Green neighborhoods. Cities' breath

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1. From narrow spaces to wide ones. The environmentalization of the urban local policies

XXI\textsuperscript{st} century global cities face a big challenge: turning from cities with narrow spaces to cities with wide ones. Our cities are often characterized by narrow, crowded spaces, with a huge number of cars that take the space away from pedestrians, and with streets surrounded by huge buildings and palaces. All this leaves really little space to breathe.

This is why, in my opinion, reasoning about the ideal city of the XXI\textsuperscript{st} century means considering ways to allow cities to breathe, and therefore, ways of building pieces of the landscape, the society, the economy that are compatible with the idea of an airy city: a pedestrian city, respectful to the environment, that gives birth to new landscapes, acting as the economic laboratory of new local economies deeply connected with the themes of ecology and innovation, aiming at discovering the world and its cultures. Saskia Sassen has defined this city as endowed by a cosmopolitan citizenship, capable of internationalizing peoples and cultures. As mentioned in “The uses of disorder. Personal identity and city life” by Richard Sennett, the city overcomes the wish to shun the city and find shelter in isolated places of the suburban periphery.

A city with open spaces does not mean a greater and greater one, boundless, that is an exploded city (Portes, 2005). On the contrary, it is a city which focuses on the theme of new urban dimensions, typically smaller and more definite, promoting communities, villages and neighborhoods inside the city that regain quality as the central aspect of both life and living.

In this regard, in a recent interview,\textsuperscript{1} Renzo Piano affirms states that the “urban belt” has to be reduced instead of being expanded and, inside it, spaces of common sociality must be built at the level of neighborhood, and the inhabitants must move by means of public transport which are part of a well-functioning infrastructural network. Piano states that the city of quality will be, in the near future, the city that will prove capable of renouncing (almost completely) to the massive use of cars. A city which pursues these ambitions must be introduced to the change piece by piece, neighborhood by neighborhood. This is important to ensure approval and participation of all communities to the process of change and to show the urban transformation as a keen moment of the local community, which is committed to improve its own quality of life. A city which reinforces the centrality of neighborhoods and their roles within the hierarchy of the urban governance. A city composed by many city halls, from an institutional point of view, and by a great number of interlinked centers from a geographical point of view. A city which experiences ways of active participation aimed at adopting micro-

\textsuperscript{1} “La Repubblica” newspaper; 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2011 (pp. 41-43).
projects of change for the urban quality. A city where micro-projects of change are functional to a dynamics that aims at refurbishing what already exists and renewing the modalities of life and of consumption of urban spaces in an “un-growth perspective” (Bradley, 2011), rather than at an infinite growth of the cities, or at the expansion of built spaces, or at the proliferation of suburbs and shopping centres.

The next step concerns the contents, namely the territorial policies and the local practices that neighborhood communities decide to undertake. Starting a process of environmentalization of the local policies and practices becomes necessary in order to structure a new best practice of urban development with the main goal of contrasting the unease (housing and residential unease, of the inhabitants’ quality of life) and encountering the well-being, meant as a sense of care for the environment and for those who live the urban space.

The environmentalization of policies and local practices becomes then synonym of urban quality, thus fostering the attractiveness of neighborhoods committed to this new path from a residential, productive and touristic point of view.

2. Neighborhoods-laboratory and ecological cities

For big cities neighborhoods, choosing environmentalization means making the historical values of good living contemporary again, that is taking care of the places we live in, paying attention to the environment that surrounds them by increasing the value of the “know how” belonging to the identity of that part of the city. Applying environmentalization to neighborhoods of different cities around the world resulted in the accomplishment of concrete actions, as well as in the adoption of administrative acts and directions of territorial planning pointing to the promotion of virtuous behaviours within the area of environmental management of the urban space.

Let’s try to provide some examples, such as putting in place strategic plans specific of a given area, taking care of private and public green areas daily and with care; creating small enterprises committed to the themes of separate collection and recycling of materials, as well as to the production of energy from renewable sources. Other examples range from the birth of various activities - linked to tourist fruition- that practise courses of action in line with the principle of sustainable tourism to promoting urban gardens, adopting processes of “zero growth” planning that helps in clamping the indiscriminate consumption of urban space down and recovering the historic built-up area through techniques of green building; from transport plans strongly aimed at sustainability to the massive support of the public transport via railroad.

In this regard, important experimental projects of neighborhoods-laboratory to consider are the Solar City in Linz, the Am Schlierberg in Freiburg and the BedZed in London. They all make use of energy produced by renewable sources, with energy-saving construction, free from cars, and full of pedestrian walks and bicycle paths well integrated into the public transport line, and characterised by a large presence of green and very wide streets. Also the Spanish city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, near Bilbao, in the Basque Country, has been identified by the European Union as “Green European Capital 2012”. The Spanish city, with its approximately 240,000 inhabitants, has put in practice concrete actions to improve the urban environment from a sustainable point of view. This path started about 30 years ago and has been marked by two main features: first of all, a high level of active participation of the citizens in the administrative choices, with citizens organized neighborhood by neighborhood; and secondly, a uniform view shared by all political forces, even those of different political belief. This led to some very important results for the city as a whole and for its single
neighborhoods. Around the city, a green ring of almost 622 hectares developed, restraining the possibility of building within sustainable limits, and bringing almost 600,000 new visitors to Vitoria; furthermore, 73% of the new houses is state-owned, with a fixed ceiling for prizes, and equipped with photovoltaic solar panels; water and energy consumption has been declining of 10% during the last five years despite the population increase; the relationship between green belts and population is of 42.12 square meters per citizen, and all residents have at their disposal a park or a garden within 300 meters from their houses; the city center has been completely pedestrianized, car parks are mainly underground and the fee to leave cars in parking lots at surface level has tripled in 2010, raising from 90 cents to 2.50 euros per 90 minutes; the use of public transport during the last eighteen months has increased of 42%.

An interesting case study at international level is that of the American city of Detroit. Since the Sixties, Detroit has lost more than 150,000 inhabitants, and nowadays is experiencing the problem of whole neighborhoods which are deserted and neglected, the so-called feral neighbourhood.

In a situation like this, it is possible to try and relaunch the city through forms of alliance between private and public, mainly represented by non-governmental associations and organizations (ONG). These alliances between private and public work in accordance with the public administration on urban requalification projects which are widespread and based on the following key points:

1. birth of gardens and farms within the city, with the aim to develop new agricultural economies;
2. creation of “green aisles” to link the parts of the city which are still fully inhabited;
3. development of plein-air cultural and museum activities;
4. redefinition of the fiscal taxation in order to reward the original and innovative use of the neglected grounds and buildings. Finally, the city may choose to focus on scientific research, technology innovation and “green car” industry to relaunch its economy, highly affected by the crisis of the traditional car industry.

These case studies also offer the chance to discuss the movement of the so-called “transition towns”, born from the intuitions and the works of Rob Hopkins and from his initial strategic project Kinsale Energy Descent Plan. This plan was first created as scholastic exercise, but soon became a methodological action plan, driving the transition towards a pattern of development with a deeply ecological content.

The movement of the transition towns face a great challenge especially in big urban neighborhoods such as Brixton, in London. Here, the project Transition Town Brixton is tackling the reduction of energy consumption and of carbon dioxide emissions with public projects, as well as the reinforcement of public transport and sustainable mobility. It is also supporting innovative practices of waste recycling, and the development of urban gardens. A crucial factor in large urban contests, is also the great importance given to developing paths of awareness and education available to all citizens. Thus, in Brixton, for instance, this involves about 60,000 persons potentially interested in the project, as well as a wider public, less attentive to the environmental values if compared to the public of little rural centers, which are the natural field of application for transition towns.

3. The new neighborhoods: contemporary, hospitable, innovative

These different experiences clarify how the set of initiatives adopted can be lived as practices that contribute to make neighborhoods highly contemporary, hospitable, and innovative. Contemporary because they adopt a model of development which pays attention to the care of the places in contrast with the disposable model of production and consumption of objects, services and urban spaces, by now in decline, which has demonstrated all its limits in terms of social, environmental, economic and occupational costs, both in the cities of the economically advanced countries and in the cities of the poorest countries.

Hospitable because the beauty, the pleasantness and the liveability of the neighborhoods reinforce both the pleasure of the hospitality in a touristic sense, and the duty of welcoming the new residents.

Innovative because the greater quality of life attracts new economic activities linked to the world of technology and of digital culture.

The environmentalization of the urban space becomes therefore the basis for the construction of cities of care and beauty, where the sustainability of life and intense human relationships are deemed essentials. A green city will spend much less to heal its own “ills”, than to increase its capacities. The neighborhoods will have the task to test themselves as concrete laboratories of the future and precursors of public actions that will involve the urban area in its entirety.

References

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