Envisioning Cities

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The paper investigates how territorial visions drive the change of places and raise a public debate on urban development. To this end I adopt a process point of view which enables to reconstruct and account for the action-net that takes shape around urban development/renewal projects. Such a choice implies conceiving cities as the interplay of practices, artifacts and narratives (Sonda, Coletta, Gabbi, 2010) where material and social aspects interact in the endless process of (re)shaping the urban texture.

The paper presents and discusses two examples of urban visions related to the city of Trento (Italy) highlighting two different ways of envisioning its future. The first kind of vision consists of the strategic plan of the city of Trento outlining priorities and objectives to be fulfilled. Attention is paid on the chain of actions and discourses developed and justified through that narrative. The second example deals with the rendering of a military base realized in the form of a leaflet and distributed by the Public Administration to the inhabitants of Mattarello, a suburb south of Trento chosen as the location where the base should be placed. In this case images are in charge of visualizing urban change. To put it with Söderström (1996, 252) representations “are not the passive repository of an exterior planning process, but one of the key sites of urbanism in the making”. In fact, around that rendering a lively debate has risen. Both examples underline the performative power of urban visions whether they are in form of narratives or images.

1. A strategic narrative

A strategic plan provides a scenario that projects the city into a near future and traces the steps to reach that goal. In other words it is at the same time the picture of a future city and a programmatic document. Here I will refer to the strategic plan of the city of Trento 2001-2010 because it enables us to confront the visions contained in that document with the present urban configuration. The purpose is not to make a checklist of what has been realized and to what extent, rather to account how those objectives have been translated into choices, investments and projects, that is, how the strategic plan has informed current practices of redevelopment of Trento and which new narratives it has produced.

The strategic plan of Trento¹ contains an urban vision that is not merely the representation of a new shape; it is something more and something different, since it let us imagine our own city giving the feeling that we are part of this change. The openness of the strategic² plan is well summarized in its title, Trento, city of chances, which does not

¹ http://www.laboratoriourbano.tn.it/pianostrategico/documenti/58.pdf
² Within discourse analysis, strategy is considered a linguistic construct that serves to make sense of the world and organize it (Hardy, Palmer, Phillips 2000, 1229-1230). Similarly, strategic visions do not mirror reality, they shape it.
provide a specific orientation that helps imagining Trento in 2010, but sketches a general framework that leaves room for many different versions of the city persuading that everyone will have the opportunity to live better.

The document is composed of two parts: the first one sketches the vision through four strategic themes, while the second part illustrates the objectives (10) and the actions (73) that specify the streams. Moreover a set of keywords (integration, innovation, internationalization, dialogue, quality) has been provided as a common ground to make the plan coherent. In fact there are some actions that criss-cross multiple themes since they can be addressed from different perspectives and meet different objectives. This is the case, for instance, of the project for the new science center – Muse – which represents at the same time an action within the first thematic stream, ‘Trento, city of urban quality’, having the purpose of renovating areas characterized by idle industrial infrastructures, and within the fourth stream dedicated to the dialogue between the historical city and the contemporary one.

The project of the new museum of science thus connects two objectives: to foster the renovation of an area formerly occupied by the Michelin factory and to balance the role of tradition in the promotion of the image of Trento using the levers of culture and innovation. At present it is still too early to evaluate the potential of this project to enliven a depressed area. Instead it is not too early to analyse the effects and by-products of this strategic measure in terms of urban marketing. The project is rooted in a wider narrative\(^3\) on city renewal through cultural investments and, in its turn, itself works as a narrative supporting institutional vision and related initiatives aiming at positioning Trento as a cultural destination. The episode is interesting because it enable us to observe the generative power of vision and how it translates into a multiplicity of projects and discourses.

So far the vision of Trento as a cultural destination has informed many projects and initiatives and is playing a strong role in reshaping the urban fabric. The science center is one of these new buildings that are in charge of renewing marginal areas while also making the whole city an interesting destination. It is not a case that these architectural projects are signed by famous architects who represent a profitable brand in promoting the image of the city.

Conceiving Trento as a cultural destination not only has materialized in new infrastructures, it has also justified investments in other directions such as for the Festival of Economics, research centers, the internationalization of the University. They all belong to this general strategy of making Trento attractive both for a cultural oriented tourist and for professionals and high qualified researchers from abroad. But the generative power of this vision is not confined to the above mentioned projects. On the contrary, that narrative becomes part of other discourses such as the candidature of the Northeast region\(^4\) as European capital of culture for 2019. On the one hand Trento becomes part of wider plan, thanks to those investments that project it as a cultural destination; on the other hand, it is the candidature itself that corroborates that scenario and makes it effective. In fact, despite it is only a candidature, it has already become a matter of concern and entered other discourses\(^5\).

The process of image construction begins a self-feeding mechanism in which each narrative relies on the other thus making it difficult to distinguish which is the goal and which is the tool in this chain of actions. At a micro scale the strategic plan of Trento functions in the same way. For instance, it is not clear whether the science center project serves

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\(^3\) It recalls the project of a new urban district in the western harbour of Malmô supplied with 100% locally produced renewable energy (Corvellec and Riesberg, 2007). Although in that case the organizing principle was sustainability instead of culture, the projects are similar for the use of two topical narratives that should make them appealing thus increasing their approval.

\(^4\) This area includes two regions, Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia, and two autonomous Provinces, Trento and Bolzano.

\(^5\) See the program of the forth Festival Città Impresa: http://www.festivaldellecittaimpresa.it/
the purposes of renovating a dismissed area thus contributing also to renew the urban image or the opposite: the rhetoric on urban renewal and city marketing legitimates investments for a new museum of science. Such a misunderstanding roots in the fact that vision is strategic not only because it orients the decision making, but also because it acts as a form of accountability for the choices made (Hardy, Palmer and Phillips, 2000). In other words, vision acts both prospectively orienting a course of action, and retrospectively as a justification (Sonda, 2010).

This episode shows that the effects of urban vision are not measurable only in terms of goals-results because a narrative such as the strategic plan opens a public discourse that intersects with other narratives/projects creating unexpected synergies. Moreover a strategic plan organize space as well as infrastructures do: it defines priorities and foresees uses and functions thus opening a space for action in which not only the city configuration but also its image, meanings and uses are negotiated.

2. Debating through images

So far we have discussed the power of narratives in envisioning cities’ destiny and tracing a direction for their development, now we turn attention on visual artifacts which represent urban change through images.

While in a strategic plan the vision is described by means of objectives and articulated into activities, the rendering of a project is self-sufficient: it evokes the whole scenario by means of images and makes visible what is still immaterial operating a translation and reduction that enables us not only to see abstract things, but also to imagine how it could be living there. “Renderings constitute an important and delicate part of the architectural argumentation as they offer a point of view into the future building, orientate and direct the attention and ‘subjectivise’ the project” (Houdart, 2008, 50). In fact the function of a rendering is not to reproduce a building, but to anticipate the change it may produce, which means considering the impact of the project both on the material and the social organization.

In order to show how the building becomes part of the urban texture, renderings provide an idealized scenario capable of suggesting possible uses and ways of life related to the activities and functions conceived in the project. As a consequence aesthetics and politics are interwoven in the attempt to make the project appealing and make people experience the new urban condition and identify themselves within the scenario depicted. On the other hand, given that a rendering is not the exact representation of the infrastructure, this leaves room for stakeholders to negotiate their visions confronting them with the institutional one. The project for the new military base in a suburb of Trento is a case in point. Here the visual dimension plays a crucial role in the controversy between inhabitants and local authority.

The committee campaigning against the base realized a ‘counter-leaflet’ resembling for size, colours and font the institutional one. Such a graphic device was meant to stress the structural and substantial discrepancies between the administrative vision and that of the local community. While the institutional rendering minimizes the visual impact of the new settlement and underlines the possibilities for inhabitants to use the facilities of the base, the counter leaflet stresses the visual, natural and social impact of the new buildings providing inhabitants with another version of the changes that would have stricken their neighbourhood. In other words, visual artefacts not only serve the purpose of

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6 The rendering of the public administration recalls the original function of urban planning that is to organize objects in space, treating people as objects, “that is reduced to social types, operators of functions (living, working, travelling, recreating) or of standard needs (norms of comfort, of noise, of household goods)” (Söderström, 1996, 275).
envisioning the future but are real ‘weapons’ of a public debate in which multiple versions of the project are put at the test”.

Although the episode deals with a classic urban controversy related to the construction and placement of a new infrastructure, nonetheless it is emblematic because it enables us to recognize that a building far from being a univocal, stable entity, “is not a static object but a moving project” (Latour and Yaneva, 2008, 80).

Moreover this episode shows that urban visions not only anticipate how a place could change, they also interact with people’s wishes. This is particularly true for renderings that offer a direct visualizing experience. Although graphic simulations act metaphorically reducing the complexity and stressing some aspects over others8, “they can also add complexity to common interpretations of the city” (Söderström, 2011, 115). The counter-leaflet elaborated by a group of inhabitants goes in this direction: it provides another way of framing the project enlightening the drawbacks for the neighbourhood. The complexity added by this point of view may represent a constraint for the time schedule, but it could instead inform a collaborative planning process. In both cases “the debate is a way of envisioning the project” (Corvellec, 2001, 207) and represents the site where technical aspects, ethical issues and graphic devices converge and confront envisioning multiple avenues.

3. Final remarks

While in the first example vision is a narrative that translates into new infrastructures and cultural initiatives, the second case follows an opposite direction: here the architectural project comes first and then it opens a public discourse. This confront underlines the role of representations in driving urban development and illustrates the socio-technical networks that take shape around an urban project. Their power roots in the capability of envisioning urban change. In fact although not material, both visions were real in people’s and city managers’ discourses.

As Latour recently observed (2008), spatial issues are political because people are interested in the organization of their living environment which influences their quality of life and their everyday practices. For this reason, although the design of city contains technical aspects that may not be within everyone’s reach, it is a contentious object. Accordingly, the way urban change is represented become itself a matter of concern. Recognizing the political character of vision enables us to understand why strategic plans, city marketing narratives, projects for new infrastructures are so effective in organizing space and mobilizing social networks.

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7 Latour in his Visualisation and Cognition (1986) discusses the role of visual tools in the history of science and more widely the power of representations in making people believe what is not visible.

8 See Yaneva’s study (2005) on architects’ scaling procedures.
References