Informal inside the contemporary new urban question

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1. Introduction

This paper is developed through the reflections that come from the interweaving of two paths of research, with the direct experience in urban planning and urban transformation projects in Italy and abroad who have provided opportunities for direct experimentation of approaches, theoretical principles and applications in the field. The themes to which it refers are to be placed in the experience gained by working with the doctoral research units inside the Università luav of Venice, the Hafen City University in Hamburg, Sheffield University, Isai in Liège and the University of Florence. At the same time, have been essential the experience of active participation in projects such as: the new urban plan of the city of Vicenza (2009-10) and Padua (2008), the sustainable urban development plan of the city of Iquitos, Peru (2010) and numerous participatory processes at urban and regional scale.

1.1 The city project between public good and private enterprise: some research questions

The thesis underlying this work is that it is necessary and essential to formulate operational strategies in line with a theoretical apparatus that can confer legitimacy, substance and foundation to the themes of participation and contamination of urbanism with informal practices of use, exploration and design of contemporary cities (Jenkins and Forsyth, 2010), toward scenarios that are able to be truly sustainable and inclusive. Beyond the value/disvalue of individual cases, this must be done in broad perspective of rebalancing the crucial role of urbanism, its tools and its objectives. The common denominator on which this paper, and ongoing research from which it is taken, try to reflect, to explain this position, consists of the imaginary and the enormous quantity of practices that gravitate around the concept of informal, on which, at least partially, we aim to reflect.

Never before this historic phase, the external pressures to the project, the urban project, for the city and its public spaces, come from diverse areas: private stakeholders (Bianchetti 2008), singular or corporate interests, in which public opinion now devoid of any real critical mass because of its fragmented nature, has no choice but to surrender for initiatives in which the balance of interests leads the public to give up a "necessary conflict" in exchange for less complex positions and apparently easier to justify, particularly in political short term. It tends to succumb to lose its rights (including constitutional), constantly crossed by an over production of interaction, instruments, interests, too agile and
changeable, in which the correspondence between the individual, society and territory is increasingly less identifiable, in which the concept of participation moves with enormous contradictions through diametrically opposed fields of knowledge, through ongoing testing and far from rare and accidental exploitation.

- How will change the project for the city, for the public space, and what will be the possibility to work on hypothesis of generation and regeneration through inclusive, sustainable and consistent processes?
- What is the disciplinary role of urbanism in this planning scheme, which is the tangible value of the plan?

The cards to play in this crucial game can and should be those of innovation of planning process and public role inside it, also exploration some paths so far traveled with distraction or superficiality, with no mature attention to the opportunities that they could offer. Within a disciplinary framework, which compares with a complex new urban question, this reading aims to research a strategic and fruitful interpretative framework, able to cope with the ambiguous and tense balance between public and private, for the government, the management and the design of the city. In the light of what has been mentioned so far we just close this first proposition opening to some issues that will certainly not have an adequate discussion in this paper, but they make good game for the arguments that follow, serving as a constant reminder to some fundamental themes.

- What is the role of planning in a scenario like this: where countless people, more and more disconnected with each other, are physically active in the permanent transformation of the territory, in its design, planning, human settlement, with a clear split into two centers, who undergoes changes, and who actively puts them into action?
- Is there a chance for the plan (what kind of plan?) to be meaningful and effective, within urbanized areas that are characterized by a continuous intensification of flows and intangible assets, building products, manufactured goods and enclave more or less impermeable to the contest; where the degrees of freedom of individuals are less and less, their forms of social production and public values are going down and at the same time are more and more planned, programmed and privatized, in which nothing more is left to chance, in which private capital legislate on public good?
- Who has the ownership of a plan-project and how is possible to manage it, in a context where the public, as public administration, is gradually crumbling under the blows of a private capital which can’t compete?
- The plan as a bureaucratic tool, which accounts for 90% of the urbanization of the territory, can evolve into a concrete, sustainable and inclusive way? Can it improve on the fundamental question of its applicability and implementation on medium-long time frame - inertia the plan - (Secchi 2000), with all that implies in the social, economic, administrative and ultimately political?

2. Keywords

2.1 Informal and participation

The common denominator, the filter through which we offer a reflection, is the relation (we stress relation and not the individual words taken individually) between two concepts, already cited, that pervade the contemporary urban imagery, even in implicitly and under different terms, often naïve; the two terms in question are participation and informal. There is a long and dense tradition that we can draw on to explore the meaning and the origins of the first of the two
words: classical authors of modernism, cutting-edge experiences and more or less successful experiments, important case studies through the years that arrive until today. In the case of the second term, initially much is attributable to Anglo-Saxon and American experiences, then rapidly developed along two main roads: the first one about developing countries under the definition given by the United Nations since the 70’s, the second one about artistic experimentation, essentially in the same period, which in recent years, we would say the last decade, is returning in a big wave (for example the recent experiment of Mendini’s Domus). Both words found theoretical and experimental peaks in recent years, confirming the interest that that they produce cyclic.

Until the mid '80s and early '90s, the territory has been interpreted as an extensive *palinsesto* in which the single actor, by isolated or aggregated forms, has found an open space, an area of conflict, for the creation of a social, economical and spatial project, reflecting and translating social and economic practices in a printed map on the ground, through industrial areas, residential subdivisions, service areas, big shopping malls and business districts (Pasqui and Lanzani, 2011). This has been the dangerous ridge on which our cities have developed since first sixties, almost always chaotic and irregular, beyond and despite the constant attempt of urbanism and planning to rule the urban phenomena. This scenario, that does not concern us further here, is however the clear evidence of a historical phase in which a new colonization of the territory, by interests, functions, subjects, never seen before, has translated explicit and implicit conflicts between private capital booming and public interest, into neighborhoods, suburbs, large industrial areas and new towns.

Since first the 90’s new informal and spontaneous practices are progressively growing In our cities, this tactics are less and less local scenarios and increasingly looking to a territorial and global scales, which are based on a logic of consumption rather than investment, less attributable specific to social groups, economic classes or specific local identities. About this condition we can obviously refer to the illuminating Bauman’s image of liquid modernity: a shift, a rapid acceleration in the change of some key conditions in our lives, in the perception of our role inside society as citizens, as planners, a shift in which we are now fully immersed. Sociologists and anthropologists have worked hard to describe this situation: a state of broken rules and forms of regulation of social relations, both self-produced and/or informal, rarely held by the public; a welfare system that we struggle to define, even if it is there, in front of us, in which there are countless and endless arbitrary conditions, in which pre-established relationships and balances often become irreconcilable conflicts, directly related to the reduction of the degrees of freedom acquired by individuals and communities, within the city, in an immediately preceding historical period. The result is a creeping uncertainty about progress, that does not look more like an element of growth, of improvement of living conditions, but rather as a train that you can’t risk losing, struggling day after day.

One of the first protagonists of this crisis is exactly the public sector, the political system, in its role as guarantor of the collective good, in its role as a promoter of public interests.

2.1 The rhetoric of public-private conflict: an interpretation through the concepts of participation and informal

The basic hypothesis is that there is a clear misunderstanding, to the contemporary approach to the theme of conflict between public and private in the widest sense of the word, interpreted each time such as: negotiation, consultation,
participation, involvement, etc.. We can also state that this depends on a constant mystification of the relationship between resources, objectives, stakeholders and the practices of inclusion, involvement, negotiation, between public and private, at any scale. Today we are living, as city planners and first as citizens, in a kind of syncope, in which we have perhaps not even appropriate terms to describe phenomena that escape from pre-determined category, but at the same time they appear and are reported as facts, as factors which seem to provide just a clear and unambiguous result from their combination.

Nearly frustrated from having refined techniques, proven tools through countless best practices, technologies that help as never before to work according to principles of interaction, involvement and information sharing: we do not know how to use them effectively, how to make them effective and what they can really do for us. On one hand, we have extremely advanced techniques and technologies for exploration, classification and mapping on the other we have no capability to translate data into scenarios, projects and programs. We know, as never before, the city, in terms of statistics, quantities, size, we have prediction tools on streams and indicators, but it is also clear that we can’t translate this into a project, to a tangible answers for our cities and their future. This highlights two issues linked with each other.

The first is the fragmentation and the technicality with which these issues are dealt with, by giving them a specialist aura, sometimes almost scientific (participation, conflict mediation, conciliation...), the second one is a sort of utopian and visionary approach (post situationist mapping, occupation of urban spaces, temporary buildings...), depriving them out from the real debate inside urbanism and planning, that instead might need these contents at all scales and in all stages of the process. All this surrounds these two terms, informal and participation, in the roles of actors ex ante or ex post, but always “out” from the urban design process, and so never completely inside the theoretical and technical growth of the plan. They are often used in an instrumental or purely informative way, denying by facts many theoretical statements, more and more frequently used to “put on a show” or communicate, to build consensus, sensation, images of progress, rather than to produce true contents and strategies. The concepts of participation and informal, are combined, either implicitly or explicitly, into more and more active processes of transformation of the city, as regard public space in particular, but they are in the hands of institutional and private organizations that most of the time use them in contradictory and rhetorical ways.

3. The concept of informal as a resource for the project of contemporary city

Our real experience, our daily life, connected to public space is made against any disciplinary code against every planning attitude, a dense network made of jumps in scale, from the smallest detail of the glimpse of an old door, to the global vision of a gps navigation system. The text that we cross every day, our city, the territory in which we live, is a place for himself in constant rewriting, where exactly these heterogeneous and scattered fragments on the outskirts of urban consolidated spaces, are able to represent, most of the time, the real fixed and important points from which to start, again, every day.

The effort to search inside urban practices, in the ephemeral informal uses, tangible and intangible, in the instances of active participation that populate our city, the symptoms of a new collective imperative that claims the city for what it
should be, is essential to realize that the text on which we used to build our urban knowledge is completely changing under our feet.

Kandinsky wrote: "...a city built by the rules of architecture is suddenly shaken by a force that challenges the calculations...", in this strong image lies the challenge of knowing how to interpret the signs, more or less obvious, that inhabit the urban space, that live in communities and turn them up, to dream of a city that knows how to express both a general overview, an horizon, and at the same time an accurate and careful attention for single and outdated detail. Experimenting with new approaches and strategies to enhance the comparison between public and private, inside the increasingly uncertain balance of the government of our cities, must pass through a new central role for the citizen, understood as individual and collective, as part of a society that should restore an internal balance to deal with new knowledge and face the challenges of the contemporary, often rhetoric, paradigms of sustainability and participation. At the same time the public should re-shape itself with tools that will be able to be as consistent and sensitive to the collective good, as articulated and flexible in their ability to adapt to a context where there are no more unidirectional trends.

For the public sector the concept of participation (is it the right word?) can perhaps take on the meaning of the lever through which to relocate its meaning and role in the near future, as protagonist of the formulation and implementation of active instruments of territorial and urban scenarios and rules, that has to compete and mediate among the public interest and private action.

The informal, understood in connection with the concept of participation can become a kind of factor of permanent compensation, next to the plan and its rules, both in the processes of development of areas already "urbanized", whether compact or diffuse, and in the development of new cities. In fact in the first case the more inertia - the time of the plan –
(Secchi 2000), that is evident in consolidated urban tissues, can be answered only leaving enough space for functions dynamically available at the time of application of the plan. In the second case, the globalization of individual communities (Bauman, 2000) and their fragmentary search for identities, even through relationships with no geographical coordinates, makes clear the need for non-linear and non-formal objects/spaces, open to non-progressive and non-linear forms of co-existence of private and public inside contemporary city.

References