The re-definition of collective image. 
Between representation and politics in a northern Italian middle size city

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In 2009 four researchers - the photo-historian Antonello Frongia, the photographer Andrea Pertoldeo, the urban designer Paola Pellegrini and the architecture theorist Roberto Zancan - were commissioned by the young center-left politician Alessandro Campera, the president of the suburban and industrial borough of Mantua, Italy, “Circoscrizione Nord di Mantova” (25,000 inhabitants), to analyze and redefine the collective image of this neglected and misjudged section of the city, a wide suburban area from the ’60s and ’70s where some controversial urban elements were located (300 ha of industrial units using chemical agents: paper factory Burgo, refinery IES, chemistry factory Edison; a large social housing development; the new motorway A22 Verona Brennero) and which is affected by postfordism and sprawl in recent years. The joint project was part of the project called “La periferia interiore” by the politician’s team, whose goal was to inform citizens about the on-going transformations in the borough (mainly the public initiative “Contratto di Quartiere II” for the requalification of the Lunetta neighbourhood social housing), involve citizens in some community activities and try a process of social empowerment in order to improve life quality and urban dignity in this section of the city.

1. The joint project: premises and questions

The joint project, done in 18 months, had three major premises:
1. the Italian tradition of photographic campaigns promoted by public institutions since the 1980s (very famous examples can be quoted: first of all the efforts of the “Archivio dello Spazio” of Milan Province 1987-1997 or Sezioni del paesaggio Italiano, Stefano Boeri e Gabriele Basilico, 1997, promoted by Biennale di Venezia / VI Mostra Internazionale di Architettura), placing great value in the hermeneutic potentialities of landscape photography as a tool of social and urban investigation;
2. the conventional notion of suburbia as a place of deprivation and deterioration of the environment and life quality (as meant in the Italian language suburbia = “periferia”);
3. the idea that images make good political propaganda.

The joint project subjected to criticism these major premises and put some questions at the core of the work: is the

1 “The interior suburbia”, the project had the patronage of Università IUAV di Venezia and published the book La periferia interiore, racconti della periferia nord di Mantova, edited by Paola Pellegrini, Quodlibet Macerata, 2009, with texts by Antonello Frongia, Paola Pellegrini, Roberto Zancan, photos by Andrea Pertoldeo.
2 www.laperiferiainteriore.it
3 From Treccani dictionary: “L’insieme dei quartieri di una città più lontani dal centro; frequente la locuzione “di periferia”, che oltre a indicare la collocazione nel tessuto urbano, aggiunge spesso una connotazione riduttiva, di squallore e desolazione.”
concept of “periphery” still useful to understand current reality and changes in the fragmented urban fabric of small cities such as Mantua? How can photography and city planning research cooperate to investigate the relationship between the production and the representation of contemporary landscapes? Can photographic and verbal descriptions contribute to our understanding of ordinary landscapes? What role can landscape images have in the definition of political identities? In order to explore the answers to these questions the joint project stimulated new representations and reflections upon the borough by means of:

- a photographic campaign by Andrea Pertoldeo exploring the ordinary spaces of everyday life, thus eschewing the conventional iconography of the suburbia challenged by rapid social change, mass-mediatisation and globalization, different models of preferred residential environments;
- a three day video workshop – “Istantanee in movimento, una storia di famiglia” led by Roberto Zancan – exploring how local families move, have fun, where meet, what buy, what think of their living environment;
- the production of citizens’ images - developed and tested during a writing seminar – “Frammenti di periferia” led by Paola Pellegrini - in which local inhabitants narrated in texts their past and present experience of the city and its suburban territory, their personal judgement on how it was built and how it should have been and could be;
- developed and tested during a photography seminar – “La periferia interiore” led by Andrea Pertoldeo - in which some local not professional photographers highlighted some parts in the suburban city they recognized as representative.
- urban investigation and analysis and the mutual interaction between them and photographic representation, meant as parallel narratives.
- discussion of the results and the ways to spread them in Mantua with the politician and his team.

Thus various types of image-production were activated in parallel, as a way to re-define collective image and to reflect upon the relationship between urban spaces and images: documentary photography, urban studies, citizens’ views.

2. In praise of suburbia for a new concept

The aim of the joint project was not to contribute to give shape to a new ideal city, aim not included in the general program “La periferia interiore”, but to stimulate new concepts of-for the city itself, more exactly of-for suburbia and its relation with the city centre, that in Mantua is extremely relevant for its historic and artistic value (and economic in real estate) and therefore overwhelming. The idea is that only if local inhabitants and all of the citizens abandon prejudices and acquire a better knowledge and cognition of the borough and its essential role in the city it is possible to start to plan a better future for the whole community and overcome exclusion, deficiency and disparity.

The difference and separation, in fact, between centre and northern suburban territory in Mantua is evident and sharp first of all because of the geography, more than in other cities where hybridization and confusion is most frequent; two different urban landscapes face one another: on the right side of the Mincio lakes the town from the Renaissance, a continuous profile of monuments protected by UNESCO, an ideal, abstract, purified construction, on the other side the new town, unhomogeneous and discontinuous, never represented, which received what could not find a proper place in the old one: large industries, infrastructures and social housing, but also single family houses and little production sheds in recent years. But it is not only a problem of separation and distance: the northern borough is generally thought of as “periferia” for the lack of what could give it an urban status (short history, absence of public facilities, difficult mobility,

project not developed, promises evaded, ...), the apparent marginality, the persistence of some ‘70s conditions and fabric; it is not only a geographic condition, but mainly a symbolic and cultural one.

But generally speaking suburbia - “periferia” can be considered a meaningless stereotype today in the contemporary city because twin concepts such as centre / marginal, close / distant, inside / outside faded away; as Cacciari¹ asserts the city is everywhere, so there is no city anymore, polarities can be anywhere in a territory experienced as isomorphous and made by the cognitive maps of its inhabitants; so the term suburbia – “periferia” is useless to describe reality. Furthermore a praise of “periferia” should be pronounced because it is the place of faint identity and constant mutation,

⁵ The project itself “La periferia interiore” defined the area as “periferia”.
⁶ CACCIARI M., La città, note per un lessico socio-filosofico, a cura di Paolo Perulli e Matteo Vegetti, Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, 2004 introduction. Many other books could be quoted.
⁷ PERULLI P., Visioni di città, le forme del mondo spaziale, Einaudi, Torino 2009, p. 5.
which is the characteristics of postmodernity\(^9\), and it is the only place where transformation and new possibilities can happen thanks to the absence of an overwhelming history and the presence of many voids and fragments (terrains vagues of concept and of fabric).

So is the term “periferia”, correlated to the Modern city, still useful to define the northern borough of Mantua? Partially. Some features of the traditional “periferia” remain with their burden\(^{10}\) – especially heavy industries and working class - and a general slowness in transformation must be noted – especially in the sprawl phenomena and postfordism, while some other similar suburban cases seem to have had a quicker dynamic recently in turning into tertiary\(^{11}\) sector dispersed cities; some other features are lost, because new ex-urban centralities were built (the core with the office campus, the shopping mall, the Arena), the city centre is not an everyday destination and proximity networks are loosen.

The new concept should arise from the borough citizens (or they should be helped interiorizing it) and therefore the goal was to tell and represent a section of the city never represented before and to enlarge the participation of citizens in the construction of the idea of the city; in fact in our pop culture if a place is not represented and does not make people talk it does not really exists.

\(^{10}\) for example: Carlo BOVINI, La strage del petrochimico, in «La Republica», 5 aprile 2001; Stefano BOERI, Arcipelago della anti-città, in «Il Sole 24 ore», 13 novembre 2005.
\(^{11}\) Luciano GALLINO, La scomparsa dell’Italia Industriale, Einaudi, Torino 2003 p. 42.
3. Participation, popular and cultured formae urbis

Participants offered their long-distance gaze in the past\(^{12}\) on how urban fabric was transformed, how people defined a new geography of actions and mobility, how natural areas shifted and disappeared. Not often they went beyond criticism of what done wrong after the second world war or beyond nostalgia of what the territory was and, though the possibility to work out new collective actions and practices has always been the background of the talks, it was extremely difficult to think of what could be “ideal” today – the glance at the future was either with proposals too small to re-configure the city – new bike paths – or idea too radical to be accepted by politicians – stop speculation. We noticed that the potentialities of urban design were not in people’s mind but they do know what they do not like: people criticized forms of design aimed at accommodating superimposed, hetero-normative meanings of living together such as the Modern Movement heritage that gave shape in Mantua to the Lunetta social housing neighbourhood, a place that turns its inhabitants and those who live in the borough into victims of a strongly stigmatized architectural identity assumed as a synonym of poverty and publicly imposed segregation. For this reason they welcomed the demolition of some slabs and their substitution with small “palazzine” and as soon as they can afford it they buy a detached or semi detached house into the countryside or re-enter in the historical centre, the best ever winning model of popular formae urbis. In fact, even though the borough is composed by different parts, 2 little old villages remain and some parts of the borough are made of nice single family houses from the ’50 – ’60, it is judged as an ugly, indefinite, congested space “in between”, included and compressed between the centre and the new “rural” “much designed” dispersed settlements. Reality got rid of what remained of avant – garde elitarism and the established values of Architecture that found space in Circoscrizione Nord and caught what people seem to desire and need, it does not matter if judged picturesque, vernacular, ugly and ordinary, barbarian…

4. Politics reaction

Participants asserted his/her own micro-politics of desire, but in most cases the self-affirmation was not “for the individual” but for the community, in order to re-gain the dimension of living together, lost forever for some, still alive and to be re-gained for others. Living together means to be political and participants claimed to be listened and communicate to a larger audience their texts and photos. The project showed, yet, that the relation of city’s political agenda with participatory process results as well as with hermeneutic potentialities of landscape photography remains contradictory. The promoter, in fact, was satisfied with the joint project until, eventually, the project turned out to be part of a larger political agenda, involving the president’s public image as an advocate for the local community and his candidacy for higher office in the upcoming election of Mantua’s city council; in this changed condition the political usefulness of this investigation became doubtful and the initial attitude - to face problems and obsolete stereotypes the politician choose to gain a better understanding of the borough and give voice to the citizens – was abandoned: criticism or photos judged too harsh were not allowed to gain place outside the participation process (apart from the project web-page). For this reason the city’s reaction to the investigation was not fostered.

\(^{12}\) Unfortunatly mainly aged people took active part to the process, for a problem of time and availability to work; to reach families and young people it was necessary to dig them out.
5. Descriptive and narrative models of urban form

Historically documentary photography has proved a good investment for local administrators, but its real utility for understanding contemporary cities is still unclear. Photos cannot tell the comprehensive story of the city, but show in detail and with extreme precision fragments of many different possible stories. The plot – involving socio-economic, cultural, historic, spatial, planning… aspects - should be narrated by the urban analyst / designer and should be re-constructed by those citizens who are open to discover with new surprise and critical examination their everyday places. But so far in Italy this effort to produce a civic and urban photographic art failed and it proved to be vain that landscape photography could change established collective images and perception of social actors and investors. The main risk is that photographic campaigns - expression of a empiric and phenomenological as well as artistic and formal knowledge – is meant as a pseudo-cognitive type of urban research, creating the illusion of a direct link between the photographer, the citizens, the city’s administrators, and the urban analyst, while in fact granting each actor the possibility to project a different agenda on the pictures themselves. While the fiction of urban photography as a complex “open work” suits every actor, the straightforwardness of photographic representation (used in order to reduce “artisticity”) might turn into a repetition of what is banal and insignificant. In Mantua, to avoid this risk, the photographer observed the territory both as an aesthetic object and an urban text and tried to interact with expert and not-expert knowledge.

The interaction between the photographer and the urban analyst produced a possible common reading of the pictures and this way of the territory, divided into themes of further investigation, but was not fully accomplished, despite frequent exchanges and a constant attempt to cross-verify the partial results of the investigation. The project developed in Mantua, from the very beginning not intended as a definitive result, was a critical test on the major premises and working conditions which in turn produced further questions.

Figure 4. "Hic sunt canes". One of the selected photos