Blots and Patchworks: Images of a Spread City

Rossella Salerno, *Department of Architecture and Planning, Politecnico di Milano*

*Blots*, stains, “reduce” the landscape to a representation. Nowadays, which is the value, which is the sense that we can we ascribe to the pictorial method invented by Alexander Cozens in 1785? Can we read a “blot” as an explanatory metaphor for the landscape? A landscape expressed by “blots”, a nature delimited by forms with uncertain outlines, fragments, just when the Industrial Revolution were growing, involving territories in huge changes?

In the early Seventies of the past century, Manfredo Tafuri interpreted the Cozens’s picturesque theory expressed in *A New Method*, (Tafuri, 1973). According to Tafuri, the theory would represent the planning aim of controlling the complex expansion of the city; the last effort of keeping *un grand ordre dans les détails*, just when *de la confusion, du fracas, du tumulte*, were expanding *dans l’ensemble* of the city and the territory, as Abbé Laugier wrote, in those years (Laugier, 1765).¹

The bird's eye view of C.-N. Ledoux on Maupertuis’ village, just like a premonitory icon of future urban settings, shows a project on a knife-edge between the autonomy of the shape and the foreshadowing of future “green suburbs”, a picturesque forecast about the expansion of the compact city towards countries. Anyway, in the short span of the

following years, the picturesque consolatory illusion would clash with the industrial economy growth. The images mentioned above can also be considered from another point of view, an imaginary constitution of the cities which often plays a crucial role in people and ruling classes’ expectations, acting sometimes as an anticipating function on the future settings. Sometimes, author and designer’s imaginary comes before and interprets the collective imaginary.

We can agree with André Corboz and Bernardo Secchi about the hypothesis that the largest part of the earth surface is a huge “depository of signs” consciously left by whom came before us; the word “sign” has a double interpretation: cities, villages, houses and isolated huts, roads and paths, canals, galleries, dikes, terracing, deforestations, fields’ divisions and their destination to specific cultivations, rows of trees and plantations, compose just the palimpsest on which different generations wrote, corrected, erased and added.\(^2\)

The meaning “depository of signs” besides indicating a material aspect, a physical consistence of “great and little” events which restlessly engraved and “rewrote” the territory, can give us a chance, maybe not less important, to consider those figures which geographers, cartographers and urbanists elaborated on their descriptive and interpretative production, as well as planning activity.

As in the past, those “figures” can still be of help today, in understanding how that huge “depository of signs” is articulated, a legacy from whom came before us. What the just mentioned Ledoux’s image seems to suggest us, is a utopian synthesis between concentration and decentralization, the two crucial figures in which the history of modern cities realized. Bernardo Secchi draws again our attention to those “huge blocks of prefabricated materials”\(^3\) that are peculiar of cities from the Renaissance to XIX century. For a long time, the “parts” of the cities, the monuments and the parks linked through masterly perspective “enfilade”, have represented the structure of a “urban body” which will

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\(^3\) Stimulating and rich analogy between musical compositional and architectonical urban processes suggested by Secchi: “In 1976, Charles Rosen, pianist and music historiographer, wrote a brief biography of Arnold Schönberg. Using an architectonical metaphor, he claims music, from the Renaissance to XIX century, along the modernity, has been built up thanks to the disposition and the composition of huge blocks of prefabricated materials. What failed in music between Mozart and Schönberg, is just the possibility to use those huge blocks of prefabricated materials”. “Since the end of XIX century […] their use leads just to the pastiche”. From Schönberg, Webern and Berg on, the music starts to be written “note by note”. (C. Rosen, Schönberg, Marion Boyars, London, 1976)\(^*\), compare B. SECCHI, quotation, pp. 58-59.
inevitably change towards the scattering settlements, in surrounding territories, and the dispersing of a univocal relationship between the relevant elements and the urban shape.

The experience of the urban concentration strongly characterized the west world even in negative aspects related to crowding, congestion, lack of health conditions. The figure of decentralization showed itself several times both with an equal and unequal strength and has been proposed in different forms from urbanistic culture; the first time from utopists during the XIX century, later through the Garden Cities plans and more recently in theories about city-region and policies for balancing the metropolitan recentralization and the territorial readjustment.

Anyway, urban and territorial events cannot be considered separately because they are the two sides of a matter. Currently, in fact, the contraposition between city and countryside seems completely meaningless, even if the traditional way of understanding a city, which corresponds to the figure of the concentration, appears so deeply rooted to indicate other possible scenarios with difficulty.

This is, in a way, the question that Vittorio Gregotti seems to put himself facing the consciousness of the “genetic” change of the “postmetropolis”. As a consequence of “the spread of the city, a nearly global event, Gregotti wonders if communities will not feel the need of finding (or going back to?) a new compatibility between stability and renewal. What does the idea of stability represent if not a return to a compact and concentrate urban structure? Gregotti's point of view is plainly declared at the beginning of his book: “Since thousands of years, architecture looks at cities, in the boundless variety of their typologies, as a whole and as a drawing of its parts. Sometimes, it widens its look to the ambition of defining a global project as an architectonic work, a utopic project or a set of rules of its development and way to plan concerning the geographical settlement conditions besides social conditions”.4

Does the city have any future apart from the concentration figure which characterized that human product that, quoting Lévi-Strauss, is “la chose humaine par excellence”? Salvatore Settis, another authoritative voice, lately wrote about the relationship between urban morphologies and landscapes: “The history of space has, like any other history, three dimensions equally indispensable: memory of historical sedimentation on which time left traces; hic et nunc, the result of processes under the way, included between the inertial preservation (maybe just for the scarcity of resources) and the planned destruction (in wealthy time); eventually it involves a future project (the lack of any project is a project itself, as it implies a disdain of future generations).”5

It means that landscapes configure themselves like a mosaic of synchronic concurrences and a stratified diachronic palimpsest, at the same time. In this case, it could be true that the concentration figures and the human decentralization settlements seem to coexist and some useful ways must be undertaken in future.

Referring to the Italian context, the phenomenon of spreading dwellings out of the urban settlements is a raising question. The irregular growth of low-density living neighbourhoods wears the landscape out. This is what English studies call urban sprawl or spread city: “unplanned, incremental urban development, typified by a low-density use of lands on the city threshold. It tends to saturate every available space for very vast areas.” This result is mainly due to the lack of an effective territorial policy. (Gibelli e Salzano, 2006).

4 V. GREGOTTI, Architettura e postmetropoli, Einaudi, Torino 2011, p. 3.
This new kind of horizontal city is diffused, widespread and growing on itself. It modifies the countryside leaving “interstitial segments, remains and fragments” among buildings. These fragments are useless for agriculture and for living, they really constitute a grey zone, a space of incertitude (Clément, 2005).

The French debate on this topic is very rich and articulated. Besides Clément, quoted above, part of the best known and more discussed positions are Marc Augè’s theory about “non-lieux” and Pierre Donadieu’s book Campagnes urbaines, which focuses on a similar and parallel issue.

Nevertheless, it is just from the Italian context that raises a reflection and an interesting proposal to face the post-sprawl. Some years ago Francesco Careri, in a book partly ironic, reread the urban interstices, the remaining spaces, as several empty gaps on different scales and of different nature; they represent a branching system able to “re-establish the urban emptiness”.6

“Even if the figure is formless – Careri writes – the city drawing that we get from separating full and empty spaces can be reread as a complex, geometrical “form”, just used to describe those urban systems that call their own structure and look like “formless” heap of material (Careri, p. 132). Independently from architects and urbanists’ theories, this kind of urban structure, similar to a fractal archipelago, appears as an image self-produced by our own culture. In its outlines, it is possible to discover the dynamism of a living organism which transforms and leaves behind and inside itself some abandoned parts of territories hard to control. The gaps, the urban amnesias, are not just places expecting to be filled of things, but spaces waiting for new meanings. For Careri it isn’t a matter of transforming a no-city in a city, but of trying to understand and get any solution for a parallel city fitted of proper dynamics and structures, still waiting for an interpretation (Careri, p. 133).

Less poetic but more effective, from an analytical and operative point of view, those urbanists who recognize themselves in the Landscape urbanism, place an open program at the center of their proposal, to face up the “territories” of the contemporary city. This program is expressed through a series of both logic and geo-referred layers, able to consider “porous” structures made of city and countryside. There, the “traditional” components appear difficult to distinguish on every scale we try to do it. Lately, this urbanistic approach theorizes that what is among the buildings (in-between), the “landscape” and not the architecture, organizes the contemporary city, improving urban experiences (Gabellini, p. 57).

In this way, after sprawl, a patchwork possibility is taking place, sewing up parts and fragments of not homogeneous fabrics, while awaiting a new urbanity re-build, a new landscape.

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6 “…the spread city. A low-density suburban system of settlement spread creating not homogeneous and extended fabrics, in large territorial areas. The inhabitants of this city, the widespreads, were people who lived out of the basic civil and urban rules, just in the private space of their houses and cars. They conceived as public spaces just the shopping centre, the motorway restaurants, the petrol stations and the railway stations, distroying every single space designed for their social life. The new barbarian who had invaded the city, wanted to change it into a Global Duckburg, living in detached houses extending their habitat to real motorways and virtual nets.” F. CARERI, Walkscapes. Camminare come pratica estetica, Einaudi, Torino 2006, p.130.
A “patchwork” settlement: Tree Hugger-farmadelphia aerial view

References

COZENS A., *A New Method of assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape*, 1785.