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Imagine the City Beyond the Visible

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To have another language is to possess a second soul
Charlemagne

The contributions that make up this conference begin from the rebirth of a series of questions in the multi-faceted scientific community of urban studies. The basic approach that we would like to propose it's about the tentative to reformulate themes related the construction of knowledge, in urban analysis, which may be able to address rising critical areas, in recent years.

Some open questions we have set ourselves can be summarized in this way:

- is it possible to overcome well-established quantitative epistemologies that, sometimes, generate visions of cities not able to interpret complex phenomena ?
- it makes sense to go back to re-examine the role of the forms of representations in the era of shared knowledge and of images as a pervasive media?
- what is the new role, with a wide hermeneutic meaning, that languages may have in the description of urban transformation?
- can we develop analytical tools able to overcome prosaic urban rhetoric now become ineffective?
- how can we renew our attitude towards ICT, when related to our way of interpreting the city and especially the way citizens have to experience it, to emerge definitively from years of fascination and subordination?

Starting from these critical areas I think we should emphasize two of the keywords in the title of the conference: Knowledge and Languages.

Rising issues about the nature of knowledge accumulated in the urban studies means, perhaps, uncover the Pandora's box; this is why one of the aims of this conference is to explore the different forms of construction of urban knowledge, thinking it as a partial, incomplete, sometimes hidden, sometimes quite impossible be mapped.

Patsy Healey, in her brilliant research on urban complexity and relational aspects in urban planning, allows me to emphasize the core of these concepts:



«The production of knowledge is thus not about the accumulation of information but about the development of understanding through the creation of meaning.» (*Healey P., 2007*)

We pushed a debate among many scientific fields (architectural design, geography, sociology, urban planning, heritage studies, history of the city, etc.) precisely for ensure plural visions first of all on interpretative subjects that can not be explored with self referring attitude.

The complex relationships that bind cities to collective urban imaginary are the cultural background from which we started and where we go back: we are convinced that decades of interpretations, mostly of a quantitative nature, as rooted in positivist epistemologies, have produced a lot of distortions and misunderstanding that underlie a widespread inability to understand what will be the city of tomorrow and who are the new, and not-well-known, actors that are generating and sharing new urban knowledge.

The contribution of our keynote has allowed us to begin to answer some of the basic ambiguity, making it easy to build a debate within the four sections of the conference. This also allowed us to give more evidence to some of the hidden challenges that may arise bringing together new languages and new ways of interpreting the city.

We have, first, the duty to deal with many urban transformations (physical, social, economical) that are not fully understandable and perhaps remains impossible to trace, to be easily defined, mapped, re-drawn, and described. The research will remain, willy-nilly, partial and incomplete, inside a context increasingly characterized by discontinuity and shifting perspectives.

These are some of the reasons that have made us put emphasis on the role of issues related to representation and its evolution trends:

“Representation and Perceptions of the Changing City” is the title of our first session. Knowing how to work with images is one of the strengths, and sometimes, one of the weaknesses of urban researchers, architects and planners, so we have decided to centre the theme of the first session about the larger issues of visual worlds. The representation and perception means not only to look at images but at their communicative role, finding ways and forms in which citizens can interact with urban imaginary through visual worlds.

The matter, however, cannot be placed on a floor too easily moved to the Future, here therefore that past and future come back in the second session: “Visualizing the Past, Imagining the Future”. In this session of the conference the construction of urban knowledge is related to the qualitative category that we manage with greater difficulty: time.

The communication issue is, however, a crosscutting theme in this work, a theme that could not avoid dealing with technological developments and major changes that are generating the way we live, perceive and describe the city.

This is one of the reasons for a specific session dedicated to ICT as, first of all, not neutral tools, getting through rhetoric that want us to forget the problems hidden behind the futuristic revolution of the Web Age. The last session, “New Urban Metaphors”, contains, in a nutshell, most of the themes of this conference: the discussion of epistemological strategies that invest urban studies, planning, the reformulation of the professional roles, the growth of demand for inclusion by the population.

Downstream of some of the most interesting and wide discussions within the various sessions, it seemed clear that is exactly the specific theme of social inclusion that allows us to offer some conclusions that open up new challenges: the interplay between analysis, representation and communication, in the reading of the cities in transformation concerns, more and more clearly, the possibility of expanding the population of relevant players, a crowd asking to be part not only of the decisions on the future of the city, but also of descriptions and shared representations of the urban landscape, within a different multitude of physical social times:

«La question essentielle de ces territoires internes, espaces sociaux, est peut-être celle tu temps, de la durée. Temps de la construction matérielle [...] temps des usages, aussi, qui ne son pas nécessairement conformes aux distinctions initiales, ni animés par les même rythmes. Temps de la maturation et de la mise en place d’une urbanité.» (*Roncayolo M., 2002*)

That's also why images, descriptions and languages struggle to be effective interpretative tools if they continue to be an adaptation of 'expert' knowledge, born by linear forms of translation of typical positivistic mechanisms. Look beyond forces us to rethink this kind of widespread knowledge that rises from the communities, from the citizens, through unexpected forms of hybridization, which needs to be revised and made understandable, clear, shared and that may allow a genuine enrichment of our research. With this in mind we can also review some of the most common definitions of heritage, particularly in urban settings, trying to include a number of new horizons, only apparently featureless, that still deserve to be explored.

«Le patrimoine n'est pas seulement l'exceptionnel; il se nourrit du quotidien, du banal ou presque, mais il est processus plus que simple conservation et capable de ce fait de peser le devenir de la ville.» (Roncayolo M., 2002)

References

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