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Three images of the contemporary city

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Three comprehensive and synthetic images of the contemporary city: the polycentric metropolis, the archipelago city and the generic city, seem to be pervasive in a vast panorama of narratives and discourses. The aim of this paper is to investigate these three prevailing images considering them as real “influential metaphysics”, underlying the way urban territory is perceived, conceptualized and designed and to discuss their pertinence in empowering the project on the contemporary city.

The paper perspective is that these three pervasive images have worn out much of their heuristic value. They are actually empowering the design process but, at the meantime, hindering a different understanding of the contemporary urban territory, its specificity and the demand for change. They are discussed as three hypothesis concerning the project on contemporary city referring stressing different features of urban territories and fostering diverse project themes.

Keywords: polycentric city, archipelago city, generic city

1. Introduction

Three comprehensive and synthetic images of the contemporary city: the poly-centric metropolis, the urban archipelago and the generic city, seem to be pervasive in a vast panorama of narratives and discourses ranging from the geographer account to the spatial-development policy document, from the architectural criticism to the design summary. The aim of this paper is to investigate these three prevailing images considering them as real “influential metaphysics”, underlying the way urban territory is perceived, conceptualized and designed and to discuss their pertinence in empowering the project on the contemporary city.

The transformations of European urban territory have been the object of a variety of descriptions and mapping operations in the last decades. This description effort has resulted in the production of a large number of images, trying to represent and interpret the character of contemporary urban territory.

The role of images in condense and conceptualize the space of the city has been recently analysed, within design disciplines, mainly from the point of view of their “external efficiency” (Söderström O., 2000).

The focus of attention has been their performance in the reception of the project: how a project involving complex processes can be condensed in powerful images, which can communicate the space of



the city, as it is interpreted or as it is transformed by the project, in a way to facilitate the process of negotiation, enabling people to participate in the transformation process (Gabellini P. 2006).

However, powerful images and description of the contemporary city can be considered also for their “internal efficiency”: how they inform the perspective and instrumentality of the design process, how they conceptualize land as territory and define problems to be addressed and finally how they state project priorities and themes (Söderström O., *op. cit.*).

The paper perspective is that the three more pervasive images: the poly-centric metropolis, the archipelago city and the generic city have maybe worn out much of their heuristic value.

A specific characteristic of all the three images is that they are comprehensive and synthetic: they refer to the entire urban territory. Nonetheless, they can be better considered as complementary images rather than alternatives, as they are usually found in diverse contexts describing relations between “parts” of the urbanized territory at different scales. Parts are here meant in an extended meaning as parts of the European urbanized space, thus referring both to settlements in large urban areas as well as small city-centres captured in a rather large urban dynamic.

A second, rather salient, common feature, is that all of them are descriptive and normative images, which is why they are considered with preference in this paper: it is precisely the unapparent shift between description and the project (and normative) use of the image what is at stake.

2. The poly-centric metropolis

Maybe the oldest of the synthetic images of contemporary European city, it is still the most influential as it is actively proposed as a substantial normative tool in the European Spatial Development Perspective (European Commission. Committee on Spatial Development, 1999).

When confronted with large scale transformations of European urban territory, the preponderance of the “poly-centric city” image seems to affect without frictions the European spatial development policies, as well as the definition of priorities in design themes and the affirmation of hierarchies within the concerned territories. As a result, projects and policies strictly depending on the poly-centric image are superimposed to a frequently reluctant territory, avoiding an investigation of its pertinence facing the variety of European territorial situation but also of European planning traditions. The ambiguity of its meaning is partly responsible of the wide extension of its reception (Waterhout B., 2002). In different context, it has been interpreted to foster different policies loosely linked to the goal of a “sustainable, balanced competitiveness” and regional network cooperation. Here, I am mainly interested in the poly-centric city as an idea of urban territory in its physical and morphological matter.

The poly-centric city-region can be described as a new form of megalopolis which can be observed mostly in Eastern Asia. It consists of a series of 10 to 50 cities functionally networked and clustered to one or more core centres, even if physically distant (Hall P, Pain K., 2006). The net gains strength and economic performance due to an internal functional subdivision of labour. This new form of megalopolis derives from a large process decentralizing activities and populations from major centres to small surrounding cities. The hypothesis, which P. Hall and K. Pain propose, is that European metropolitan regions are behaving in the same way and that they are growing more and more poly-centric. Indexes of this phenomenon are the ever increasing part of population and workplaces which are moving out of majors central cities, as well as the reality of small cities becoming increasingly networked, with a large flows of information exchange bypassing large central cities (Hall P, Pain K., *op. cit.*).

This reading of the territorial dynamic is strictly related to the interpretation of society and its relation with the territory as a “network society”, an interpretation focused on the relevance of “the space of flows” and information exchange as an index of territorial reorganization of society (Castells M., 1989). However, the relation between the hypothesis of the poly-centric structure of decision making, economic flows and information exchanges on one side, and the actual morphological consistency of territory is not really questioned.

The data models used for the purpose of mapping the poly-centric structure, for example, consider with preference direct connections: flights and direct trains between city centres, avoiding to consider indirect links between cities or urbanized areas. This choice is strictly dependent on the hypothesis of urban territory working as a net of “point cities” (Koolhaas R., 1995): a land where well defined centres are linked by pipe like connections between them.

At the meantime, the image provided and the analytical tools deployed hinder the possibility to grasp a more articulated structure of smallest connection internal to large urbanized areas, and to map urban areas which can not fit any more in the model of the “point city”, as is the case of north Milan region and the Po river plain. Milano is immersed in an urbanized land of numerous million inhabitants which was virtually not existing in one of the first maps produced during the process of construction of the ESPD, representing Europe as a net of city centres¹.

As a result, the key question is whether functional and morphological polycentricity come together (Hesse M., 2007).

The polycentric-city is much more than a functional scheme to investigate processes reorganizing European market economy. It is, at least since a decade, a driving principle and normative image designing European space, focusing on the attractiveness of centres and their connectivity, moreover it is a synthetic and comprehensive idea of what the city is and how urban territory should be organized in space.

The stated goal of ESPD is a balance between the centre and periphery of the European space, the means are an extension of infrastructural network, the effects are a potential and paradoxical draining of resources from “periphery” to “centre”.

A strong dichotomy is introduced in European space between land and territories which are connected to the infrastructural network - configured as a system of “channels” linking centres - and territory which are bypassed. At a local scale, this dichotomy is producing new and more complex “centre/periphery” relations, raising issues about spatial (and social) inequalities.

Moreover, the poly-centric image is affecting the way territory is designed at an urban scale, where the poly-centric image is applied through the policy of “sustainable concentrated de-concentration”. This policy has gained consensus without any precise elaboration of its pertinence in relation with the scale and specificity of the diverse European urban territories and appears to be derived from a scaling down of the poly-centric model considered as an abstract principle not affected by scale.

The smoothness which characterizes the reception of the poly-centric image at the planning level is probably due to its coherence with driving principles to be found in planning traditions confronting with large scale and territorial projects.

Two main references are evident in the poly-centric model. The first is the “central place” theory, which was the result of Christaller investigation of an agricultural context in southern Germany, during the '30s, and was soon shifting from an interpretative model to a normative one, becoming a well rooted large scale design principle.

Secondly we can consider the policy of “concentrated de-concentration” as strictly linked to the tradition of the garden city and its evolution in the idea of the “new towns” which has been a long lasting guiding principle in the British but also in the German planning tradition. A tradition which has been revitalized in the last two decades under the label of the “sustainable city” or more sustainable neighbourhoods, through a range of realized projects of new urbanization usually outside the existing city centre, with an accent on densification along the transit system.

Of course at a larger scale, the idea of a poly-centric Europe is also grounded on a historical reference to European small size competing cities of medieval origin. The European city, in its confined figure and

¹ the making of the ESPD and the difficulties in finding consensus on 'mapping' the European urban territory are discussed in: Faludi A. Waterhout B., (2002) The making of the European spatial development perspective: no masterplan, London, Routledge.

with its surrounding land, as it is portrayed in the Georg Braun atlas of 1572, is still a remarkably strong prototypical idea of what a city is or should be, and despite the pre-eminence of large urban areas, Europe is still rich of small to medium size cities which can recognise themselves in this prototypical model. However this is only a part of the truth, and even small city centres would be better investigated in relation to a much more complex set of relationships between urban territories characterized by very diverse density, and settlements criteria (and a large part of European agricultural land is here included), which cannot be considered under the exclusive umbrellas of “point city” or “generic” metropolitan areas (Koolhaas R., 1995).

3. The generic city

One of the most persistent idea about the contemporary city, is that the process of globalization of the market arena, and the increasing fast urbanization of large “new” territories are giving place, nearly everywhere through the same modalities of space production, to an anonymous, homogeneous and isotropic urban mass.

This is an image shared by many studies about the form of the metropolis and well spread in the architecture culture but also in the sociological and economic literature. The main narrative description of its content is maybe the “generic city” (Koolhaas R., 1995).

The basic principle defining the generic city, which is also the lens through which the actual contemporary city is described and interpreted, is the idea that the most recent parts of the city could be positively re-evaluated if they can be liberated of the necessity of an identity. The quest for identity is seen in the context of Koolhaas text as something negative. Identity is the rhetorical instrument through which large parts of the contemporary city have been secluded and deprived of the consideration of architecture as they “lack of identity”. The city centres, have capitalized all of the value of identity, and the whole rest of the contemporary city is thus deprived. Identity is -in the context of the generic city- the expression in the space of the city of the past we share; it is a sort of built capital, an asset that can be exploited until it is exhausted.

In this rhetorical and almost caricature description, architecture and urbanism are only able to preserve and reinforce the stated identity, until the complete falsification. But the process of city construction that happens largely outside the concern of architecture gives place to the “real” city which is generic, and avoid any specificity: here is where most of the population actually lives, a city which is large enough for everyone.

This plea for the “generic”, as a basic feature of the contemporary city, which means homogeneity and recalls egalitarianism, could be seen as an effort to shift the attention of architecture on the value of the “actual city” the “reality” of the contemporary city and its values as they are the voluntary product of society, thus making clear the ever increasing distance between architecture and the city.

From this point of view, the image of the generic city had an impact in proposing and moreover in divulging project themes concerning contemporary urban territories.

The generic city as an image of social critic internal to architecture is fascinating: the marginal role of architecture in defining the space of the everyday life is thus depending on the poverty of its internal cultural and social project. The generic city promises to liberate the city from the tyranny of identity, stating the generic, the lack of an identity as a positive principle: this is why the generic city, we are told, is the first form of the city that is multicultural and multiracial. Nonetheless, the hypothesis of a higher degree of egalitarianism in the generic city, comparing with modern city, is not verified.

When reconsidering the American eastern coast megalopolis, first described in 1961 by Jean Gottman, five decades after his studies, geographers found that patterns of social and economic differentiation were grown more and more complex. The ethnic composition too was becoming more complex. But in the same time span, and despite the passing of fundamental civil right legislation, the indexes which statistically refer to social and ethnic segregation did non change much (Vicino T.J., Hanlon B., Short J.R., 2007).

In the production of the generic city - as we know it – the issue of spatial justice does not seem to be addressed, conflict for identity recognition and exclusion are no less significant even if we avoid any discourse regarding the past. The bottom up development of the generic city - which is maybe the only implicit normative aspect in a prevailing descriptive image- is no guaranty of the higher democratic level of its physical space; and the identification of public space with the residual can hardly be considered as liberation. The “over demanding” public space of the modern city, has left its place in the “generic city” to the “residual”, which in a Colin Rowe terminology is the natural outcome of the Modern Movement's “green space” full of “good intentions” and lacking attention to the needs of associated life (Koolhaas R., 1995). But the characterization of open space as the “residual” is probably hindering a more complex reading of processes of space production within large urbanized areas. Residuality could be better considered not just as an intrinsic characteristic, or value, but as an index of an undergoing process of space restructuring which acts on different space and time scales (De Carli B., 2011). A range of processes which are in the making and whose formal instability should be regarded, in a long period perspective, as a potential opening for the project on the city.

However, considering the contemporary city as an homogeneous urban mass, has frequently resulted, within architecture and urban planning literature, in describing it as pure extension. The city is thus reduced to its bi-dimensional figure perceivable from the satellite as a stain on the ground, where the only differentiating principle is the floor area ratio, which also become a crucial control tool as recent researches about “density” seem to suggest. This neutral extension becomes the perfect background for individual aims and desire and, even more, for the individual architectural object, able to recover the identity content which was first expunged: the corporate identity of the generic architecture.

4. The urban archipelago

The image of the contemporary city as an archipelago of urban islands has gained a certain success in recent years as an interpretative image of the urban condition as well as a normative one. The archipelago has been seen as a metaphor able to condensate what the city intimately is: the place where we live separated (Soja, E. W., 2000); and the direction which the city could take: defined parts avoiding the destiny of an indistinct mass of urban material².

The 1977 project of Berlin as a green archipelago by the group led by Oswald Mathias Ungers in the summer academy of Cornell University, which is probably the more influential project built upon the archipelago image, is organized as a manifesto through eleven thesis delving into the idea of the “cities within the city” (Ungers O.M, et al, 1978).

In the first thesis, we find a recall of the demographic reduction of Berlin population and the acknowledgement of the impossibility of a complete “repairing” of the previous state of dense urban fabric. A phenomenon of reduction of the population living in the central urban areas and dismissal of vast portions of the urban fabric was at that moment the social and political reality of Berlin. This was a phenomenon of abandonment of the city centre towards the rather peripheral areas which was later investigated as the “shrinking cities” phenomenon.

Confronting with this phenomenon the proposed hypothesis is a clarification of the residual urban structure to achieve a number of “cities within the city” (Ungers O.M, et al, 1978, p. 86). Parts of the city which can be recognized as urban islands are subject to a process of clarification: they “will have an identity in keeping with their history, social structure and environmental characteristics”. Having lost their link with the previous urban structure the islands could be defined as objects of autonomous projects of densification, relying on the richness of the architecture tradition in urban design (Ungers O.M, et al,

² In 'towards an archipelago' Aureli P.V. (2017) ' delve into the concept of the urban archipelago as the (only) possibility to re-instate the formal and the political value of space, recovering architecture as a mean to build the 'city' seen in opposition to the prevailing 'urbanization'. Aureli P.V. 'Toward the archipelago. Defining the Political and the Formal in architecture ' in Log, 11, 91-120.

1978, p. 88). What is outside of the urban islands is subject to the effects of time and will be progressively transformed so that the islands will find themselves in a green archipelago in the long run. The “sea” of this archipelago is described as the place where we can find infrastructure, parks and sports ground, large commercial surfaces, industrial parks and suburban zones it is the space of the contemporary city under construction (Ungers O.M, et al, 1978, p. 90).

If we confront this image with the image of Roma, Arcipelago Frattale, by the group Stalker³, which was produced twenty years later, we can see that urban islands can only be perceived and defined if we cancel (without erasing it from the map) the reality of that space in between which is the problematic part of the city. This overlooked space is not quite “empty” but devoid of any structural meaning, even if this 'blue' sea of the image is supposed to be the focus of interest⁴.

Recalling the idea of the urban archipelago frequently means to focus on a range of features of the contemporary city: the diversity of parts within an urban area and their internal rules, the relations between parts, but also their reciprocal exclusion.

The interest of the archipelago image resides in the way the 'island' is defined as part of the city. However, the 'sea' of the metaphorical archipelago and the way it is characterized should be better scrutinized. In other words, the relationship which is imagined between the diverse parts of city is a qualifying feature of the metaphor and cannot remain undefined. I would like to suggest that while the focus on relationships between parts is frequently fostering the use of the archipelago metaphor as a descriptive image of the contemporary city, it becomes less explicit when the archipelago image is used in a design perspective. This lack weakens the possible usefulness of the archipelago metaphor as an interpretative image within architecture discourse.

Moreover, the original narrative about the contemporary city, which is described in the Berlin “cities within the city” is apparently extremely distant, due to the radicalism of its argumentation, from the current process of production of urbanized space; while a more domesticated version of this image has produced a number of design strategies legitimating a market oriented kind of fragmentation within the urban fabric.

Each urban operation, if large enough, can aspire to be considered as an urban island, drifting in an unspecified sea, without any need to make clear the condition of its own existence in a larger structure. However, the “sea”, remains the most problematic part of the city: it hosts the infrastructure network, residual agriculture plots, space for recreation and large commercial surfaces and a great amount of scattered productive units. Removed from the attention of architecture, it can work indifferently as a connection between given islands or as a whole range of barriers between them. This understanding of the very structure of the city does not enable architecture to face a crucial issue that is precisely the way parts of the city are arranged together, which results in the impossibility to question the degree of openness or enclosure of the city towards its inhabitants. In this perspective, the risk that 'urban islands' are just an image legitimating a city of enclaves (and ghettos) became more decisive than their possible value in emphasizing the specificity of a city which is made of highly different parts.

5. Conclusions

Three images: the poly-centric metropolis, the generic city and the urban archipelago have been considered for their heuristic value and for their long time influence on the discourse on the city. They are currently still empowering the design process but, at the meantime hindering a different understanding of the contemporary urban territory and its specificity. They have been discussed, in this context, as three

³ Stalker – Careri F., *Rome, archipel fractal, voyage dans les combles de la ville*, in "Techniques & Architecture" n° 427, Paris 1996, pp. 84-87.

⁴ The image was produced as the result of a trekking along the fringes of Rome urban periphery. Stalker – Careri F., op cit.

hypotheses concerning the project on the contemporary city referring to diverse urban planning traditions, stressing different characters of urban territories and fostering diverse project themes. Confronting with the current state of European urbanization process they appear to leave some crucial issues undefined. The actual correspondence between the polycentric image and urbanization morphologies seems to be unresolved. The concept of the “residual” appears as a simple leftover hindering the possibility to address the structure of contemporary urban space recalling the relevance of open space. Relationships between parts are not fully addressed, preventing the questioning of enclosure of space towards inhabitants. The hypothesis suggested is that a complete revision of this three prevailing images is necessary in order to discuss the form of the contemporary city and the processes of space production.

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