Roads and practices: a research on Milan

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Traffic jams, cars parked all over the place, pollution: these phenomena have been the focus of attention for a long time, in big towns and small centres alike. A growing concern over such issues and their dramatic effects on habitability are logically matched by a multiplication of proposals and experimentations, projects and policies.
In Milan, during the two terms of office of the executive council headed by mayor Gabriele Albertini, the cognizant department worked unsparingly and produced a number of resolutions and actions designed to address the numerous demands associated with these problems. Emergency actions, similar to those implemented in other Italian cities (traffic bans and alternate licence plate transit) were flanked by short medium and long-term initiatives designed *to redistribute stopping and moving patterns over the existing road space* (parking permits along the roads for different user classes, limitations on vehicle traffic through the city centre, through the reorganisation of one-way roads by urban sectors, the creation of pedestrian islands and axes); *offer alternatives to change the habits and behaviours of motorists* (creating underground parking facilities for residents, construction of interchange parks at subway and bus stations, reserved lanes for public transport vehicles); *create a sturdy, integrated mobility network* (new roads, junctions and traffic circles, new tramway and subway lines). While the debate on the construction of new infrastructures, as envisaged in the *2001-2010 urban mobility plan*,

remained confined to the *milieu* of administrators and experts, the other provisions set forth in the *General Urban Traffic Plan* and the *Urban Parking Plan*, as periodically updated and adapted, became a topic for general debate, which animated the exchange of opinions and brought out conflicts and contradictions. In fact, decisions entailing short implementation times and perceivable effects are part of the shared, daily experiences of the city and the territory. Starting from the consideration of the civil significance of traffic-related problems, the International Association of Lions Clubs deemed it important to look into this matter and entrusted a university department of architecture and planning with the task of conducting a research project focusing on the observation of such phenomena and the needs of city dwellers.

Experimental research

A number of well-known and well-tested approaches already exist to cope with the problems of city traffic and the quality of urban space.
The first approach, typical of infrastructure designers and transport engineers, puts the emphasis on sectorial aspects, of a functional and quantitative nature. Space and society, structures-people-relations are interpreted and expressed in terms of vehicle *flows, linear development* of infrastructures, network *capacity* and *efficiency*, parking *areas* ... Another approach, that has recently gained attention and popularity in Italy, is centred on road design and, in particular, on the re-shaping of road patterns. It relies primarily on use of techniques for the construction of 'models' that have proved highly successful in prior experiences and can be exported as viable solutions to different contexts.

Yet, in many quarters it is now believed that the time has come to *break the isolation of the problem and its solutions,* not only through the integration of instruments and decisions, but also by addressing the problems and devising solutions within the framework of a territorial strategy that will take into due account the different 'landscapes' involved. The need to come to grips with the complex nature of the theme is a stimulus to engage in research along new lines.
The research on Milan described in this article was conducted in this perspective, and, through an experimental, empirically oriented project, it covered a wide variety of situations and contexts to be able to evaluate possible interventions, focusing on practices and behaviours on the roads. The underlying assumption being that a careful and detailed observation of the phenomena associated with daily vehicle movements and, in particular, of the relations that are established between the subjects that populate the road space and the objects that connote such space, might lead to more appropriate considerations on the minute solutions adopted by city the administration, or might even provide cues enabling the experts to conceive better solutions. Working at the intersection between practices and spaces, in fact, we may realise that spaces of the same kind accommodate a multiplicity of coexisting elements: sometimes, this gives rise to conflictual, degenerative situations, where transgression and prevarication pre-dominate, conversely, at other times, this blend of heterogeneous factors is adaptive and even capable of improving on the existing conditions, and may help the experts to conceive more suitable solutions, or

even ones that do not fit into codified rules. This is the reason why it is felt that a promising approach to the problem in hand is to assume the *primacy of practices* without, however, under-estimating the importance of *structures*.

One operation plus two

A central aspect of the research was the intention to identify and describe different conditions of habitability of road space, to undertake the construction of a detailed map of situations in the city of Milan.
At the same time, two other operations were performed, with the aim of building up a telling background, i.e. a review of the municipal instruments governing mobility and parking modalities and a scrutiny of local news relating to a significant and 'hot' period, that is, the months from early 2000 to the summer of 2001, when two fundamental planning instruments were published: the Urban Mobility Plan and the General Urban Traffic Plan.
Instruments. The synopsis and comparison of sectorial plans made it possible to formulate some considerations on the specific aspects of each instrument and to assess the confluence of the different provisions into an overall framework. This originated a *deductive report* and an *additive approach*.
The *Urban Mobility Plan*, geared to the improvement of infrastructures, outlines the schedule of structural interventions and the correlated goals in terms of improved accessibility; the *General Urban Traffic Plan*, instead, defines the management framework and, above all, sets forth a functional classification of the network, paving the way for the minute treatment to which road spaces should be subjected for the sake of congruence with the

functions to be performed (smooth traffic flows, interdistrict, district and local links); accordingly, executive projects draw from a repertory of well tested and unified solutions (e.g. the abacus of materials for the design of environmental islands). In general, a viable goal that can be discerned seems to be that of discouraging in a progressive manner the use of private cars in favour of the public transportation system; this goal, however, has but a mild selective effect on the choices to be made and works, rather, in the sense of proposing a range of interventions in which 'as well as' is the keyword, i.e. the construction of new subway and tramway lines, *as well as* additional reserved lanes, car parks and interchange nodes on the city outskirts, biker lanes and environmental islands, *as well as* measures to achieve smoother traffic flows, new rules on wayside parking, construction of additional parking facilities in the inner city districts and residential areas. This seems to lead to the consolidation of sectorial plans based on a progressive accumulation of infrastructures, man-made structures and services geared to an indistinct improvement of accessibility, with some of the measures conflicting with some of the others (parking areas are attractors and setting up car parks close to the city centre will discourage the use of public transportation). Some of the arguments supporting this approach are controversial, i.e. the view that establishes a correlation *tout court* between a reduction in vehicle traffic and the expansion of the public transport system, or the notion that replacing private vehicle traffic with public transport vehicles is possible and legitimate only when the latter have

reached competitive levels of comfort and efficiency (as if such levels were a variable independent of vehicle traffic congestion). In the light of the theoretical uncertainty that persists in this field, the additive option, the multiplication of chances, might seem a reasonable choice. Yet, the ensuing hypertrophy of infrastructures and man-made structures (including generalised interventions for the reshaping of road layouts) can be seen as an unrealistic prospect, on account of the quantity of economic resources required, exceedingly long realisation times, incompatible with the needs to be met, and the inelastic limitedness of space available in a densely inhabited city such as Milan. Compared to the situation that has come about, it seems more advisable to consider two complementary lines of action. On the one hand, assuming a strategic vision that "demands 'more courage' on the part of the city administration", beyond the "petty handling of day-to-day affairs", beyond the "policies of compromise"; this would lead to adopting an approach where *instead* is the keyword, in lieu of *as well as*, i.e. a selective reduction of the measures in favour of accessibility, to be achieved by identifying a reasonable line of work, to be pursued through mutually congruent and synergetic actions, explicitly correlated with land use. On the other hand, a ductile design capacity, that is able to recognise the problems whose solution cannot be postponed and possible remedies, by investigating behaviours, their sense and legitimacy, overcoming the misconception of the right to free circulation, construed as a non-discriminating occupation of public road space, regardless of any consideration as to its effects and its costs to the community.

Local news. Precisely because it is part of the experience of anyone who lives in a city, the problem of traffic breeds different, and often conflicting, opinions, and occupies a central position in the public debate and agenda. For this reason, a study of the local news records (the newspapers, first of all, but also the web, as a venue where the different players voice their opinions, organise, mobilise and form coalitions) seemed useful to grasp the 'common' perception of a problem, the dominant factors in the way it is described and interpreted, a first step towards a reflection on the appropriateness of the solutions that are proposed, and those that might be proposed. Local news as an access to shared views, as records of the social practices that are the heart of this research, local news to become attuned with the 'temporal compression' and the 'over-abundance of events' that David Harvey and Marc Augé have brought to everybody's attention. Aspects characterising contemporary life that account for the constant presence on the daily newspapers of ideas and critical contributions by scholars and experts, sometimes organised as thematic inserts. Newspaper articles were collected and read to construct an annotated chronology and an initial reconstruction by themes, which revealed the emergence of two major concerns: atmospheric pollution and lack of space, space being devoured by moving and standing vehicles. The more superficial layer of local daily news depicts a city that deprives its inhabitants of two essential conditions: breathable air and a rich, plural, meaningful urban space.
From a reading of mass news we get a markedly variegated image of urban

conditions in Milan over the last few years. As 'non academic', 'non scientific' sources, newspapers should perhaps be viewed as the best means to grasp the habitability crisis of Milan, where particularly evident is the jarring, almost schizophrenic contraposition between 'mega-projects' (e.g. the new fair grounds in Rho-Pero, the contest for the transformation of the city's oldest urban enclosure, the Santa Giulia district in Montecity, the 'new' Scala …), which, in the national news, place Milan in the narrow circle of Europe's top-ranking cities, and the 'small' causes of distress, the minor episodes that continuously appear on the local news, evidencing the malaise, the exasperation of so many inhabitants of the metropolis. A paradox of Milan that was summarised by Alessandro Balducci in an editorial on the local pages of *Corriere della sera* of 7 January 2005: "On the wake of the success of the completion of a major project such as the restoration of La Scala, the debate was rekindled regarding the need to invest, with the same determination, in the recovery of a quality of life that, in Milan, appears badly compromised. The habitability of a city is the outcome of a number of factors, such as the quality of public space, the quality of the air we breathe, the efficiency of services, security, social cohesion, the vitality of some urban places, the ability to provide homes for the young, correcting the exceedingly selective dynamics of a real estate market that has lost all correlations to the utilisation value of housing facilities".
The reference to habitability appears new if we consider the debate that has taken place over the last two decades, centred on competition-related issues. On the other hand, if we

look further back, we shall find that habitability is a 'classical' theme and, especially after the impact of the Modern Movement, has given rise to a host of techniques. The comeback of this theme is of interest if, in addition to grasping its integrated character, the discussion explores its technical implications with respect to the new life styles.

Going back to the original meaning of the term, working on habitability means working on the experiential dimension that unfold in the relationship between space and society, expanding the field of observation to the different places and modalities where this relationship materialises. In this sense, speaking of the *habitability of roads* is not something abstract or paradoxical, but rather it reflects a clear intention to view movement as a fundamental moment in life and to steer design and planning activities accordingly.

Practices, descriptions, images/actions

In as much as they are manifest actions, practices provide access to unvoiced demands, to the needs and the interests of a settled community. The observation of repeated behaviours helps to capture habits and patterns, the observation of behaviours shared by groups of individuals evidences common traits and differences, and, finally, the observation of rare, unique behaviours makes it possible to discern emerging trends. Enjoyment, adaptation, distress are the perceptions that social practices will reveal, if they are examined keenly. For pressing and controversial issues, such as the problems associated with city traffic, the interpretation of signs, the collection of warnings add up to appropriate ways of listening, more interesting and more reliable than the

customary modalities. In this case, however, the responsibility of the observer is evident and the research itinerary is less certain.

In view of the chosen approach, the research could not aim for a predetermined conclusion, or one that could be generalised. Surely, it could not set for itself objectives for immediate implementation. On the other hand, it made it possible to explore a line of work and test its fertility, albeit with some syncopated passages.

In keeping with the underlying criteria, the *primacy of practices* without underestimating the importance of *structures*, it was decided to organise the experimental investigation into the "Observation of practices" and the "Descriptions and images/actions".

Observation of practices. A painstaking sequence of direct observations was translated into an organised collection of photographic documents, animations and charts; the process of observation was subdivided into four main logical stages, that were assigned names reflecting the progress of the theorisation and its thematic connotations: "Practices and figures of distress"; "Standardised techniques"; "Before and after standardised interventions"; "Before and after adaptive practices".

The aim of the first stage, *Practices and figures of distress*, was to try and delineate, with reference to different situations, the manifestation of conflicts between the people who use the roads and man-made structures, between different groups of inhabitants. Markedly transgressive practices are observed, deviating greatly from expected and regulated behaviours, that sometimes take the form of a veritable prevarication of

some user classes over others, or, sometimes, give rise to an informal use of road space in precarious conditions of equilibrium between the different users. *Standardised techniques*: this aim of this stage was to determine the modalities by which the administration, with the allotted tools, provides solutions to known problems, by addressing them through standardised, repetitive solutions. In *Before and after standardised interventions*, the solutions put into effect are observed in relation to the taking root or rejection processes they have triggered, also as a means to determine their appropriateness and validity. The inhabitants react to the new spatial organisation by adapting, readapting spaces, or generating new, unexpected situations. But even in the absence of institutional interventions, road space undergoes processes of adaptation and transformation through 'do-it-yourself' solutions. In *before and after adaptive practice*, such spontaneous solutions are examined and some of them are recorded and validated by a technical treatment.

A sample of the photographic records of the behaviours of car and motorcycle drivers, bikers and pedestrians, as well as the latest transformations of space, followed by considerations on what goes on 'before and after' (including the reactions of road users to the corrective measures adopted and the reactions of the experts to their behaviours), is illustrated in the images proposed in these pages, that try to summarise icastically the correlations between practices and techniques, revealing striking and, sometimes, paradoxical situations.

Descriptions. In this portion of the research, *ten representative situations* of movement and stopping

patterns in the roads of Milan were identified empirically: 1. the distress caused by parked cars in the residential districts; 2. the criticality of cars stopping along the primary traffic arteries, which reduces the capacity of the roads and hampers the flow of vehicles; 3. parked vehicles invading the preferential lanes of public transportation; 4. the difficulties experienced by commercial vehicles in stop-and-go deliveries; 5. the plurality of uses of green patches along the roads, a space that is now deemed, and has become, residual, but is potentially significant; 6. the paradoxes characterising paid parking regulations; 7. the partial and fragmented set-up and the badly undermined, unsafe conditions of biking lanes; 8. the 'special' treatments and many needs of pedestrian areas; 9. the difficult coexistence of people walking and parked mopeds; 10. the competition between residents, commuters and city users for parking/standing spaces in the proximity of stations and urban attractors.

The descriptive decalogue of the research summarises (and leaves programmatically open) the process of recognition of problematic behaviours; proposes an initial identification of critical situations that are recurrent in the city; makes an attempt to conceptualise social practices with reference to 'dedicated spaces' whose functionality is undermined (the residential zones and the main traffic arteries), 'weak spaces' whose conditions remain unstable and are exposed to the risk of turning into 'reserves' (ornamental green spaces, paid car parks, biking lanes), 'spaces fought for' where the concomitant presence of different groups of dwellers does not evolve into a regular coexistence (pedestrian zones,

sidewalks, car parks at the stations).

The habitability deficit finds expression in an 'exasperating' manner in the roads of residential areas, where heavy traffic and illegal parking practices clash with basic requirements that people perceive as prerogatives of these portions of the city, i.e., protection of people walking on foot, guaranteed and effortless parking, widespread use of bicycles, places where people can meet, hang around, rest and play … The last step of the research therefore consisted of exemplifying, compared to the first situation described (*exasperated residents*), a ductile and contextual approach, also suitable for application to other situations, by imagining three different action profiles.

Images/actions. These are ideal-typical, programmatic profiles, designed to reveal the decisive correlation between the reorganisation of space and the objective pursued, in lieu of functional classification of roads, also in view of the fact that a single class will include different roads and, conversely, roads of the same type will fit different classes. Hence, the road space project must be interpreted in relation to the characteristics of the entire section, the specific surrounds (man-made structures and functions), the habits of the inhabitants, precisely those practices that were the focus of the research. Proposing three profiles for the same road, all of them compatible with its functional classification, is designed to evidence the margins for choice; one profile, in fact, does not rule out the others, and hybrid forms are possible. Above all, the action strategy recognised as suitable for coping with a given problematic situation in a specific context will not necessarily be the appropriate answer for other city contexts in which the same situation is reproposed. The simulation therefore suggests the need to evaluate recurrent issues against the venues in which they come up, to proceed with a flexible, contextualised scrutiny of possible project solutions, which can also capture, and take advantage of, locally identifiable adaptive practice.