Culture and identity in the strategies of a medium-small sized town

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The identity of the city, which is an ambiguous and elusive concept, can be posited as the result of an act, unnatural and always relative to the subjectivity that completes it, of abstraction of a relatively stabile image from an unpredictable and continuous process of change "from which forms emerge and in which they are destined to disappear" (Remotti 1996). Identity in this perspective is the result of a decision. This result is always full of partiality, conflicts and contradictions in the separation of a mental figure from the continuous and unpredictable movement of things. The narration that follows aims at demonstrating the relevance of these brief reflections in the context of the case of La Spezia, a small coastal city in the north-west of Italy with a population of about 95,000 that has had a history of changes and discontinuities, sometimes of a catastrophic proportion, that have marked its process of formation, growth, crisis and reinvention.

La Spezia was a small centre in a wider system of land established in feudal times. Its placement, defilated with respect to large territorial distances lent it a relative marginality for centuries. Only in the second half of the 19th century did the settlement materially acquire a relevant urban dimension in the context of changes in national territorial strategies. The placing of one of the most important naval bases of the unitary state in the plane beside, led to a sort of refoundation expressed substantially in the birth and expansion of a new city.

The 19th century urban dimension was the expression of a definitive assertion of the social classes of the industrial era, the bourgeoisie (tied to the military class) and the working class, and was incarnated in some characteristic themes (Romano 1993): large tree-lined avenues, orthogonal road system, new piazzas, new theatre and a new station. Towards the end of the 19th century demographic growth generated by the arrival of the Arsenal led to the need to build new neighbourhoods for the working classes, settled in continuity with the orthogonal structure of the blocks of the pre-existing 19thcentury city.

If "urban forms are the product of history" and in the city we can recognise "the accumulation of a sum of historical experiences" (Roncayolo 1978), this new urban dimension certainly found an element of stability during the evolution of the city until the threshold of modernity in the permanence from the 19th century onwards of the orthogonal plant. The plot of orthogonal avenues that projected the new urban fabric into the planes in several subsequent phases of growth is oriented according to the axes of the 19th century naval base and continued to be so, even defining the line of growth of the city in the post-war period. The Arsenal settlement set off of a process of industrialisation that radically changed the slow evolutionary development of the city until the mid 19th century. Urban development was definitively conditioned, in the long-term, by the military and industrial role forced on the city and by the affirmation of a new bourgeoisie whose visions of the future formed a background for the urban plans from the beginning of the 20th century to the second world war.

At the beginning of the 20th century, large industry began to settle and the mercantile port was born and accompanied by a further urban development marked by strong territorial transformations. Among these, was the levelling of a hill to enable the urban colonisation of an agricultural area, mirroring that in which the 19th century city developed. New industrial concentrations were progressively affirmed in the naval-mechanic sector and in that of arms production. The new mercantile port was established and rapidly consolidated the rise of its traffic. Urban imagery was built around plans that prefigure the doubling of the city with the urbanisation of the plane to the east of the consolidated centre, re-proposing the 19th century orthogonal structure. The large avenues of the historical city pivoting on the lines of the Arsenal were projected on the plane giving shape to visions and expectations of a new industrial bourgeoisie.

The second world war was a high point of catastrophe in the history of the city, which was destroyed by bombardments, and what was left of one of its deeper elements of identity, the medieval nucleus, was devastated first by air raids and second, even more radically, by post-war reconstruction implemented in a deregulated and speculative way through substituting preexisting fabrics.

Post-war development confirmed the industrial vision born in the 19-20th century with trust in large-scale state-sponsored development, the progressive development of the port and arms production. The orthogonal structure began to materialise the visions of plans from the beginning of the century, initially reproducing typologies of blocks characteristic of the first 19th century expansion, then shattering in the disorder of the periphery of a minor city made of cottages and houses complying with the old rural format, but also of factories and productive areas that found support for organising activities in the old paths of rural origin. The commercial port, born at the beginning of 20th century, underwent a phase of veritable expansion: the progressive moving of ship fitters from Genoa to La Spezia and subsequently, the introduction of container transport led to a strong growth in port space and employees without, however, a corresponding planning of infrastructure or environmental integration activities. At the end of the 1980s, La Spezia had become the main Italian port for goods container traffic notwithstanding the small spaces of the dock and the almost total absence of adequate rail and road infrastructure. In this framework of unplanned growth, not supported infrastructurally, the first conflicts with the city emerged: while the port became of notably national strategic interest, the surrounding neighbourhoods underwent the repercussions of its development in terms of overall environmental compatibility. The process of post-war industrialisation continued with strong territorial dissipations progressively leaving visible waste. In the 1960s the consolidation of the framework of productive settlements, some of which had already been in place at the beginning of the century and had been strengthened between the two wars, definitively ratified the structure: port, electrical power station, armoury industry and refinery.

From the end of the 1970s the economic system of the city entered a critical period characterised by decline of large-scale manufacturing

industry, growth in unemployment, accompanied by demographic decline. Large industry began to cede ground to smaller widespread realities that spread in the valleys outside the city towards areas in which land availability was less limited and spaces for production were less equipped in terms of accessibility. The crisis, principally manifest in the strong decrease in employment, also found a further element of decline in environmental questions. A vital cycle seems to have been extinguished looking at the inventory of the environmental threats left in inheritance by military and industrial dominion: pollution of the thermo-electrical power station, still fuelled by coal, the dumps in the hills and in the military Arsenal areas, the bloody cohabitation of movements and relative infrastructure with the peripheral living fabrics produced by a port that occupies increasing amounts of space, pollution of the sea, a sea increasingly farther from the eye of the resident that continues to struggle to find spaces to overlook it.

In the middle of the post-industrial crisis, a totally unexpected event took place and competes as a decisive factor heralding the birth of a new urban identity hypothesis. The setting off of a new process that in the course of the decade led to a change in the vision of the future of the city was given life, not insignificantly by a member of the industrial elite. Amedeo Lia donated a collection of antique art to the city of La Spezia and ensured the commitment of the municipal administration to put in place a civic museum with the donor's name. In a short time the museum, which was housed in a restored religious building from the 17th century, was inaugurated. At the same time, public works were organised in a

strategic manner from the central generator of the museum to sustain the propagation of a process of requalification with a gradual but unfailing rhythm to the entire historical centre. Pedestrianisation gradually facilitated the proliferation of new commercial activities and services for tourism. One after another, other donations were made giving life to the idea of building, in the context of the urban centre, a veritable museum network. To bolster the Lia Musuem, a neogothic building was recovered in order to host temporary exhibitions. Here a new museum was opened, it too the fruit of private donations that offered the most complete collection of seals in the world to the municipal administration. After the restructuring of the abandoned court-house building, also in the historical city centre, thanks once again to private donations, the last act of this process of museum reinvention of the city was put in place, the CAmeC (Centre for Modern and Contemporary Art) that gives expression to Martinetti's idea for the city, that of a 'house of art' seventy years later. The picture of this unprecedented museum fabric is completed by the recovery of one of the benchmarks of the city's history, included in the structure of the Arsenal and a further museum, the National Transport Museum which is still being adjusted and reorganised. Overall in a decade the city underwent a general rediscovery of its historical centre thanks to a process propelled by an absolutely unprecedented development factor in its history: culture.

Innovation in the planning system

In the same year in which Amedeo Lia donated his collection to the city hall and in which works on the museum began, work on

the new Municipal Urban Planning Instrument was launched. The themes of sustainability and urban regeneration acquired a dominant role and enabled developing a perspective of the objective of an overall transformation of the city, beginning with the identity born from the awareness of the crisis and the emerging 'city of museums'. The particular nature of the historical moment of the city and especially the need to rapidly give shape to a new vision was made evident by the fact that in the planning process some elements of innovation were introduced both in the contents and the instruments of the plan. While work on the urban plan was underway, the city hall forwarded some strategic choices that ensured the stability and strategic reliability of the "background vision" (Piroddi 1999) that the plan was gradually interweaving. This occurred through not totally conventional instruments and procedures approving three 'area plans' relative to themes of transformation, that were subsequently totally acknowledged in the general plan. The first of these relates to the reconversion of a large area of about 70 hectares, an urban lacuna in a baricentric location with respect to the entire urban organism left by the abandoned preexisting refinery. Here the realisation of a new urban and district centrality is heralded with the forecast of new commercial, tertiary and quaternary functions. The second area plan, also of crucial relevance is that which redefines the central part of the sea front part of the town.

The new waterfront represents a strategic opportunity to reimpose the image of the city in a tourism direction moving the new development of the mercantile port towards more peripheral areas and bringing back to a public urban dimension and with

commercial, tertiary, recreation and accommodation functions the water front placed in axis with the urban centre. The port expands to the east leaving the first basin free in the centre. In this, through a competition, some of the relevant contents for the new tourism perspective will be defined for planning.

The third area plan in the east seems to constitute the compensatory counterpart vis-à-vis the periphery of this strategic choice which is unbalanced in favour of the centre. It provides for a delocalisation of port movement activities which are currently directly in contact with inhabitants of peripheral eastern neighbourhoods of the city to an external intermodal centre and the conversion of areas occupied by them to a productive district for pleasure boats, thereby injecting new sustainable productive activities in a degraded environment of the city.

The city's strategic plan
The instrument to accompany this process certainly cannot only be the urban plan. The adoption of an instrument able to place interactions between various subjects at the centre, able to place the different levels of civil society in communication to pursue a system of shared objectives was made necessary. An instrument able to integrate urban planning instruments, overcoming the possible narrowness, extending the focus to environmental and social questions that constitute cogent themes for the future of the city and that reclaim a level of involvement and sharing that cannot be reduced to procedural and technical constraints of codified institutional practices. The strategic plan of La Spezia developed in two phases. The first one began in 1999, a year before the adoption

of the Urban Planning Instrument with the aim of elaborating a shared image of the city and formulating some projects for change, but especially to express the need for identity and to develop the idea of a city-community. The plan was structured as a pact among public and private actors and leadership was accorded to the coprotagonism of the municipal and provincial administration. A strong interrelation is developed among different institutions called to face each other and undersign a 'pact of the new city': Chamber of Commerce, Local Health Board, Port Authority, as well as all public bodies. Other public bodies, like the Region and some other municipalities in the territorial district, while not signatories of the 'pact', undersign specific agreement protocols on the strategic objectives concerning them. The objectives are: identity, understood as a revisiting of the historical vocations as a reference for the future of the local economy; competitiveness, as brought by economic globalisation with the aim of enhancing natural and cultural resources; solidarity connected to problems of welfare and the search for development of participative processes; sustainability deals with resources as the basis of competitiveness of La Spezia in an international arena. The strategic axes on which objectives are to be reached and on which over the second phase of the plan eight work commissions were articulated are: the sea as a significant identity resource; construction of an integrated provincial tourism-cultural system; confirmation of the centrality of defence and marine technologies; the promotion of variety and synergies; activation of strong collaboration among productive sectors and the

system of training and University; strengthening of the infrastructural system, on a grand scale and on an urban grid scale; production of a more qualified environment through a better balance between productive-port functions and territory, the reduction of polluted areas and the spread of green areas and services; a more modern welfare based on a plural system of supply and on a renewed governance meaning participation and crediting of actors; structuring of paths of extended participation of citizens in the system of decisions that relate to them. The main part of the work, more strictly tied to the theme of identity as a fruit of construction and the decision-making process, is centred on the theme of shared 'vision' based on research of a new economic, social, environmental and cultural perspective.

Reflections on the experience of a medium-sized town
Today transformations regard the image of the city, rather than its physical form. It involves a renewed experience of the city and of its perception that solicits unprecedented behaviour by inhabitants. The imagined city makes them protagonists of evolution of the traditional city, port and military industry to the 'creative city', of culture and tourism. The careful architectural restorations and rediscovered public role of two buildings have led to the recovery of surrounding public spaces by the municipal administration and the enhancement of the down-town building fabric by private owners. In the light of this experience it is useful to ask ourselves what urban identity is. If we consider only that which appears, identity would seem to correspond to a pure image without history and context, like a

photograph that identifies people in identity cards. If we consider why all this has happened, the answer is not so easy. The cultural dimension existed already in private spaces of the bourgeoisie of the traditional city and in closed places of its collective rites. The intuitions and happenings that stimulated the new urban identity were possible because fuelled by cultural and financial roots that originated in previous historical phases of the city. Urban identity is therefore something more than a simple image; it is the deep structure of the way of being of an urban community and city spaces in which it lives. It is made of relations that put in relation the behaviour of inhabitants that take on the value of collective practices with the spaces in which they are manifested.
If the prospects of a renewed urban identity are founded on cultural values and resources, it is natural to ask what is urban culture today and what are the behaviours and meanings that it expresses. In the feud of words between 'cultural city', as metaphor and image for promoting change, and 'urban culture', as knowledge, models and techniques that enable interpreting and orienting change, you can create a short circuit that renders urban complexity banal, proposing it according to slogans of publicity images. However, in both cases culture is no longer the term that designates an exclusive dominion of subjects that have technical, professional or intellectual competencies. Today museums are places for masses of people that activate notable economic flows in tourism activities. Average levels of education are much higher than in the past and the higher availability of free time tied to the increase in average age and early pensioners, have generated a population of potential users

of cultural goods which have been likened now to consumer goods. Historical cities, open air museums refresh the image of facades and public spaces to attract new occasional tourist visitors, before improving the quality of life of inhabitants. The strategy of public interventions leads to improvement activities of many private interventions. The 'cultural city' relates to 'urban culture' in an aleatory fashion. It presupposes the renewal of the appeal of urban images, carriers of an ephemeral identity that values 'cultural goods' but also requires the diffusion of new values tied to needs of urban quality and the meaning of cultural goods like public goods and new social and anthropological behaviour of identification and participation in the improvement process.
The cultural city is only one of the many aspects of a city supported by the production of immaterial goods that in more general terms is defined 'creative city'. Are we to understand by the term 'creative city' that which realises spaces of the 'creative economy' or is the correspondence between the two a reductive simplification of more articulated and complex relations that hide problems that are more conveniently removed?
Reflecting on the case of La Spezia, it would seem that the definition of 'creative city' does not only refer to modes and styles of economic production founded on the production of intangible goods, but refers to the capacity to manage and accompany change. The 'creative city' has sought to regularise relations among different subjects and reabsorb conflicts set off by choices on the use of land made in the urban planning instrument, inserting them as active moments in the 'strategic plan of the city'. The change, in which the factor of initial catalyst can

be found in the donations of collections by modern benefactors, was not concluded by the drafting of the urban planning instrument. The planning process has been opened to a sequence of decisions and actions that have found headquarters in the procedures of the strategic plan.

Urban and regional planners have to confront immaterial and intangible questions that are difficult to approach and define. Their nature changes the paradigms and references of professional practice that have to decline the abstract terms of quality, creativity, culture and imagery with concrete actions and interventions. In the case of La Spezia, these problems took on very evident real and contingent professional connotations.

They lead us to understand what is 'urban identity', increasingly recalled as a factor with which to measure urban quality; what is the nature of 'urban culture' and what are the behaviour and values that express it; what is the meaning of 'creative city' and if this has to necessarily coincide with the 'creative economy'.

If the new emerging categories of the 'creative city' send us back to abstract terms like identity, creativity, and culture, the paradigms and parameters with which these interpret and represent the urban phenomenon are still little explored. It would seem that speaking of 'identity' we cannot fail to have to do with models of complexity, with continuity of history and the controlled arbitrariness of evolution.

A second reflection also expresses a certain preoccupation. If we accept the logical simplification that associates the 'creative city' with the 'creative economy'; if the creative economy is based on immaterial goods, one wonders whether the creative city also belongs to the immaterial world and therefore is not real.

There are reasons for fearing that it is fruit of manipulation of images typical of publicity slogans, once again tied to a strongly and exclusively economic vision. One wonders whether the city is not more articulated and complex, whether planning has not still got instruments to decipher and operate in the transition from industrial city to still-to-be-named city that has replaced it.

The creative city, that produces itself its own image to compete with the economies of other global cities is evidently the city of dominant elites and classes. In the meanwhile the phenomena of marginality and disadvantage have also changed but differently from the city of elites; the city of marginality does not have an equally evident image nor clear parameters to describe it. The emerging image of the 'cultural city' and the 'creative city' risks hiding fragmentation, discontinuity, ambiguity, and contradictions of the real city.