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The post-European city in Europe

1. Introduction

The very possibility of identifying univocal trends and credible scenarios has been placed in a difficult position during the phases of rapid and turbulent transformation. Our discipline was formed on the assumption of long-lasting, ongoing developments and a series of linear phenomena that are easy to extrapolate. In these analytical models even crises don't change the direction of the phenomena but they do allow temporal scansion and periodic readjustment.

The current situation is however different, since not only do our forecasting tools appear to be inadequate but the majority of assumptions considered to be axiomatic with regards to urbanisation processes also seem to be contradicted daily by emerging phenomena. Their very multiplicity not only makes the search for common features useless but also makes any average/long-term forecasts unreliable.

In European tradition there is, however, something that allows the identification of unifying ways and answers, the analysis of urbanisation processes and not their forms. By definition, a union is a tie between different components. It is the result of actions that aim at a high-priority strategy to solve common problems, the urgency of which prevails over any original differences.

2. A prior quantitative observation

From this point of view, a possible strategy to overcome the complexity is to isolate the new problems and compare them with those that are specific to other contexts, trying to distinguish facts from theory, results from projects and aims from instruments. Data then appear that not only confirm the thesis of change of paradigm – now widely accepted – but also appear to lay the foundations on which the pieces of the puzzle can be placed.

To begin with, a quantitative observation is necessary. The most relevant urbanisation phenomena are no longer in Europe – the biggest cities and the largest urban agglomerates have now moved to other parts of the world. This corresponds to the percentage decrease of European urbanised areas in the world (ninety per cent of new urban population is in non-western areas). Moreover, another diminishing aspect in Europe is the specific weight of the centres within a widespread urbanisation compared to the concentration prevailing in the rest of the world. Furthermore, what were once the paradigmatic functions of urbanity, i.e. housing and production, are no longer to be found in urban centres. In the cities there is also a general refusal, if not abandonment, of »planned« areas and quarters, i.e. the symbols of the modern movement in urbanism and welfare that had been achieved in Europe until the 1970's.

Although areas of public housing and buildings for healthcare, social services and education still continue to absorb a large part of local administration investments, they have recently produced no successful typology, which on the contrary currently all appear to have been imported (shopping-malls, business districts, water fronts, traffic junctions, theme and science parks, protected suburban quarters, leisure centres...).

For a long time, it was taken for granted that Europe was both the initiator and exporter of urbanisation models. Now however, it would seem that there are no »winning« models – not even in the traditional fields of urban technology, integrative capacity, or the dynamics of attraction.

It is very likely that this had to be the case since for more than a generation we have seen a total reduction in investments in social fixed capitals, and a restructuring towards forms that have scarce visibility or are not specifically urban.

The change in outlook due to current transformations allows us a greater understanding of the enthusiasm for the »European model« of the past, if these transformations are seen as relative. In reality, the characteristics of the European city and it's greatest successes probably lie in the reply, the resistance, and often in the reaction to the »different« forms of imported urbanisation.

Polycentrism, cities organised in »parts« and the attention paid to connections between the centres and separate parts of the city, are just a few of the more evident signs of this specific tradition, where the zones for inhabitants of other cultures enriched the centres as terminals of vast interrelational networks. However, the outstanding characteristic of this opening to the other, the attempt to exploit one's own answers on other cultures lay in public investments, in the ability to supply services and an infrastructure that encouraged development and created conditions of functional cohabitation and a higher percentage of overall productivity.

The physical evidence given to this type of investment lies in the very care given to their architectonic impact, in the civic pride expressed in the buildings and structures that represented society's overall capacity for innovation.

However, symptomatic of a different attitude towards urbanism is the recent lack of importance given to representative buildings of institutions and public interest.

Hospitals, schools, transport networks, quarters and social building have all been interpreted as spatial dividing elements and as elements of temporal arrangement. Places of civic pride seem to be limited to museums and banks or to those with a high flow of visitors such as shopping centres and airports.

The shift of symbolic values is clear – old instruments, in particular those for social housing as opposed to the private and unplanned city, have transformed places of integration into areas of segregation, while social meeting places have been reduced to places where individuals come together but pass through fleetingly.

3. The lost cause of public investment?

Public investments seem to be moving from what is real and concrete to what is monetary and imaginary, thus losing their capacity for symbolic representation. The attempt to establish direct and objective relationships between social transformation and its representation in urban space is al-

ways difficult. One can nevertheless deny that a certain parallel can be drawn between modifications in European social policies over the last twenty-five years and the strategies of the single nuclei and their location in the city. Faced with uncertain and egalitarian welfare, increasing strata of population have preferred certain, concrete and differentiated forms of welfare – small houses, long-lasting consumer goods, taking care of one's physical well-being and investments in know-how rather than academic qualifications.

Corresponding to the fall of urban support policies of development are the decreased development (or developments) in different sectors that are characterised by more individual characteristics and advantages that are not as widely divided. From the point of view of planning, until now the main problem was recognising existing resources and dividing them between places and social groups. Now, however, there is a tendency that does not yet have theoretic foundations and that no longer regards planning as a way of dividing resources, but as creating them, mainly through the formation of a system of attractiveness and enhancement of places.

In other words, the idea is that the result must be greater than the sum of the components and that the problem of the division of costs and benefits automatically becomes less pressing during development stages – even if it is to the advantage of only limited population groups.

In reality, it is the latest attempt to quantify the relationship between space and society, to reduce the places to the functions imposed on them. The consolidated city is however neither neutral nor indifferent to social policies – it is characterised by an inertia that is even greater than the »burden« of its history.

4. The benchmarks of urbanity

Temples of the city are not temples of history – they follow much more complex paths with forms of autonomy that reflect political and social changes.

The urbanised world is no longer isochronous but polyrhythmic. It is characterised by growing differences in specific replies, in which each »island« has different reaction times, and the ever-changing form of the archipelagos is increasingly dependent on the form of connections or exclusion between the components.

The emergence – delayed in comparison to other disciplines – of the poetry of the fragment and of the changing point of view, can possibly be explained by the greater inertia of urban materials as well as by the lack of attention paid to connecting structures: deconstruction leaves the pieces intact, but not the connections between them.

However, it appears to be difficult to abandon the physical and temporal continuity of the city in favour of systems of commutation of time and distance that are both separate and distinct from one another. It seems difficult to think of three-dimensional nodes of multi-network spaces, the control of differentiated flux and speed, the abandonment of the traditional system of clear dichotomy (city-countryside, centre-suburb, etc.) in favour of unclear multidimensional systems.

This corresponds to a serious crisis in the discipline's capacity to guide the transformation – urban tradition is based on continuity and linearity and its instruments are those of distinguishing and separating diverse developments. If urbanist instrumentation follows flexibility, unstable situations, pro-

gramme modularity and unexpectedness of results, it reduces itself to a tale, to the presentation of technological marvels that could be created in the future, should a coalition of interests renounce other criteria of evaluation, control and definitions of temporal priority that had finally been acquired.

Faced with the diverse temporal discontinuity and phases, sciences of the city seem to have forgotten that the economic value of the city itself is becoming increasingly central (also in comparison to the value of the undertakings which, according to a current interpretation, sees the city in the role of instrument, support, a catalyst).

During phases of transition, cities rediscover their function as places of accumulation of differentiated economic and human resources and diverse projects.

5. Rearranging hierarchy

After a long period of tendential reduction of positional values, there are now vigorous attempts to rearrange the hierarchy and proposal of these differences as positive values. These can ultimately create a tension, which is potentially useful for development.

Nostalgia for selective and dividing mechanisms that still finds justification in the name of public interests (defined in terms of grouped economic aims) is particularly clear in cities exalted as newer models, such as the Asian or American ones. In reality, it is this very »novelty« that needs to be understood. If it is really true that the growth rate and percentage increase in the income produced cannot be compared to those of major European cities, the manner in which this was achieved would appear in many ways a step backwards, especially those of increasing social polarisation, parallel involution of citizens« rights and democratic processes of decision making. It could be considered an up-dated re-proposal of growth phases we have already superseded. Anyway, it is questionable if growth is a desirable objective, independently of its costs – and that the percentage increase in income can be independently evaluated from its distribution.

Rather than mimicking the saloon-like vivacity of some of the so-called new global cities, our mayors should reflect on the fact that attractiveness is mainly based on accessibility and investments in urban technology. From this point of view, excessive investments in the regeneration of old centres and abandoned areas seems counterproductive in the long-term. Although they are certainly capable of attracting a residual flow of tourists, they do not guarantee the autonomous vitality of historic areas, whereas the collapse of proposals and intervention on infrastructures and technological networks deprives any new expansion of the conditions necessary for their »urbanity«.

There is no doubt that European cities have been penalised by uncertainties regarding strategies, and above all, a ruinous welfare policy – one that is not only perceived by those who are paying the price as too expensive and badly managed, but also perceived as one that does not correspond to the expectations of those using it. It is generally offered in a standardised manner, while the ideas of well being of different groups generally tend to be conflicting. In the long run, it is possible that the most innovative phenomena can be observed in our very cities.

The supporters of the global city emphasise the decentralisation of production but forget that not only are services and

management concentrated in a city but also, and above all, the production of the city itself. From this point of view, which includes not only the already accumulated fixed capital but also the increasing location values being carried out. These appear to create greatly differing positions of European regions in comparison to apparently more fascinating areas.

If it is historically true that the urban framework represents the best support for economic development, then the better overall structure accumulated in European urban areas still seems to be competitive. In the long run, certain strengths could create competitive models: the transformation of European regions into interlinked territories, widespread urbanisation with a great wealth of external economies and the capacity to absorb any sectors undergoing a crisis (the virtuality of Asian models without hinterlands, linked only to the network of analogue cities, reveal a fragility that still has to be verified), the specific experience in confronting insecurity, fear, transformation. Innovation, in particular the accelerated innovation around us today, gives rise to the widespread perception of the connected risks, e.g. tumultuous immigration and social polarisation lead to increasingly new forms of gated cities that are a sign of the abandonment of the city's primary function as a device to maximise social interaction. However, if new forms are not invented to allow the coexistence of innovation and risk, the inertia of European cities will increase and find a way to reduce the risk, albeit not as innovatively but in a more controlled manner.

6. The post-European city

In reality, there is innovation in Europe – even if a change in outlook is required for it to be perceived. It is just like a picture in a kaleidoscope, a multitude of projects without a plan reveal a complex design – although only visible to the long-sighted. The transformation that is taking place here does not seem to compare itself to other models that have been absorbed, but rather to our very past. The attempt appears to be that of overturning the inherited city according to a non-dialectic dichotomous system. Surmounting the situation seems to be at the end of the process, but without Hegelian conservation. The emerging city does not limit itself to contradicting or competing with what preceded it but to swallowing it up and metabolising it by changing both its position and role.

Some characteristics can already be seen even if they concern the transformation processes and not their forms:
– **densification-dilution**. From the very beginnings, the difference in density has always been at the heart of urban history, increasing in the centres and decreasing in the country. For the very first time, density (and everything that is interrelated, above all the intensity of social relationships) is diminishing all over in European centres, whereas the connections between them are increasing.
– **concentration-de-concentration**. The difference in potential between centres and suburbs is overturned in favour of a tendential indifference in location: what currently matters is the total critical mass, not its internal articulation.
– **continuity-discontinuity**. New urbanised territory is no longer isotropic as in modern urbanists« dreams. There is no longer any continuity, neither physical nor social. The new city is made of fragments, specific solutions, the search for individual well being that expresses itself in the isolation of one building from another and in the definition of territorial limits at the expense of shared spaces.
– **centripetal-centrifugal**. What is new is to be found in the new parts of the city, leaving the representative cen-

tres »behind«. Life of new urban areas is determined by increasingly unforeseeable flows that are no longer commute between the centre and the outskirts. Those who move do so in between the cities, with a lifestyle that is the very opposite of that of our parents.
– **symmetrical-ssymmetrical**. In practice if not in declarations, the search for balance is replaced by the acceptance and emphasis of asymmetry, which is regarded as the engine of both growth and innovation.
– **innovation-conservation**. The production of innovation appears to be reduced in the traditional centres, characterised by traditional know-how. The capacity for innovation seems to be increasingly linked to moveable goods and not fixed capital, to software not hardware.
– **dot-like-network-like**. The capacity of the nuclei's attraction seems to have been replaced by that of the interconnected areas. Urban projects are destined to make citizens who abandoned the city for inter-urban areas return there – not as inhabitants but as consumers.
– **competitive-complementary**. Whereas the city's ranking order once depended on their ability to out-do their competitors in the same fields, their success now depends on their offering something that is lacking elsewhere, on the complementary nature of the urban system networks.
– **stabile-changing**. Different speeds of transformation are no novelty – what is now new is the attempt to institutionalise them, to recognise areas with a strong tendency to change and those that are more inert. Differentiated intervention systems, increasing the fluidity and flexibility of the former can all lead to the preservation of the latter.

The list could go on with opposing pairs in different fields.

Amidst the consolidated past and new aggregations that are held together by technological networks in which service quality and quantity are already superior to those of the past, there is no lack in plans and proposals that allude to possible futures for our urban systems.

At present, only one thing appears to be certain. It will be a series of different cities with one thing in common – cities opposing instead of developing the tradition of the European city.

The post-European city will be a topsy-turvy one.

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Illustrations
Picture 1: *The minimal structure of the subway station Dante in Naples, designed by architect Gae Aulenti, doesn't interfere with the metaphysical image of the square at all.*
Picture 2: *The winning competition entry for the master plan of the seafront in Trieste (architect Franco Zagari), which also contains proposals for paving and street furniture, is the framework for innovative interventions of rehabilitation or new developments.*
Picture 3: *The winning competition entry by architect Boris Podrecca for the abandoned wine warehouse on the seafront in Trieste. A master plan for the area was also submitted by the architect.*
Picture 4: *Layout of the Bahnstadt area in Heidelberg (architects Venturi, Bezzenberger and Brech)*