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City: a term at its end. Revisiting the General theory of urbanization

Antonio Alberto Clemente

It's synchronic: the discipline of urban planning is born and the idea of city dies. In 1867 Ildefonso Cerdà publishes *The general theory of urbanization* (from now on *Gtu*). This is the incipit: "I'll introduce the reader to a brand new, untouched, virgin knowledge. Because everything is so new, I have had to search out and invent new words to express new ideas for which explanations could not be found in any existing terms". The founding act of urbanism as a discipline was not based on building programs, plans, street sections, and design theories but rather on 'new words to signify new ideas'. It is a complete reformulation of the metaphors, lexis and boundaries of the whole discipline. And it starts from this need: "the very first thing to do is to give a name to this mare-magnum of people, things and interests of all sorts, of thousands of diverse elements that appear to function independently of the others ... called city".

Why does Cerdà feel the need to delete the term city from the vocabulary of urban planning? Is it just a matter of semantics? Or rather an impossible coexistence? Furthermore, should the *Gtu* be considered such an outdated historical text? Or does it contain a cultural heritage that makes it worth reading again?

The answer to these questions brings out this need: to put aside the Barcelona built by following Cerdà's plan to focus on the *Gtu* as a reading and on the historical period in which it was published.

Therefore, if Cerdà's writing is such a privileged point of view then we can sustain the hypothesis that some of his ideas still represent an extraordinarily valuable conceptual heritage. Worth reading again.

Metaphors

Just three statements build up the background. The first one: "the urbanization that is generally believed to originate and develop according to random patterns, on the contrary, submits to immutable principles and fixed rules". The second: "urban planning has its place among the sciences that are teaching man how to achieve perfection". And lastly the role of the urbanist who: "lives estranged from his existing background, putting himself completely in the hands of science and blindly obeying it, so as to submit every achievement to its uncontested principles".

"The city as a body is the metaphor that has synthesised knowledge and the urban condition up to the beginning of the modern era" (Rosario Pavia). The urban organism idea imposes a conceptual transfer, which radically modifies the concept of the human body, changing the way of meaning and perceiving space, with relevant operative consequences: the closed shape idea of the city, in which all the single parts are correlated and in proportion, is set aside.

The human body is transformed from a symbol of perfection to a biological organism that the science of urbanization will have to describe via direct observation. Even of its depths. The urbanist may no longer stop at the exterior aspect of the city: he will now have to deal with what is underground as well. And this will be extremely important since below street level there is: an abundance of masterpieces, vaults, large and small "pipes which, forming "the venous system of a mysterious being of colossal dimensions ... allows the development of urban life". By sectioning, scrutinising and investigating the inside of the organism we can understand and plan "all its alimentative, digestive and excretive functions".

The city becomes an aggregation of parts and urbanists "the cold anatomists of the urban organism", whose mission is to comprehend "the active germ of the serious disease that erodes the viscera of mankind". A disease that turns the urbanist into a doctor for the city.

Etymologies

For a newly born discipline, the main effort in identifying its sphere of action lies in adding new terms and specifying their meanings. It is the desire to give an independent language to a brand new subject. It is the need to emphasize the gap between the past and the present. And this is the context within which Cerdà declares, on the one hand, how 'it became clear that the word city would not do' and on the other hand he stresses the exigence of finding "a new word for a new subject, so general and comprehensive that it would encompass all the diverse and heterogeneous elements that ... constitute what we call a city".

In the *Gtu* the word city disappears; it becomes a noun without any existing direct reference; a symbol of an extinct language; the last remains of an exhausted, conceptually unproductive and ineffective vocabulary. The subject of the new discipline is called *Urbs* due to the need for a new terminology, since "I found that our language does not possess terms adequate enough to describe the concepts to which I refer". This new age would eventually render obsolete, useless and sterile every instrument that had previously, for centuries been used to plan cities. With a retrospective view, Cerdà favours a definitive expansion into the surrounding hinterland. Not only because the walls have been knocked down but also, and above all, because of the indifference to demographic measurement and to any boundaries that could possibly limit urban expansion. The administrative borders of each commune will be superseded: through the *Ley de irradiación*, Cerdà suggests the necessity to extend the planning act to the whole of the province.

Dismasures

To Cerdà "*urbs* is a knot in universal viability". What was yesterday a simple intuition, way ahead of its time, is today widespread knowledge "the city is an anachronistic object belonging to the past; the current process

of urbanization involves us in posturbanism” (Françoise Choay).

Extending continuously towards lands without any horizon, cities are such extensive entities that they result incomprehensible to our minds. Unimaginable areas. That can be given a shape and form only by a satellite view. Cerdà understood that the relationship between spatial structure and context, topography and territorial identity, *forma urbis e genius loci* would be weakened. What was then just an eventuality, has now become reality. It is well known that “some cities - New York, Tokyo, Londra, San Paolo, Hong Kong, Toronto, Miami and Sydney among others - have developed in trans-national market ‘spaces’ and prospering in this way, have ended up having much more in common with each other than with their respective national and regional areas, many of which have gone on to lose their importance” (Saskia Sassen). There’s a certitude that guides the thoughts about the historical evolution of urbanization: “locomotion will be, in every urban age the starting point of our researches and the means of control for our observations”. This transformation has reached its fulfillment. The city is, increasingly so, a space for transit; traffic; transportation. So much so, that all the programmed projects have become “abstract in that they are no longer bound to a place or a city: they act within the orbit of the site offering the largest number of interconnections” (Rem Koolhaas).

By continuing to call the current urban phenomenon city, we risk misunderstandings and controversies that “arise from the oversight and sloppiness with which words and signs are used and understood, a sort of ‘language plague’. Carelessly casual about the weight of meaning that every term unavoidably carries, we stick to one rather than to another meaning and thus raise phantoms against which we fight heroic but useless battles” (Bernardo Secchi).

The future: a retrospective

The distance between words and actual facts has widened out of all proportion. And with that arises a certain difficulty in having a future vision, given that in global urbanization there is the coexistence of two opposing but inseparably linked concepts.

On the one hand the world is turning into a global city, thanks “to the communications networks that link the large directional centres found inside megalopolies” (Marc Augé) and to the system of large financial and economic firms invading markets everywhere, with the same products and services. On the other hand, the large city now symbolizes a world within the world, with the coexistence of contradictions and conflicts that are created when various ethnic groups share the same urban space. Often within short distances, there are various combinations of different living conditions, cultural differences, differences in ethnic origins and in economic conditions. “There is a confluence of violence, exclusion, ghettoism, different generations, youth and the elderly and immigrants, legal and illegal. In other words all the

complexities and inequalities present in larger world” (Marc Augé).

Urbanism is running into trouble with regard to these processes: the reasons for which the discipline was born are antithetical. To Cerdà, the term urbanism “means the whole of the acts that tend to form a grouping of buildings and to rule their functions, it appoints a set of principles, doctrines and rules to be applied because buildings and their grouping, far from repressing, weakening and corrupting physical, moral and intellectual capabilities of the man living in a society, should contribute to encourage its development and to increase individual and public welfare”. These very founding assumptions are now in crisis. And urbanism itself is in such a conflicting situation that “the systems to govern and control the phenomena that it postulates, no longer exist. This has many different implications. The fact is that a deep divarication exists between how professionals perceive their role (convinced as they are, as tradition would have it, of acting for the public and general interest) and what we are actually going through nowadays, that is to say a totally opposite logic, that of the market which, by definition, does not leave any room for these kind of concerns” (Rem Koolhaas). And this is why it would be useful to revisit the *Gtu*. Cerdà revises the metaphors, vocabulary and boundaries of the urban discipline. He strives to reconquer the future. The present situation is asking for a similar effort but in a much more critical condition. This is because if yesterday Cerdà could say: “the coming age will produce a generous and prolific civilization” today ‘a contemporary ideology is raging through the world’ that renders “the lessons from the past as outdated and obsolete as the desire to imagine the future. Over the last two decades the hegemony of the present has meant that the future no longer seems difficult to predict” (Marc Augé).

This is especially so for those practitioners of the discipline, that for conceptual inertia, continues to be called ‘urbanism’.

The centre of the planning: the technical rules

Francesco Chiodelli

Nowadays planning seems to be confined to an (irremediable?) aphasia (Bianchetti 2008). There are lots of causes for this situation. Some of them can be traced back to precise responsibilities of the discipline.

According to my opinion the main problem of it is that planning was not able to interpret the (difficult) connection with politics in an effective way. As a consequence the planning has been overwhelmed by politics.

A solution for coming out from this condition is, as a matter of this paper, to find the heart of the planning and to realize both its limitations and its areas of action. These have not to be intended as static borders, but rather as a substantive space to be reinforced. And that is however in the preservation of all the hybridizations and the disciplinary contaminations that have always marked the planning knowledge.

As I illustrate in this paper, it is my conviction that this centre of the planning has to be put in a substantive technical knowledge related with the connection between spatial and social organization.

The search for this centre it is not an academic exercise de stile. And it is not a self-preservative jump of the category, either. But rather it is the statement of the importance of a technical knowledge about spatial planning: one of the actions from which also the postmodern societies cannot evade is, in fact, exactly both subdivision and spatial regulation.

Lefebvre and the planning

The planning politicality. Among lots of authors that can be useful in this searching operation for a centre of the planning one of them is Henri Lefebvre. His thoughts about both urban space and planning suggest in fact a little explored search direction. The starting point of his reflection seems like that of planners who, exactly in sixties and seventies, started to refuse of being confined to a merely technical role. What they asserted was instead a no neutral outlook on the discipline (Taylor 2006).

Just like them, also Lefebvre starts from the consideration that the space is by definition political and as a consequence strategic (Lefebvre 1970; 1976a). The planning is for this reason a discipline that is constitutively related with the political sphere.

All the same, in his opinion, in the twentieth century the planning has been overwhelmed and exploited by politics. We have witnessed a political use of planning knowledge (Lefebvre 1973), that just only aimed at the realization of the power dictates. An obvious example is the presumed neutral technicality of the proposals of the rational-synoptic planning.

His criticism is not at first sight very original. All the same Lefebvre suggests a different solution from the leit motif proposed, however with different shades of meaning,

starting from Davidoff (1965) and confirmed over the years by advocacy, radical, pluralist, communicative and collaborative planning (that of a political activation of the planner).

It is true that the government's operations of the territory have an essentially value importance. Nevertheless this does not mean by force of circumstances that planning has to undertake political tasks in detail.

The planning acts as intermediary between political will and space. Lefebvre highlights how are not the planners to decide the settlements disposition (Lefebvre 1973). The planners only are 'spatial translators' of the political choices. The french philosopher draws here his attention to what planning really is: the right intermediary between political will and space.

All the same what he contests to the planning is not this function. The problem is that the planning tries to conceal this function. Instruments of this concealment are, according to Lefebvre, the principles of the rational-synoptic planning just contemporary to him (Lefebvre 1973: 177-78). Particularly the idea that it is possible to study and recognize the population's necessities and to give them an answer too, in a consequential connection between description and city plan.

The struggle that he carries out against the 'planning ideology' is in this way completely turned to refute these theories. Firstly Lefebvre demonstrates how the space has not been created by both planning and planners, but by both productive forces and production relations (Lefebvre 1976b). There cannot be any deterministic connection between description and prescription. It is politics which creates the space, knowledge and planners's creative acts do not create it (Lefebvre 1973).

To depoliticize the planning. By Lefebvre does not come any 'reform' proposal of the discipline. Unlike Friedmann or Davidoff, he doesn't attempt at politicizing the planning just to make it as an instrument for disadvantaged groups. If the planning is the 'translation' in a spatial way of the wills for power, it has simply to be unmasked. It is the power that needs to be defeated, through the different types of social mobilization.

From Lefebvre's reflections we can deduce the following theory: if the problem is an instrumental use of knowledge that power does of it, the solution can be a depoliticization of planning knowledge. The purpose of this depoliticization is double: to recover both autonomy and disciplinary specificity (Lefebvre 1970, 1976b); to take explicitly back to the political sphere the final responsibility of the value choices related with the space. As we can express with a slogan: to depoliticize the urban planning for repoliticizing the space.

Politics and technique

In his own reflections Lefebvre expresses in a personal way the thesis of the division between value and facts. At first this theory has been also supported by Davidoff: nevertheless this distinction has been gradually set aside in the advocacy planning practice. And, finally, in

the communicative ethics perspective by Forester it has been completely reversed. In fact, according to Forester, it is necessary to accept the 'no-neutrality axiom', that is to say the "overcoming of a rational-style distinction [...] between the possibility to discuss rationally the facts and the impossibility of doing as much about values" (Borri 1998: 332). Thanks to this overcoming the planner, according to Forester, can carry out his own both mediation and negotiation functions, and so the planning can become rational management of the 'communicative quarrel'. This ethical principle is a base for all the different politicized interpretations of the planning. The planner can be considered as a *sui generis* actor, different from all the other subjects involved into the process, just because he associates some peculiar competence of 'technical judgement' with an element of political judgement. All the same the legitimacy of this position is debatable. In a division context between assertive and normative sphere (McIntyre 2007) there cannot be any more competent judgement about value. Every judgement is equally both competent and legitimate. When two incompatible value judgements collide it is difficult to find a 'solution' in the communicative ethical field. It is easier that this solution, although it is like an *inter pares* consent, actually comes from the power field (Milroy 1990; Schmitt 2008).

The planning competence sphere: the technical rules

As the value choice belongs to the political sphere, the planner should not think that in the centre of his work there is the judgement. A logical consequence that should come from this statement could be in fact that there is no distinction between planning and political activity (Mazza 1993).

The planning, on the contrary, should 'be satisfied' to be circumscribed to the world of statements expressing a need: if you want X, you have to do Y. It is what Azzoni (1991) defines the anankastic sphere (from the Grecian word, that means need). What it has to create is a knowledge made up of technical rules. A technical rule "is a statement that prescribes not a behavior in itself, but rather a behavior as a condition ... for achieving a contingent purpose" (Azzoni 1991: 13-14). Not all the statements made in planning are technical rules. All the same that of the technical rules seems like the substantive field of major interest (and complexity) for the discipline.

The technical rule goes into action (such it is) only in the presence of a contingent purpose subjectively given by the agent (x), as an objective condition (y) for achieving the aim itself (Conte 1983). The agent who subjectively defines x is, in the territory government sphere, politics. Spatial planning should investigate and express y, that is to say the (spatial) means that allow to achieve the socio-spatial purpose.

The heart of the planning: the technical rules

Therefore the technical rules are, in my opinion, the heart of the planning. The centre of the discipline is based

neither on an analytic-descriptive knowledge (more related with geography or sociology, for example), nor on a judicial-value knowledge (more related with the political sphere, in a broad sense understood). The planning is a technical-substantive knowledge. Its own purpose is to express the connection between spatial actions and social-spatial results, that is to say between the spatial and the social regulation. This does not mean that planning is only and simply what we mentioned, and that the hybridizations and the contacts with other disciplines should be broken off. And all the same we cannot forget that in the reality of their own professional activity the planners are constantly involved into some political judgement degree, so that it is difficult to divide clearly descriptions from judgements. To draw the disciplinary competence line it does not mean to build a fortress within to be retired. It only is intended as for recognizing some stable anchorage points, some common bases all around which to organize both the discussion and the attention of the discipline.