

Report on the AGORA Workshop

held at the Conference

"Urban Utopias: new tools for the renaissance of european cities"

in Berlin (november 1995)¹

1.

Looking at the city as an organised space, one can ask how much the citizens are aware of the characteristics and peculiarities of the space modifications and the extent to which their lives depends on them. The question is the more important the more the urban space has been the subject of rapid changes.

When such peculiarities are the result of slow historical settlement the characterisation of the urban space and their correlation to the 'quality of urban life' are relatively easier, provided however that the changes that inevitably have occurred over the times have not undermined the dominant role of the historical city core.

What can be said instead of the urban space characteristics of cities that have grown to the size of millions of inhabitants in few years? If one thinks of city like Lagos in Africa or San Paolo in Brazil, or Mexico City, does the un-planned approach to urban growth produce only miserable quality of life, or the urbanisation process respond to some intrinsic forces that at the end produce some positive results? If we consider instead the 'planned' growth of cities in Europe - and the peripheral zones circling the old historical centres - are the end results much better, in terms of quality of life? And, even when the planned growth was guided by the 'rational' approach of the urban space organisation - such as, e.g., theorised by the Chart of Athens - has the result been any better?

It is well recognised that the ability to intervene on the urban space to improve the quality of life depends on our understanding of the characteristics of the used space in cities. As for the development of any science the first steps to develop an urban science pass through the development of a meaningful classification system. Long lists of urban indicators have been suggested. How can we detect and measure them? Does new technology be of help?

These questions are the subject matter of two of the papers presented at the Agora Workshop.

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J. Radberg, underlines how planning is hampered "*by the lack of operational concepts for description and analysis of the urban fabric on a micro level.*" He proposes the selection of micro-space indicators that directly correlate to global objectives referring to the quality of urban life such as the 'sustainability' one. Using cartographic techniques, as the GIS system, maps of the urban territory can be produced to help developing consensus of citizens on initiatives to improve the urban space characteristics.

The importance of citizen's perception of the urban space characteristics is even of greater importance for cities that have very rapidly grown in an apparently chaotic non governed way. Here are lacking even simple maps that show the basic features of a cadastral representation of the territory. New technology can help to provide data that represent not only the today situation, but also the dynamics of growth by means of diachronique satellite survey of the territory. This topic is developed in the paper by **J. M.**

Eberhard. He specifically refers to the case of third world cities and the important effect that data presented in terms of accurate cartography have for the authority to communicate with citizens to assure their participation to the urban planning.

2.

What causes the success of the specific city, the decline of another? As anything to do with the form that the spatial occupation and organisation has taken over the years?

It is well recognised that there is a city effects which is somewhat related to the functions that are performed in the city space. The success of the city depends on the types, quantity and quality of such functions, their accessibility to the users and their spatial distribution. A simple models proposed in the past that fit cities arranged around a dominant 'city centre', is that of a gravitational arrangements of city function, with the highest density and the higher quality of functions concentrated in the city centre.

The 'form' of the city - intended as the spatial distribution not only of inhabitants but also of functions - has been subjected to rapid changes in the last half of the century. Can we be assured that these changes have not undermined the ability of the city to be the privileged space of civilisation, of virtuous circle of wealth generation? Doubts are legitimate when one considers the trends of city growth towards suburbanisation, peri-urbanisation, metropolization and ghetto separations of citizens. Is still the concept itself of city as a spatial concentration of functions a useful ones?

The matter is discussed in the paper by **R. Camagni** where he argues in favour of the quest for a proper form for a 'sustainable city' which "*should hold as a benchmark, not really an earthy paradise of ecological equilibria but a multidimensional archetype in which all the different functions of the city*

appear: the functions of supplying agglomeration economies, dynamic proximity advantages, welfare, internal social interactions and proper accessibility to the external world."

The best bet proposed by Camagni for such an optimal sustainable city form is that of a 'multicentric network city', a pattern that "*maintains the 'urban effect' linked to the agglomeration of different functions in compact centres, avoiding at the same time the diseconomies coming from excessive size of the single centre through the multiplication of centres.*"

3.

Supposing that one can envisage the optimal 'form' of the city in terms of maximum economic efficiency, will such a form assure also a satisfactory 'agora' effect?

An important aspect to be considered is that of the facility of communication. In fact, one can look at the city as a communication tool, facilitating both physical encounters and other way of communication.

The growth of the city, by having increased the time to go from one place to another, is part of the problem. There appears to be an optimal daily 'time budget' not be overcome. The 'size' of a real integrated city depends therefore from the available transportation means. Their different speeds (from foot going, to street car, to subways) should induce a structure on the city spatial organisation.

In the paper presented by **S. Gabrielli** it is argued that the urban space organisation can be thought as a kind of fractal: a local level city, the 'village' (of the scale of the quarter), whose size is that of the distance travelled by a time not greater than the daily time budget, an aggregate of quarters joined by streetcars where any two centre points are connected within a time not greater than the daily budget, and higher levels of aggregation tied by transport network connecting any two nodes again in less than the daily time budget. The availability of very fast trains, like the MAG-LEV, might then assure an integration in one city border of a metropolis.

If one therefore considers as a constrain for an 'agora' city not to overpass the 'natural daily time budget', the spatial organisation of the city will look again as an 'hierarchical multicentric network' where the city functions are distributed according to the frequency of use, but always reachable, thank to the various transport means within the daily time budget.

A similar spatial structure, the city as a multilayered complex of simple units, is also suggested by **M. Roberts**. It is recommended to take an 'holistic' view of the city recognising the existence of different scales, local and global, and the need for local-global connections. A balanced local-global view of the city will require not only better interconnections, but also "fine-grain, mixed development at local scale and new forms of meeting places (transport interchanges, leisure/retail centres, historic centres, speciality districts)".

4.

It is important to understand what are the physical characteristics of the urban space organisation that contribute to the realisation of an Agora city utopia, and to propose models to guide actions towards it. However, it has to be recognised that the citizens perceive the space according to their use of it, their habit and culture, their idiosyncrasies.

According to the individual citizen's perception there are city spaces that produce a state of 'euphoria' and others that lead to discontent (sites of 'urban disphoria'). Examples of such perception of urban sites, for a given city, are reported in the paper by **T. Lask**. He proposes a methodology to build 'cognitive maps' of the city, which compare the mental representation of the inhabitants to the physical realities. The underlying assumption is that *"there exist a certain numbers of objectives parameters which, incorporated by the urban actors, produce euphoria or disphoria"*.

The need for a systematic analysis of the elements that adds to the people perception of 'the visual quality of city landscape' is underlined in the paper by **G. Lazzarin**. He recognises the difficulty of the task with respect to that of determining the parameters that contribute to the physical city landscape. The paper suggests a systematic approach that includes analysis of natural, anthropic and cultural components which intervene in the perception of city landscape by the individual.

The importance of considering culture aspects is stressed in the paper by **H. Fischer**, *"Mith of the city: identity, planning, culture."* According to him, *"a citizen retains a 'civic pride' of the place where he lives, if there is something like a 'poetic tension' in the air."* To judge the 'liveability' of a city one might then ask the question: "can a poet live in such a city?". Considering the city as a cultural enterprises, the city space organisation should adapt to the cultural changes. To give an example, is the transition of the modern city towards an "instant city, a city of speed, changes and transience" the result of the adaptation to the pervading 'culture of consumption'? To include 'cultural actions' in city planning is however a difficult task because of the difficulty to develop a rich enough terminology, so that cultural adaptations possibilities to technical options could be included in future by town planners in their concepts. To this end, the paper suggests a variety of interesting hints.

From the spatial organisation point of view the paper suggests to look at the city as a *"grid that redistributes hierarchy and centrality"*, a concept that has recurred in many of the papers at the Workshop, each one arriving at the concept from different starting points.

5.

The complexity of the urban system, the difficulty to understand and to classify urban characteristics that underpin its success or failure, to match the physical landscape and the perceived ones, the rapid planned or unplanned change of the city, the difficult to get consensus between all the interested actors, all that throws serious doubts on our ability to optimal planning and take actions to adapt the city to the changed situations.

D. Bernatau approaches the urban planning problematique, starting with the question: "*Are the urban discrepancies the results of the players selfishness, looking for short-term, local, limited satisfaction, that is to be corrected by a public authority, or are they only reflecting the lack of this basic fluid of the liberal system: information?*"

The paper provide the frame for a systematic approach that includes proper considerations of all the actors (users, constructors, financiers, public authority), the different time scales at play (of the project, actors, city and economy), the integration of the diverse interests and of the financial logic and time scales.

The approach is underpinned by the liberal theory: "*the production of the urban tissue is not the result of a form imposed and implemented by a master of the works (a 'prince'), but the outcome of a play between actors, governed by rules of the game, which are laws and urban regulations, and economic laws.*"

6.

Three of the papers presented at the Agora Workshop deals with ideas on how to intervene practically on the city space.

J. Msika deals with the problem to revitalise city quarters which have often themselves been the result of 'huge welfare projects' that - no matter how good was the intentions of the planners - ended up in 'dormitory cities'. Since this quarters are usually made of high towers buildings loosely scattered leaving a lot of unbuilt land around them, the idea illustrated in the paper - with the help of actual projects designed for specific cases - is to revitalise the sites by placing, close to the old ones, new buildings of a lower scale and fit to a variety of human activities.

W. Werdinger, in his paper on '*Gestalt and components*', considers the changes that will be produced in our cities by "*the implementation of the new information and communication technologies into the day to day life and economic development of our society*".

These changes will depend on our ability to conceive and design new 'building blocks' that respond to the needs of the users and well integrate, as local components, in the city whole. A list of such building blocks is illustrated, such as: 'mini-malls and local markets', 'transport interchanges service centres', ' virtual art districts', 'hybrid-city-fragments' and many others.

The possibility to completely redesign and build an entire quarter of an existing city is presented in the paper by H. Dumreicher, "The city as a hill". The base idea is to revisit, in modern terms and using up-to-date technologies, the city layout that has made a success of many of the old city of central Italy, recuperating their special feelings of an 'agora' environment.