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Reading the Exchange —Mapping Journals as Platform for Urban Knowledge—

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Abstract

Mapping the Transfer (1920s-1970s): Magazines as Platforms for Architecture and Urban Knowledge (resp. Gaia Caramellino and Nicole De Togni) is a project inaugurated in 2014 and developed over the last three years with the contribution of the Master students of the course in History and Theory of Architecture, at the Politecnico di Milano. It is based on the inquiry conducted on forty-six periodicals published in seventeen diverse countries between the 1920s and the 1970s. The presentation will discuss the creation of a database aimed at facilitating the study of the international circulation of models, persons and discourses in areas of diverse cultural and linguistic background. A powerful tool/source for the research in the field of transnational studies, the database will not be used to address the history of periodicals and the editorial culture – observed within their national boundaries –, but will rather encourage a cross-national and cross-cultural reading, aimed at investigating the international dimension of the process of production and discussion of architectural and planning knowledge over the 20th century. As a testing ground, the database will be used for the investigation of the transfer of urban notions and visions between US and Italy, after WWII. The main goal will be to map the exchange, but also to analyze the forms of reception and adaptation at local level, by questioning their impact on the urban environment.

Keywords: Mapping; architectural periodicals; transfer; urban criticism

Introduction

The paper attempts to envisage the creation of the database Mapping the Reading: Architecture and Urban Criticism Over the 20th Century, a digital platform conceived as a research tool and a source for scholars interested in transnational architecture and urbanism.

The database will collect the first results of the ongoing research project Mapping the Transfer (1920s-1970s): Magazines as Platforms for Architecture and Urban Criticism (resp. Gaia Caramellino and Nicole De Togni), inaugurated in 2014 and conducted over the last three years with the contribution of the students of the Master course in History and Theory of Architecture, at the Politecnico di Milano.

Addressing specialized periodicals as sites of construction (Colomina, 2012) and production of knowledge, as well as platforms for criticism –the forerunner of the contemporary blogs – the database aims at facilitating the research on architecture and urban knowledge at global scale, offering a transversal tool to read the international exchange and document the circulation of projects, persons, networks, discourses, notions and visions, in diverse national and cultural areas over the 20th century, as well as their forms of reception and adaptation at local level and by national professional cultures and bureaucracies.

In the most recent years, a set of research networks addressed the history of the specialized journals and of the editorial culture, observed within their national boundaries (as for example the project Thesiteofdiscourse). Our project looks rather at periodicals as objects of enquiry and sources to construct new narratives, putting in relation diverse geographies, encouraging the observation of their mutual interplay, with the aim of documenting and mapping the migration of architecture and planning cultures across regions, and focusing on the vectors and agents of the transfer.

This angle allows a critical reflection on the mobility of discourses and models in space and time, bringing to the light general features and local specificities, that contribute to a deeper understanding of the transnational production of architectural and urban knowledge, observing the process of codification of certain notions in their shifting across linguistic, disciplinary and institutional frames, as well as their fortune and crisis over the 20th century. The survey on the magazines also contributed to question some conventional chronologies proposed by canonic narratives and overcome monographic and “localistic” approaches.

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Over the last three years, the research has investigated 46 periodicals, published in 17 different countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, France, Greece, Hungary, India, Iran, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom and United States) between 1923 and 1975, documenting also all modifications in the title, structure, layout and composition of the editorial board over the time. The corpus of periodicals includes diverse types of magazines (Jannièrè, 2016: *XXth Century Architectural Magazines in/for Architectural History: a Critical Survey*): institutional journals linked to official professional organizations (among them JAIA, OAP, *Revista de arquitectura y Urbanismo COAM*, AIA_Royal Australian Institute of Architects, *Urbanistica. Rivista bimestrale dell'INU*, *Új Építészeti*, the journal of the Union of Hungarian Construction Workers), official vehicles of political associations (like the Italian *Architettura/Sindacato Nazionale Fascista Architetti*, the Spanish *Hogar y Arquitectura. Revista bimestral de la obra sindical del hogar*), “small magazines” (Colomina, 2011), as well as academic, technical and commercial periodicals

Moving from the list of articles – the excel is conceived as a static tool – students’ elaborations provided a first attempt to create bi-dimensional visualizations (variable in time and space) of the collected data. A brief description of the initial input and output will help to understand the methodology adopted for the work of analysis conducted on the contents of the journals.

After compiling the listing of the articles through the use of a conceptual grid, the different parts of the journals were analyzed: the table of contents, the colophon, the covers, the advertisements and, in some cases, also the sections dedicated to the comic strips. The first quantitative and qualitative elaboration of all these data (like the synthesis of the contents per year, the analysis of the editorial board and of the recurrence of influential authors, or the typologies and distribution of projects and events) produced a series of bi-dimensional visualizations that adopted a wide variety of graphic tools: multilayered timelines, pie charts, histograms, maps, clouds. On the one side the maps, with the geolocalization of the projects, were used to document the centrality of certain geographies and their variation, discourses and projects in precise historical moments; on the other, they are a powerful tool to visualize the trajectories of certain authors and architects, but also the mobility of models and ideas over the years. Clouds have been used in some cases

to document the recurrence of concepts and notions over the analyzed period.

The project of the database can be positioned within a recent interest for big data in the field of architecture, urban history and historiography (e.g. the recent dedicated session *Big Data in Architectural Historiography* in EAHN 2016). Treating periodicals as big data (the forerunners of IT platforms), the project has the purpose to use the collected corpus of sources, with all its potentialities, as the starting point for the construction of a digital tool (the database) that can facilitate transversal readings of the periodicals. The goal of the project is therefore to increase the complexity of the inquiry and facilitate the cross-reading and analysis of the data, by moving from a static to a dynamic platform that allows bi- and three-dimensional visualizations.

This database can provide the tool for a plurality of thematic investigations that adopt this transnational perspective. The shift from a bi-dimensional visualization to a three-dimensional visualization will allow to increase and enrich the number of outputs through diverse forms of intersection of data, to trace a multitude of new narratives on the apparition, circulation and impact of a set of architectural and urban notions, ideas and protagonists operating in a global scale.

A main goal of the proposed database will be the exploration of the terminological mobility across national, cultural, disciplinary and linguistic areas. The investigation of the migration and mutation of certain terms can help to understand also how to treat the critical statements and, more in general, the theoretical discourses. Clouds and meta-clouds can provide an extremely powerful tool to verify the recurrence of a set of notions, while theoretical maps can be a helpful support to investigate and document the terminological mobility. The international dimension, the comparative approach and the attempts to put in relation forms of knowledge produced in diverse contexts, will be made possible by shifting from the excel compilation to a dynamic visualization of the data.

Mapping the Transatlantic Exchange: Periodicals as Platform for Urban Criticism

The undergoing comparative project on the transfer of urban notions and visions, planning cultures and tools between Italy and America during the second half of the 20th century, could provide a testing ground for the creation of the digital platform. The challenge is to document the migration

and mutation of a set of urban concepts (neighborhood, townscape, urban design, urban renewal, city-region...) which had a particular fortune and informed the discourses and practices of architects and planners between the 1940s and the 1970s, often generating several misunderstandings.

The inquiry conducted on Italian and American magazines, rooted in a critical selection of database results, will allow a first assessment of the multiple occasions, platforms and vectors of the transfer and of the forms of reception and hybridization. It will provide a multifaceted and more nuanced narrative of the global history of urban criticism, leading to a deeper understanding of the process of mutual exchange and local reception in these cultural geographies. Journals will constitute a complex source to observe the places of knowledge production and its dissemination, and the paths of specific concepts from the academy to the practice to their codification in the forms of regulation and planning policies across linguistic, disciplinary and cultural frames.

The investigation will explore the appearance of certain terminologies and notions, their reception, recurrence and fortune, in order to document the process of progressive appropriation and mutation on diverse geo-cultural grounds. The inquiry conducted on the multiple use of notions such as “neighborhood” or “urban design” can provide an interesting occasion to explore the potentialities of the platform.

The creation of the database will allow the development of a dynamic platform that will continuously be implemented in the future, through the analysis of new magazines. The project will benefit also from the collaboration with other research networks and scholars. Beyond the already established collaboration with H el ene Janni ere, the team could benefit of the relationship with the ongoing research project East Arch Pub (conducted by professor Ivo Covic at the Politecnico di Milano), based on the survey of a corpus of Eastern European periodicals published in the post-socialism years.

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