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THE LOST URBAN IDENTITY: TRADITION AND FUSION FOR A NEW SENSE OF PLACE

Franca MIANI

1. THE CITY: AN OPPORTUNITY OR “A NECESSARY EVIL”

The city is a complex phenomenon, in perennial transformation, permanently engaging and rich in contrasts. Significantly, city dwellers often perceive their relationship with their surroundings negatively. This is not just a general sense of unease, but a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction which is revealed in studies of urban lifestyle based on advanced social theories. Literature, artists and cinema tend to emphasize negative impressions rather than positive aspects, and surveys show repeatedly that most people are dissatisfied with urban environments. Society today is characterized by increasing attention to cities of the 21st century, in a lopsided ambivalence or a grudging functional attraction accompanied by an intellectual dislike: “For every urban thrill and sophistication there are several urban laments and rural yearnings.” (Knox, Pinch, 2010, p.148)”. There is an apparent ambiguity in this. On one hand, small towns or even rural areas are preferred, and on the other hand there is an increasingly marked trend for movement into cities as people search for a better quality of life and employment prospects. As Knox and Pinch note, a city is neither good nor bad but in a sense a “necessary evil” (Knox, Pinch, 2010: 148).

Wim Wenders, one of the film directors who has been most successful in interpreting a certain type of urban image, said in an interview “Architecture, cities and places speak to us uninterruptedly ... Places give us energy, sensations, memories, they create situations where we can work, relax, feel at ease or not Cities influence our actions and thoughts, our attitudes and even our behavior. They influence us more than we are probably willing to admit” (Casciani, 2011: 38-40).

Rather than demonizing the effects, we need to understand the real role of the city. We need to understand the potential of its organizational, social and spatial structure in a world increasingly made up of enormous urban nebulae, where historical places seem to be disappearing in urban fluidity and centres of gravity are in a permanent state of flux.

Multinational companies on one hand are looking for the most promising opportunities for growth in cities which will help to grow business. On the other hand, they need to identify policy and strategy to promote themselves and adapt to new market requirements. In these dynamics, closely linked to online flow of information, the global city as an innovative form of space (Castells, 2004: 58) is taking on strategic importance (McKinsey Global Institute, 2011). It is not, however, found in one precise place, but is rather the global articulation between specific sectors in different metropolises, linked online, and forming a network of control over the whole globe. Smaller cities also play an important role, as they are linked through multifunctional relationships which give them the means to ensure stability in times of trouble and big social and economic change.

In this complex world scene, there is inevitably competition between cities. They all need to raise their ranking and urban value in order not to fall into a downward spiral of dissatisfaction of inhabitants and decline in their own capacities. They cannot afford to compromise their income or population figures (Miani, 2013). It follows that the significance and role a town or city had in the past is no longer enough to ensure competitiveness.

2. URBAN RENEWAL AND BIG EVENTS: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

There is today no single vision of the future of the city. Debate centres, on one hand, on how to limit urban expansion and on the other, how to manage growth with suitable policy. A useful hypothesis is that cities need to find a new urban-environmental identity in order to mediate between global interests and the local context, and which also takes into account sustainability. The city needs to become a living laboratory, an attraction point for talent where history, beauty and ideas meet up with capital. This would be the new idea of the Renaissance “ideal city”, which was considered so because of its design and innovative urban space, but especially because it permitted “good government” (Fig. 1).

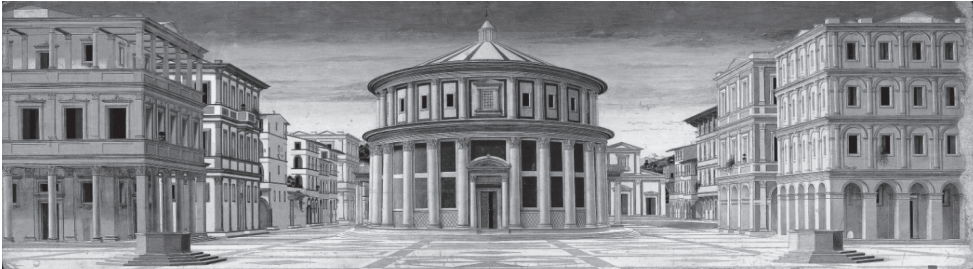


Fig. 1: Anonimo (Piero della Francesca, Leon Battista Alberti, Luciano Laurana?), Veduta della Città Ideale, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Pesaro, 1460 ca.

It is not, however, simple to translate this utopia into reality, although many architects like Ebenezer Howard and Le Corbusier tried to do so over the course of the 19th and 20th Centuries (Fig. 2-3).

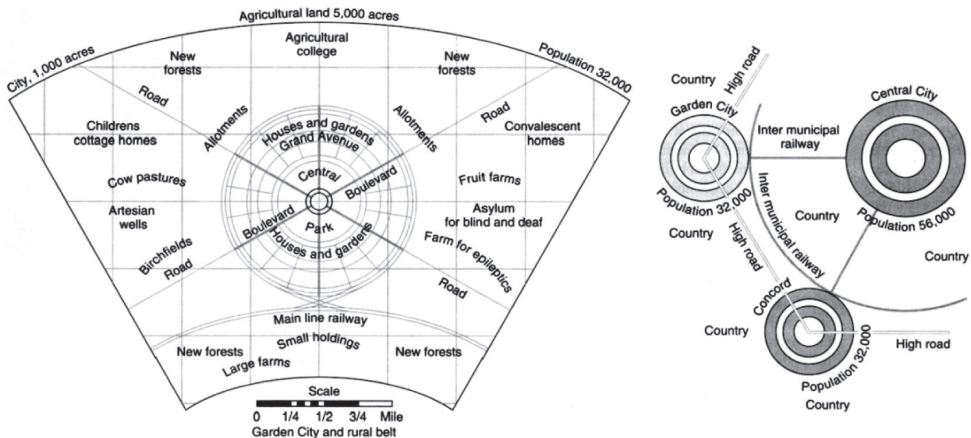


Fig. 2: The Garden City Movement is a method of urban planning that was initiated in 1898 by Sir Ebenezer Howard in the United Kingdom

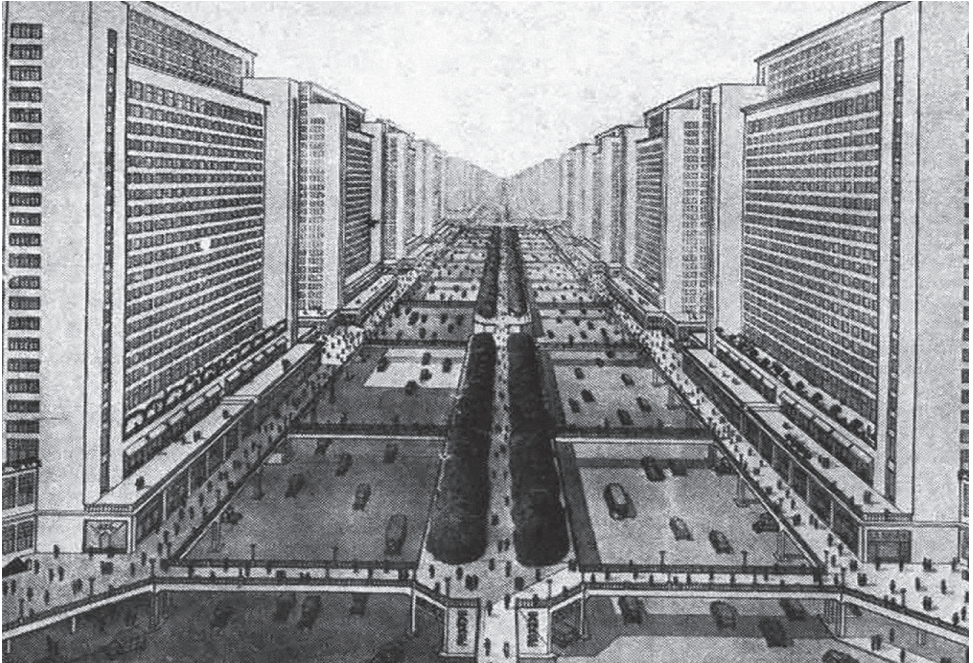


Fig. 3: Ville Radieuse (Radiant City) was an unrealised project designed by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier in 1924

Today, attempts are being made with design in emerging countries and the construction of small smart cities such as Masdar in the United Arab Emirates, near the Abu Dhabi International Airport. This Eco-City planned by the UK's Foster and Partners for 47,500 inhabitants, combines state-of-the-art technologies with the planning principals of traditional Arab settlements to create a desert community that aims to be carbon neutral and zero waste for a life beyond oil, with a mixed-use, low-rise, high-density development.

The first phase of the project, the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology (a private university focused on alternative energy, sustainability, and the environment) was completed in 2007 (Fig. 4a, 4b, 4c). The last phase, including a Moschea and the Residential District, is under construction.

“While, Masdar’s design represents a specific response to its location and climate, the underlying principles are applicable anywhere the world. In that sense, it offers a blueprint for the sustainable city of the future” (www.fosterandpartners.com).

There are also new towns showing varying degrees of environmental awareness in more westernised parts of China (Miani, 2009). On a somewhat larger scale, these are extensions of the concept of new small towns already codified and implemented in the USA, according the principles of New Urbanism (CNU, 2007) (Fig. 5).

Looking at Italy, there unfortunately appear to be very few projects for innovation or strategies for future development. Design and construction appear to be largely in the hands of a ruling class acting, sometimes, in their own interests with no underlying aim or vision. There is little attention to wellbeing or urban quality and notably little interest in the envi-



Fig. 4a: Masdar Institute view from the desert. The land surrounding the city will contain wind and photovoltaic farms, research fields and plantations, allowing the community to be entirely energy self-sufficient (2014)

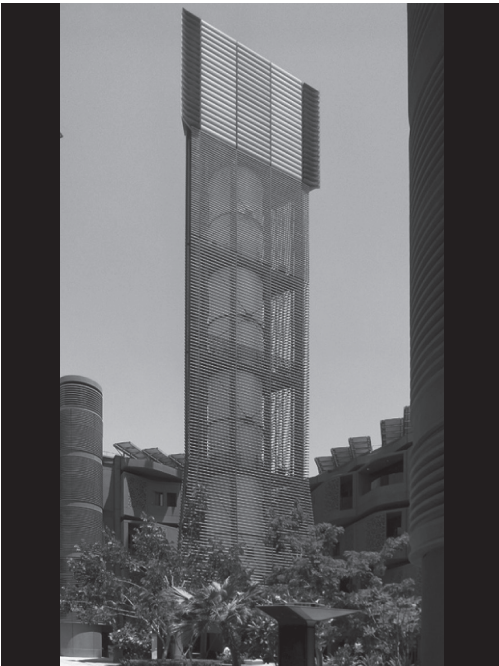


Fig. 4b: The principal courtyard of the Masdar Institute Campus, with the Wind Tower, the visible part of a sophisticated, self-regulating system to obtain “Thermal Comfort”, encouraging people to use the outdoor spaces more often and for longer periods (2014)



Fig. 4c: Masdar Institute: A view of a building with photovoltaic panels on the roof (2014)

ronment. Fine words are spoken about the desirability of creative, attractive, competitive, green, sustainable cities, but in actual fact, cities are continuously being built up and added to without any serious planning or design.

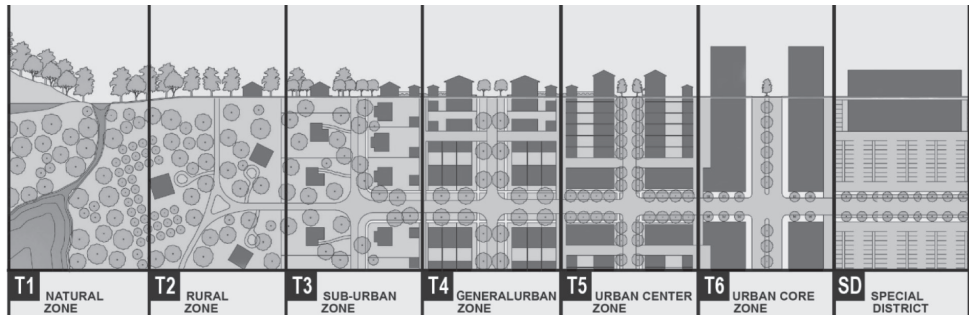


Fig. 5: New Urbanism: Transect-based Planning

Italy in fact has nearly always been at the side-lines in international debate on the future of the city. It has never tried out any innovative proposals; it has almost always made timid and isolated attempts based on standard or out of date plans. Current attempts to use high profile international events for mega-building projects bring the illusion of obtaining big benefits, but the actual result tends to be draining away scarce resources which would find more rational use if they were employed for the collective good.

In an interview published in *Domus* magazine, the architect Vittorio Gregotti made some interesting points about international exhibitions. He believes that since the London Crystal Palace Great Exhibition of 1851, they have declined in importance as they have become more frequent. Over time they have become confused with trade fairs and international sports events, and become increasingly superfluous as mass communications have become more technological. What were once really universal exhibitions are today only temporary events. Even structural modifications are undertaken for the sole purposes of image. Clearly, they can now offer little in the way of cultural transformation or significant civilization and are no longer big attractions. All that can be expected is set design of the type used on TV. Exhibitions today are held to meet the interests of marketing of a city, or perhaps tourist and real estate marketing. But the main reason is to seal agreements between local and national government for large amounts of funding, which in the best hypothesis provide infrastructure and services to last after the event itself (Gregotti, 2010: III).

The next 2015 Expo in Milan has as its theme “Feeding the planet, energy for life”. The expo is based on the idea of a “world food park” bordered by canals and consisting of large bio-acclimatized greenhouses and vegetable gardens, to grow and display the agricultural marvels of different countries. The “conceptual master plan” originally put forward by a group of architects aimed to prevent further building on two million square meters of land in the Milan area, already badly disfigured by unlicensed buildings (Fig. 6).

But at the time of writing a more modest version of the project is under construction, and already appears to be providing cover yet again for interests in real estate that will lay siege to the area after the event (Deganello, 2010: III); and there are also ongoing investigations for corruption in contracts for buildings.

The case of Valencia in Spain has showed how deeply rooted corruption tends to be in the planning of big events. The America's Cup World Series yacht races held there in 2007 (Fig. 7) enabled the fast completion of construction, beside the River Turia, of the 'City of Art and Science' (Albanese, 2008: 951-957) designed by prestigious Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava.

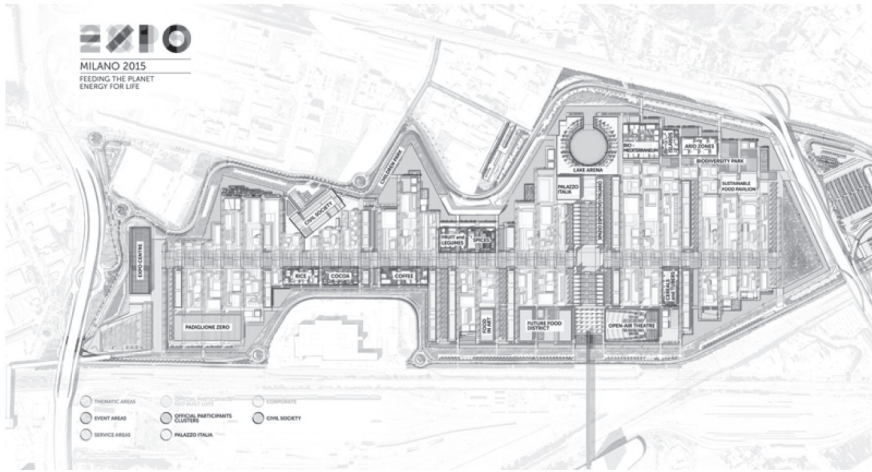


Fig. 6: Expo 2015, Milan, conceptual master plan

Fig. 7: Valencia, the harbour of America's Cup and the City of Art and Science, 2007

Initially this was lauded as a great success, but it was not long before questions were raised about funding of the new airport, transport links to the harbor and numerous new condominiums too. The local government fell into bankruptcy, the ghost of corruption reared its head and the efficacy of using big events to boost local development was again called into question.

The suspicion also arises that big events may even constitute an attempt to offer 'circuses' in a scenario of *'panem e circenses'* (Harvey, 2006). They may in fact constitute a way of keeping the 'have-not' section of the population under control; they can offer entertainment to distract from day-to-day social and economic problems and to an extent keep a lid on social unrest in favor of the 'haves.'

These mechanisms, against a background of deep economic crisis, raise questions about the best use for funding which such events continue to obtain even in spite of the crisis. Discussion needs to take account of social problems and security issues raised on the occasion of any large event worldwide. There was for example heated debate about security costs for the London Olympic Games in 2012. In the same year there was also controversy about the America's Cup World Series yacht races in Naples, from which Naples, like Valencia, gained no long-term solution for its endemic problems and little short-term advantage in spite of spending millions of euro on the event.

On paper, the "Società di Trasformazione Urbana" or "Urban Transformation Companies" set up in many towns across Italy were meant to be the most efficient and innovative way of implementing big urban renewal schemes. They were meant to play a key



Fig. 7: Valencia, the harbour of America's Cup and the City of Art and Science, 2007

role in times of economic crisis. But these too have been sometimes used for profiteering and land speculation. They have brought many local administrations in Italy and other European countries to the brink of bankruptcy, leaving such high debts that future generations will be paying them off through heavy taxation for years. Worse still, however, they have left gaping unfinished building sites in cities all over the country, all abandoned for lack of funds.

3. CITIES AND GLOBALIZATION

The critical points in economics, society and culture are today inevitably accentuated by globalization. Today everything that happens is spread instantaneously through media and social networks. This rapidity brings immediate consequences, be they positive or negative, and there are few opportunities for control and organization. Blending between economies society, architectural styles and ideas takes place just as quickly.

As noted by Paul Claval (2007), communication plays a key role in the spread and construction of culture. The nature of culture itself depends on the means a people have at their disposal, from simple imitation or oral communication, and writing, to modern media and social networks. Culture is a matter of know-how and knowledge which enable the individual to understand the environment, and it is closely linked to territorial organization. Even today, cities are still made up of places and spaces with precise significance for people living there.

The value of urban landscapes is closely linked to their past and the history which has

shaped them. Urban identity, however, is little more than an abstract entity, a near obsolete concept with boundaries and characteristics that are hard to define.

Today, in our society, it is hard to define “sense of place”. History has handed down a type of urban space which has inevitably influenced subsequent development, but it is unclear whether planning today takes this into account. The role of urban history is unclear in interpreting the historic basis of a city in order to adapt it to change without the city losing its traditional identity. The very meaning of the word tradition is also open for discussion. It is used in publicity and advertising for Italian areas, food (Miani & Albanese, 2012) and cities, but is increasingly hard to actually see tradition in cities which today bear the imprint of cultures and ideas from all over the world. There appears to be a real possibility that today’s urban system of networks and communication can subvert the order and organization which have prevailed up to today.

We need to ask what the degree of identification of an Italian city is. Undoubtedly, they are still a valuable resource for the whole country and a reference model thanks to their characteristics and their high number of historical town centers and art treasures. In spite of modern trends, they retain definite deeply rooted identities, which is not always the case in cities in other countries, sometimes envious of the Italian heritage. And identity is a factor often required for successful regeneration of city centers now empty of inhabitants and lacking character (Miani, 2010).

Urban policies have the precise role of adapting out cities to new requirements without forgetting the past and without suffocating them and preventing their growth by spatial armor. It needs to resolve various policy issues, such as whether the city is mainly competitive, creative, sustainable or ancient and in need of preservation. The city needs to decide whether to be a city of places or a city of flows.

Many researchers have emphasized that given its multiform, varied and complex nature, it is not sufficient to analyze the phenomenon of a town from one single point of view. At the same time, geography as a field of study has by necessity been influenced by other disciplines in looking at the city. We need to establish what is meant by a creative city, and whether there is an optimum size to develop creativity. We need to know whether small and medium cities can be creative or whether only metropolises succeed in developing by attracting creative professions.

For urbanist Maurizio Carta, a creative city has to go from passively attracting talent to being a creative city actively producing new identities and economies along with a new geography. This implies moving from a financial view of a city, where creativity attracts investments, to active planning, where creativity generates a new morphology and productive innovative activities (Carta, 2010: 169). Following this line of thought, regardless of its size, every city has the potential to become creative.

In the view of the economist Irene Tinagli, however, the heritage of cities and small towns around Italy is failing to do this. There is instead competition between local interests and a series of power conflicts creating a fragmented series of islands without there being an overall network of innovation. The lack of appropriate policies and failings in managing the economy have serious economic effects and lead to big losses in opportunity and socio-cultural problems. Within towns too, there is the risk that the social structure will change from one of over-riding social cohesion to an attitude of closure to external influences. This will prevent renewal and the exchange of ideas, and cause the continued flight of talent from

Italian cities (Tinagli, 2008).

This is because in the web society, the problem is not so much how to obtain information as how to retrieve and select useful and significant information from a continuous flow. The new cultural, spatial and social relations means new “maps” need to be drawn, not simply geographical maps which are so easy to find on internet, but maps of the convergences of action and activity centers all over the world.

4. THE LASTING CENTRALITY OF CITIES AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW “SENSE OF PLACE”

For Saskia Sassen the big cities of today are where people from all over the world meet in a way which would not be possible elsewhere. The growing and ever more complex metropolis has become an attraction for tourists not so much because of its museums or monuments, but thanks to its characteristics, futuristic architecture and even the people who live there, “considered as an exotic phenomenon” (Sassen, 2006: 31).

City	Rank 2014	2012	2010	2008
New York	1	1	1	1
London	2	2	2	2
Paris	3	3	4	3
Tokyo	4	4	3	4
Hong Kong	5	5	5	5
Los Angeles	6	6	7	6
Chicago	7	7	6	8
Beijing	8	14	15	12
Singapore	9	11	8	7
Washington	10	10	13	11
Brussels	11	9	11	13
Seoul	12	8	10	9
Toronto	13	16	14	10
Sydney	14	12	9	16
Madrid	15	18	17	14

Vienna	16	13	18	18
Moscow	17	19	25	19
Shanghai	18	21	21	20
Berlin	19	20	16	17
Buenos Aires	20	22	22	33

Fig. 8: Top global cities ranking (source: www.atkearney.com)

It is interesting to consider why there should continue to be this concentration of people and activities in the age of internet and e-commerce, and why the new technologies and communications have not neutralized the age-old power of the city. After all, the city was even thought at one time to be dead as a strategic space. What is actually happening today, however, is the opposite. Cities are proliferating and growing bigger. The organization of the global economy today is being carried out and into the future by a restricted group of large cities around the world (Fig. 8). These have adapted, in terms of urban planning and architecture, to their new role by finding a new aesthetically valid identity or logo which is effective and competitive internationally.

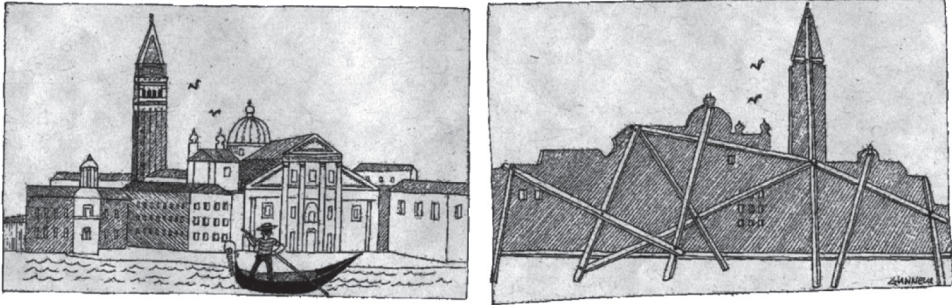


Fig. 9: Venice, magnificent scenery

In this never-ending competition to characterize the city, ever taller and more complex skyscrapers have made a comeback, along with new museums, “archistar” projects and fantastic shopping centers. But the need for infrastructure; airports, management headquarters, hotels, housing and services to match international lifestyles, has led to a certain standardization of urban landscapes around the world. There has been a fusion between building styles which often have no connection with local traditions and culture. In many global cities there has been a remodeling of space and functions which has spread a common model of development, almost a “visual code” for consumers in the image of winning city.

At the same time, a dense network of service activities has grown up to meet the needs of city dwellers and tourists around the new spatial and functional framework. Creative

professions and informal activities have sprung up as pioneers to fill the interstices in many metropolises. Often they generate new roles through aggregating creative youngsters taking over entire areas ripe for regeneration and setting up new types of activity and consumption.

Creativity is the raw material of innovation and is directly proportional to the surrounding flux of new ideas. The challenge is to manage the unstoppable tendency of cities to compete on all fronts and at the same time respect historical values and stratified identities. From this point of view, the Italian territorial fabric with its high density of population and diversified activities is a deeply rooted cultural heritage and a fabric of places and cities defined and linked by flows and relationships. This is recognized as being strength of Italy and is desired by emerging countries too. Workmanship and products from Italy have a value added which is not found elsewhere. The value of products “made in Italy”, however, is higher if they are entirely made in the country rather than being only assembled or simply sold outside the European Union or in the Far East. For cities too, the value and the uniqueness lie in their specific position and development dynamics. Over time, these dynamics have proven to be sound, thanks to solidity of institutions and good governance. It is possible to build a copy of Venice in Las Vegas, but nothing can compete with the real thing.

It is relatively simple to build a new Italian town in China to an Italian design, but maintaining the identity of historical Italian cities is a much more complex matter.

Venice, which has become an empty shell, is an emblematic case. As the Italian journalist Aldo Cazzullo remarks, “Venice is dead as a city. And it is reborn as a shop window” (Cazzullo, 2012: 16) (Fig. 9). In fact, the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in Las Vegas or in Macao (Fig. 10-11) and the real Venice have in common their purely economic function: to be a shop window for tourists.



Fig. 10: The Venetian Hotel, Las Vegas



Fig. 11: The Venetian Resort Hotel, Macao

The real city has been forced to cut its original functions and services and the population has fled, so that it has become simply a monument or a giant hotel. Behind the scenery, the real city of Venetians and their daily life has given way to purely tourist activities. At night, the frenetic activity of daytime gives way to melancholy silence of barred windows and scaffolding on the many battered old palaces that are being restored by tycoons from all over the world.

So holding on to tradition and consolidated urban identity in the belief that historic cities will survive autonomously without expressly adapting their components leads to “mummification” of the territorial space. Behind the scenes, the social fabric and relationships are continuously modifying the role and characteristics of the social group. There needs to be carefully thought-out and well-managed process of fusion between the social environment and its spatial structure, incorporating elements which will enhance value without forgetting the heritage of local history.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Today, everything seems to be possible for the environment and sustainability regarding local resources and their enhancement. Modern technology applied to energy problems can help us to extrapolate positive elements from diverse cultures. Critical awareness in finding solutions from elsewhere is essential, but the rediscovery of ancient wisdom from elsewhere, knowing how to adapt and use ideas from other parts of the world is a new and stimulating field of research and one of the joys of our time.

Urban development models used for high profile events or big architectural projects cannot in fact be repeated indefinitely. They may have had positive effects at certain times in the past, but they are no longer today a system of generating growth or internationalization.

The current economic crisis means we require solutions urgently. Forced by circum-

stances to leave large scale projects to one side, we require a new focus on the overall urban system. It is essential today for cities to be effective in supplying services, accommodation, education and overall security. All too often models successful in one context have simply been reproduced in another without taking into account the essence of a city or its “polis”. More thought tends to be given to city users and multinationals, through marketing campaigns, than is given to the people who actually live there, whereas city-dwellers who are happy to live there can be a key component in city promotion.

Recently, however, it seems to have become more difficult to make a city work than to organize a big event. City councils repeatedly take part in international competitions for city promotion, rather than focusing on the daily life of people who already live there and enhancing the value of what they already have at their disposal.

The entire heritage of Italy, the “Bel Paese” needs to be rediscovered and re-launched in an innovative way. This is a huge task; a country known for its artistic wealth since the days of the Grand Tour appears currently unable to organize its museums as well as other countries. There is also a great deal of catching up to do in hotels and accommodation; in spite of the large numbers of tourists potentially attracted to Italy the sector is not organized as well as overseas competitors.

The case of the city of L’Aquila shows that Italy does not care enough for its historic towns either. After the devastating earthquake of 2009, which destroyed the beautiful historic centre, there was no valid plan for rebuilding it (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12: L’Aquila, the church of San Pietro a Coppito

Instead, all efforts were focused on building homes outside the town, where the inhabitants were ‘temporarily’ transferred (Fig. 13). Rebuilding contracts were given to construction firms from all over Italy. The new accommodation, although purpose built, is far from constituting a real new town, although it is true that it was apparently built according

to anti-seismic guidelines. What is missing is the opportunity for socialization and aggregation, and it has become difficult to access shops, services and everything that made up traditional urban life.



Fig. 13: C.A.S.E. housing at Roio Poggio, L'Aquila, 2010

Many ex-inhabitants of the former city centre, especially the elderly, are feeling a deep sense of loss and bewilderment, as hopes of being able to return to their former homes have receded. The reconstruction of L'Aquila in this way has led to sharp loss of identity and sense of belonging in its former inhabitants, who in fact realized, from the start, that abandoning their homes and jobs in town would cause a social disaster as serious in its way as the earthquake itself. The city will only come back into its own as the compact centre, strong and confident in its own identity, if the links between the past and consolidated spatial and social relationships are maintained. This, however, does not appear to be happening today in the jungle of shortsighted and unwise political decisions relating to this unfortunate city.

So, to conclude, even in the face of new environmental and sustainability requirements, which undoubtedly necessitate modification in the urban fabric towards green or smart cities, tradition remains a key aspect. The use of new technology and communications, and the most positive elements of globalization, are vital for the strategic innovation required to re-launch the splendid cities of Italy provided that, at the same time, the historical legacy of place is taken into the correct account.

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