
RESEARCH ARTICLE

COMPARING HABITATS

The Challenges of “Comparative Urbanism” in Post- Fordist Cities:

The cases of Turin and Detroit

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Abstract

In 1947, the U.S. Secretary of State, George C. Marshall announced that the USA would provide development aid to help the recovery and reconstruction of the economies of Europe, which was widely known as the 'Marshall Plan'. In Italy, this plan generated a resurgence of modern industrialization and remodeled Italian Industry based on American models of production. As the result of these transnational transfers, the systemic approach known as Fordism largely succeeded and allowed some Italian firms such as Fiat to flourish. During this period, Detroit and Turin, homes to the most powerful automobile corporations of the twentieth century, became intertwined in a web of common features such as industrial concentration, mass flows of immigrations, uneven urban sprawl, radical iconography and inner-city decay, which characterized Fordism in both cities. In the crucial decades of the postwar expansion of the automobile industries, both cities were hubs of labor battles and social movements. However, after the radical decline in their industries as previous auto cities, they experienced the radical shift toward post-Fordist urbanization and production of political urbanism. This research responds to the recent interest for a comparative (re)turn in urban studies by suggesting the conceptual theoretical baseline for the proposed comparative framework in post-Fordist cities. In better words, it develops a "theory" on the challenges of comparative urbanism in post-Fordist cities.

Keywords: post-Fordist Cities, Comparative Urbanism, Motor (Auto) Cities

Introduction

In the early part of the twentieth century, the dominant industrialization paradigm of the developed countries of North America, Europe and Japan, led to a system of mass production that came to be known as Fordism, the system formulated in Henry Ford's automotive factories. However, with technological changes, global market competition and organizational revolution that took place after the 1980s, Fordism was mainly replaced by post-Fordism, which is more reflective of self-organization, economic globalization, mass customization, decolonization of corporate headquarters within the downtown core, decentralization and devolution of authority, ad-hoc assemblage, selective gentrification of the inner city and the expanded mobility of the factors of production. In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of transnational trends connected Turin (part of the famous industrial triangle in northern Italy along with Milan and Genoa) and Detroit (American Motor City) such as similar patterns of growth, depopulation of the city center, industrial decentralization, demographic changes and territorial equilibrium. These cities of the automobile industry provided much of the radical iconography of their respective countries.

The most famous events were the 1930 Sit-down strikes against General Motors in Detroit that led to the unionization of the domestic United States automobile industry or the 1919 *Biennio Rosso* (the two red years) in Turin and the wave of strikes and marches that gripped the area starting from 'Fiat Mirafiori' Plant during the 'Hot Autumn 1969' in Turin which continued with the massive occupations of public

housing that occurred throughout the early 1970s and peaked in 1974. In both Post-Fordist cities, the intense conflicts over public housing, service costs, and urban plans were dramatic. In 1982, Paolo Ceccarelli used the term 'Città Fragili' (fragile cities) to characterize Detroit and Turin as the examples of how such modern cities should not be built [1]. However, Nicola Pizzolato in his book 'Challenging Global Capitalism' [2] called Turin "the Italian version of Detroit" and argued that Fordism had brought the opportunity to *Meridionali* (southern Italians), in Turin, and African-Americans in Detroit (two groups heavily represented in the automobile factories of these cities in the 1960s), who had exposed how 'fragile' the motor cities were. In response to a growing conflict in ways of promoting an agenda for the definition of post-Fordist cities, Comparing Turin and Detroit as prototypical forms of the post-Fordist Cities represents an approach which can help to advocate and develop new understandings of the expansion of automobile cities and urbanization processes, building one's theory from different North American and Italian contexts.

Considering the fact that a viable urban theory includes the complex dynamics of social life and urban form, the comparative approach in urbanism emphasizes the commonalities across all types of cities and the organizational processes that shaped them. In the context of this research, three concepts are placed under debate: Post-Industrialism, post-Fordism, and Post-Modernism. This research aims to respond to the following questions: are these concepts partially synonymous? Are they actually used, in the field of history and theory of urbanism, referring to the same cities? The cases of Detroit and Turin are relevant to answer both these questions and to some necessary, complementary questions such as: what similarities can be identified between Detroit and Turin, two former Auto Cities from the point of view of the industrial system and the industrial production (= car)? Do these similarities correspond to the characters of the Fordist city and Fordist Urbanism as theorized by historians of urbanism, and urban sociologists? In this regard, comparing the urban features of Automobile Cities can define a framework for other Auto Cities like Stuttgart, Hannover and Wolfsburg in Germany, Cordoba in Spain, Toyota in Japan as well as Turin and Detroit, in which the automotive industry has been the dominant industry in the city.

Transnational radical motor cities: Turin and Detroit

In the post-war period, FIAT indirectly fueled an estimated 80 percent of the industrial economy in Turin's metropolitan area [3] (p.77). In Detroit, the whole market can be seen to be controlled by the 'Big

Three': General Motors, the Ford Motor Company and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles US. Moreover, during the 1940s and 1950s in Detroit, a massive wave of immigration had recomposed the working class. In 1960s, African Americans constituted the majority of Automobile plants workers in the Detroit area [4] (p.97). Similarly, in 1972, 40 per cent of the car workers in Turin were southern Italians [3] (p.92). As the result of the mass migration to the city from southern parts of Italy, the Turin metropolitan area experienced a dramatic shift in its population, from around 800,000 residents in 1955 to some 1200,000 in 1974 [5]. Concurrently, the lack of public housing, poor residential conditions and the tendency of real estate brokers to specialize the modern residential building for the bourgeoisie became posed major concerns in terms of growth [6] (p.172). These demographic changes deriving from the Auto industry's decisions fueled competition for housing and resources between newcomers and locals compounded by ethnic and racial prejudices [7] (p.20).

Starting from the 1950s, groups of labor radicals such as 'Correspondence' in Detroit and 'Quaderni Rossi' as the representative of autonomist Marxism in Turin, circulated ideas that challenged Capitalism and the Fordist system in a drastic way. These groups criticized the capitalist structure and urged workers to develop possible autonomist working class activity [7] (p.14). By 1980, the two motor cities became representative of the decay of the Fordist System paradigm. As a result, both cities experienced rapid industrialization, relocation of automobile plants, deficient public infrastructures, high unemployment rates and uneven urban growth that followed workers' insurgency.

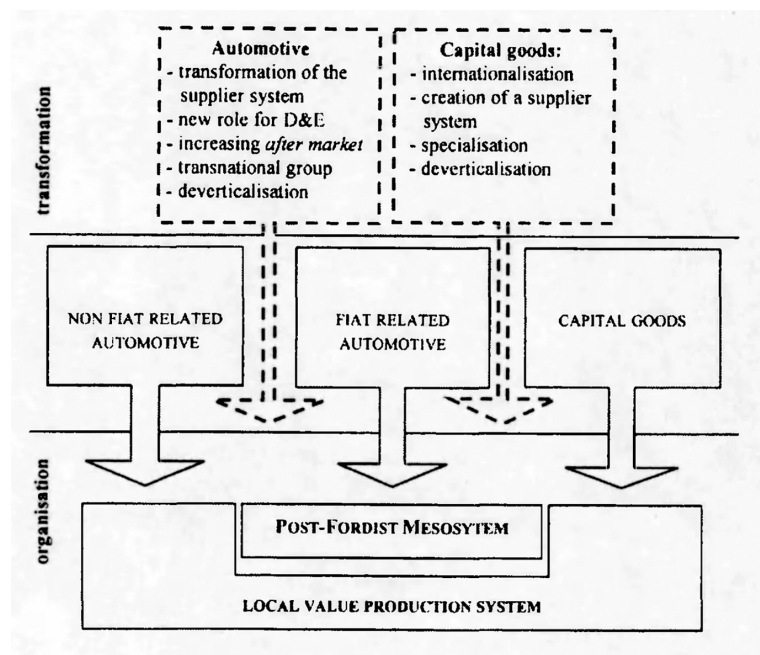


Fig 1. Turin's Manufacturing System. Source: Giaccaria, 2007

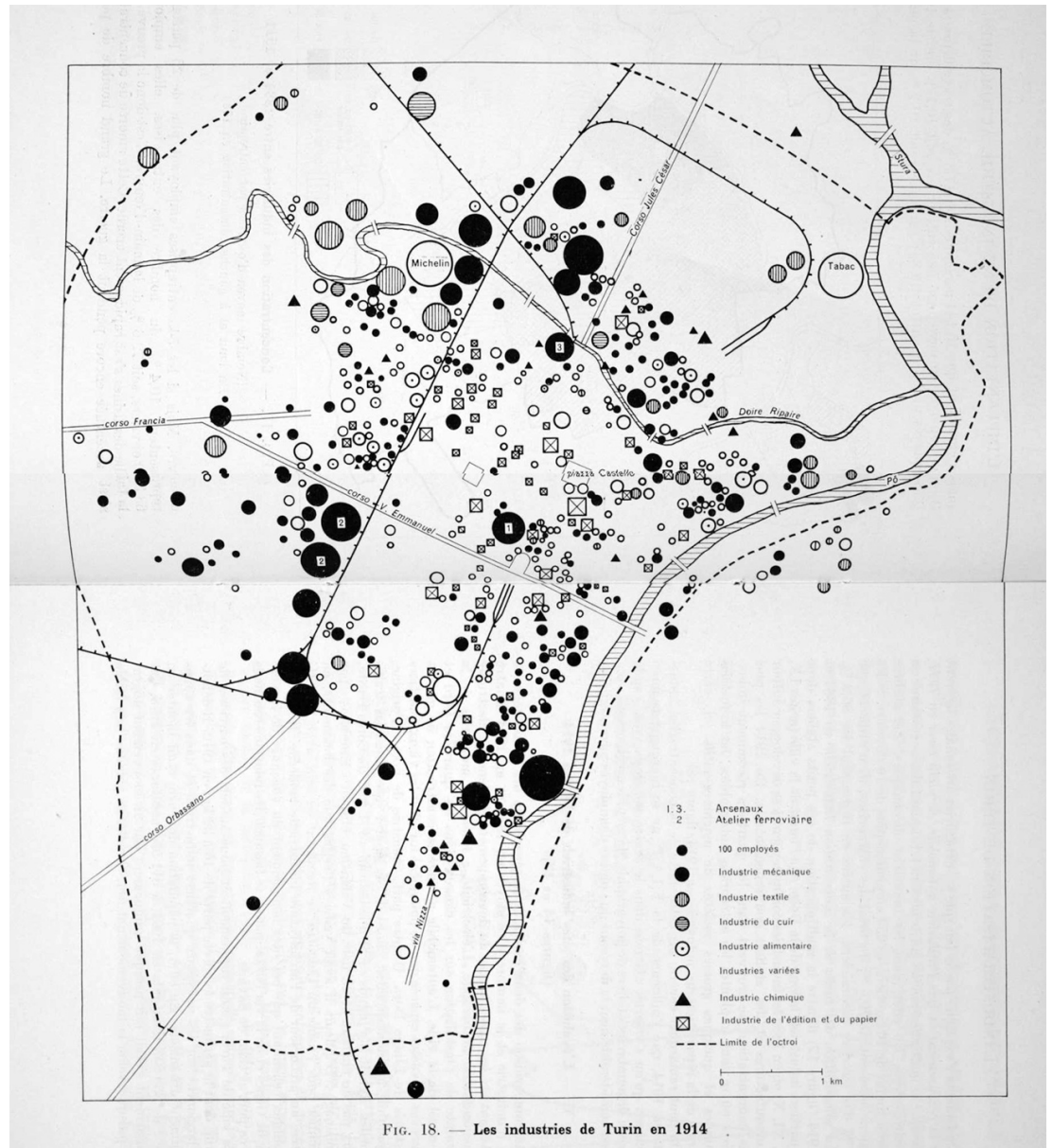


Fig 2. The industries of Turin in 1914. Source: Gabert, 1964, p. 132&133

Post-Fordist Urbanism

To counter the negative representations that had been attributed to the Fordist Cities and Automobile Cities at the peak of their industrial powers as boring coke towns barely worth a visit, the new urban image in the post-Fordist cities has been represented. In 1961, Jane Jacobs in her book 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' criticized Detroit at the height of its economic power: "Virtually all of Detroit is as weak on vitality and diversity as the Bronx. It is ring super-imposed upon ring of failed gray belts. Even Detroit's downtown itself cannot produce a respectable amount of diversity. It is dispirited and dull, and almost deserted by seven o'clock in the evening" [8]. Thus, Detroit offers the most legible indictment of Fordist patterns of urbanization. As Jacobs mentioned about the notion of the modern city, monotony and lack of diversity are the typical 'ills' or 'failures' of the industrial cities. Similarly, Charles Jencks in his book 'The Language of Post-Modern Architecture' described Detroit's deepest crisis as the "death of Modern Architecture" [9]. However, the force behind the emergence of post-modern architecture and urbanism must be found on the socio-economic level. Postmodern cultural production coincides with the historical crisis in the system of mechanical mass-production, first developed by Ford in Detroit [10].

In new Detroit, large buildings, offices, schools, train stations, and vast urban territories have been abandoned. The new model of post-Fordist Urbanism re-inhabited the historic city as a necessary communication hub for the new economy [11] (p.48). The origins of the post-Fordist tendencies can be found in several concurrent socio-economic transformations such as: shifting commodity markets, increasing electronic control of production, decreasing state regulation, increasingly global capital markets, and weakening labor relations [11] (p.53). So, the new socio-economic logic of post-Fordism offers a reading of the current prospects of Detroit and other cities in the dynamic of global economic restructuring. Post-Fordist production paradigms are increasingly organized around principles of decentralization, horizontality, transparency, fluidity, and rapid mutability. Concurrently, the possibilities for post-Fordist urbanism are among the many interesting questions raised by Detroit. In this regard, the post-Fordist landscape is marked with polycentric spatiality and decisive re-colonization of corporate headquarters within the downtown core. In addition, revival of the central business district and selective gentrification of the inner city, including recreational and pseudo-historic tourist events, caters to a suburban population. Similarly, the works of the cultural Geographer Edward Soja offer an extensive analysis of the coming post-Fordist urbanism. Soja's exploration of postmodern urbanization focuses on the Los Angeles which plays the role of Detroit, once declared as the 'most thoroughly modern (Fordist) city in the world'. In his book 'Postmodern Geographies' [12], he described the contemporary post-

Fordist patterns of urbanization as: ‘seemingly paradoxical but functionally interdependent juxtapositions are the epitomizing features.... One can find in Los Angeles not only the high technology industrial complexes of the *Silicon Valley* and the erratic sunbelt economy of Houston, but also the far-reaching industrial decline and bankrupt urban neighborhoods of rust-belted Detroit or Cleveland. There is Boston in Los Angeles, a lower Manhattan and a South Bronx, a São Paulo or Singapore. Soja’s ‘Spread City’ is best described as “an amorphous regional complex that confounds traditional definitions of both city and suburb” [12] (p.212).

Comparative Urban Features of Post-Fordist Cities

In some countries, post-Fordist urbanism is linked with rapid evolution of civic policies for conducting urban redevelopment, renewal and regeneration as well as emergence of the new models of urban governance. Current narratives focused on depicting Turin as a city capable of fighting its industrial decline and reinventing itself through a balanced association of the old and the new [13] (p.167). In 1995, the new master plan for Turin focused on the regeneration of former industrial sites of Turin. In this plan, the spatial structure of Turin defined by the central backbone that was a modern representation of Turin’s spatial structure in the Baroque period [14]. At the same time, the strategic approaches to preservation of some of the royal castles and palaces of the Savoy period such as *the Castle of Rivoli* and the *Palace of Veneria*, tries to redefine Turin as a city shaped by the ‘Royal House of Savoy’. Holding international events, music festivals and national celebrations like *Luci d’artista*, the *Turin Jazz Festival* and the *Turin Film Festival* in the famous Piazzas of Turin like *Piazza Castello* were instrumental in transforming the urban identity of the post- industrial city.

Starting from 1961, the new buildings erected in the southern part of Turin, such as *Palazzo del Lavoro* and *Palazzo a Vale* placed the emphasis on the emergence of modernity in the city [15]. The new slogans like “Turin, on the move” to introduce an innovative, dynamic and balanced city image were on the top of the city’s advertising campaigns. For depicting Turin as a city capable of fighting its industrial decline, preservation of cultural heritage has been an important urban strategy. Consequently, Turin’s Baroque studies by a growing number of Italian architectural historians brought the city to the forefront of international researches [16]. As the result of these new urban trends, the *Strategic Plan* of Turin, was signed by a large number of public and private actors in the year 2000 [13]. Enhancing place identity and promoting urban branding is a concept referring to both visitors and residents in the postmodern city [17] (p.312). In the process of creating new urban image, the

representation of Turin as a city of “culture, tourism, commerce and sport” was a strategic goal declared in the first *Strategic Plan* of city. The modern Turin marked its new urban identity by organization of great events like the 2006 Winter Olympic Games and tourism promotion strategies especially in the historic center of the city, in an attempt to provide a comprehensive answer to the crisis of Turin’s Fordist pattern. Hence Turin represented itself as the former Automobile City, the Capital of Baroque, the Capital of the Savoy, the city of cafés and museums.

In 1908, Henri Ford introduced the model T automobile and opened his first assembly line production in Detroit [18]. Ford’s assembly line efforts to Americanize the ‘immigrant workers’ became models for ‘welfare capitalism’ and coined the term ‘Fordism’, to describe Detroit’s distinctive contribution to the labor-intensive and highly productive form of modern industrial production. For describing Detroit as ‘total industrial landscape’, the dependence of towns like Toledo, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan, on the auto industry led to a common adage: “When Detroit gets a cold, the whole Midwest gets pneumonia” [19]. As Joachim Hirsch stated ‘Fordism as the Taylorist organizational method was an answer to the international crisis of 1929-30 which lasted until the mid-1950s’ [20] (p.28). In 1950, during the postwar economic boom in Detroit, a poster summoned the residents of a white neighborhood to an “emergency meeting” to respond to an “invasion” of the city by black workers [18] (p.230).

In Detroit, post war tensions, the growing difficulties of American Auto industry and the destruction of the 1967 riots led to a decline in the city’s population. As a result, entire sections of inner city of Detroit have been depopulated, leaving a hash of abandoned buildings, vacant or overgrown lots, and crumbling infrastructure [21]. Moreover, starting from 1970 with the rise of international competition especially from Japan and Germany, Detroit’s image had been completely transformed. Metropolitan Detroit was completely abandoned by decades of disinvestment, depopulation and urban shrinkage. The city’s urban problems were further compounded because of the relocation of Detroit’s major automobile manufactures. While there are many identified brownfields within Detroit, many potentially contaminated are still likely to be in need of some form of remediation. The Detroit Strategic Framework Plan (DFC Strategic Framework) establishes a set of policy directions and actions designed to improve the quality of life for all Detroiters and support the fiscal sustainability for the city. This shared vision for Detroit asserts that by 2030, the city will have a stabilized population and twice the number of jobs currently available to residents. The DFC Strategic Framework horizon aims for Detroit to regain its position as one of the most competitive cities in the nation, the top employment center in the region, and a global leader in technology and innovation, creating a healthy and sustainable jobs-to-resident ratio and economic opportunities for a broad range of residents. As such, the city should be well on its way to implementing innovative,

21st-century systems of infrastructure and transportation, storm water management, power, and waste management to support new growth.

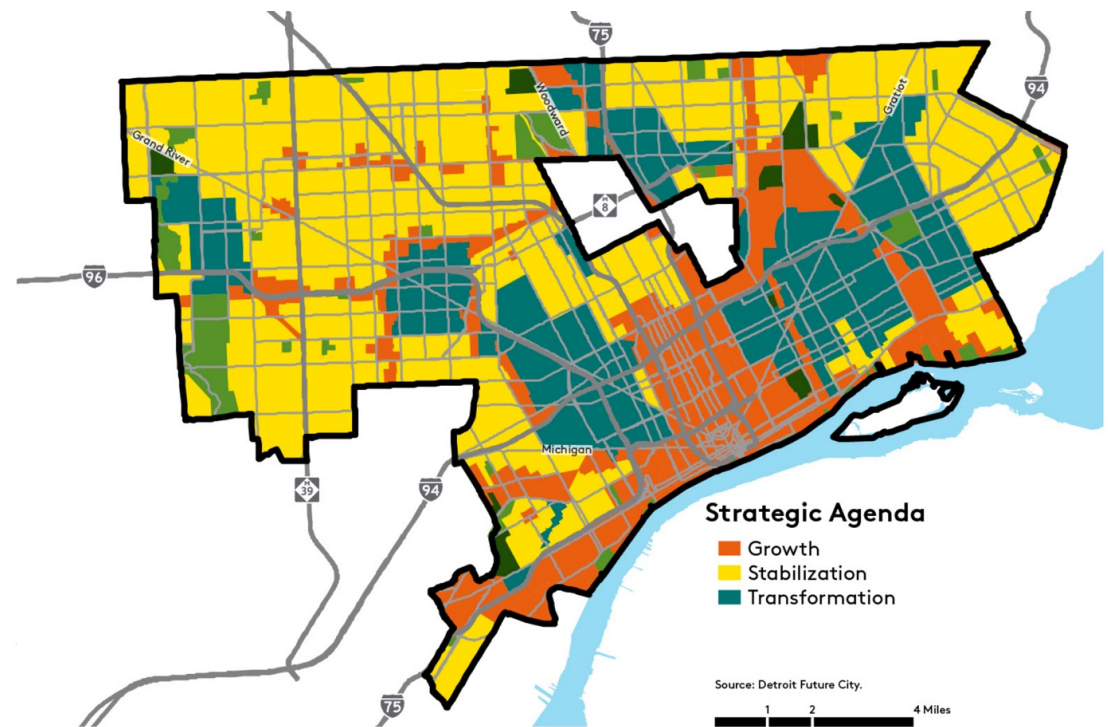


Fig 3. 50-year land use scenario reflects the long-term vision for a city of diverse neighborhoods, employment districts, and productive landscapes. Source: Detroit Future City Report, DWPLTP Planning Team

Discussions

As *Jan Nijman* emphasized ‘the essence of comparative urbanism must revolve around investigations of difference and commonalities among cities and urban processes. In this way, the particularities of places like Turin and Detroit must be read in ‘dialectal dialogue with theoretical understandings’. Moreover, comparisons must be question-driven, theoretically and empirically embedded and cases must be specifically selected [22](p.183-184). In this way, the theoretical foundations of comparative urbanism are about research design, methodology, observation and analyses. In addition, regarding the fact that city-state relations and the processes of urbanization have formed a constant critical dimension in the evolution of cities since ancient times, a broad political economy perspective can define comparative urbanism [23]. Nowadays, Turin and Detroit have become

the laboratory of new forms of political mobilization based on Industrial Heritage conservation, urban regeneration, improving urban quality of life and urban branding policies which improves marketing of the city image in various ways by converting the visual image of the city into a new image [24, 25, 26].

For attracting the external resources to these post-Fordist cities, organizing great international events were seen as special occasion to foster the new urban image. In terms of sociopolitical theory, the transition from the industrial Fordism of mass production to post-Fordism can be interpreted as the transition from the national welfare state to the *global* and *neoliberal* state [27] (p.119). In this respect, neoliberal restructuring of cities based on globalization narratives emphasized that the processes of the construction and destruction of capitals are always situated in time and space [28,29]. In the context of this research, the economic structure of the two cities has definitely been similar for decades. That meant that, apparently, also the social structure was similar, the immigration process and challenges as well. They were cities for the working class organized around the industry and its polarized but solid social structure, working times, services and housing needs. But the successive post-Fordist phase has highlighted and made the differences which were behind the main economic forces come to the surface: in the case of Turin a more inertial social and spatial structure emerged than in Detroit where there was rapid and massive depopulation, based on a pattern of highly diversified ethnical and racial opportunities, and abandonment of large parts of the physical city (against strong differences in the property and real estate market structure). The way the leaderships reacted in the two cities was also quite different: Turin had the opportunity to react reasonably quickly thanks to a great capacity of the wider local leadership of the mid 90s to explore and build a discourse, confidence and a concrete strategic approach towards a new vision of a more diversified city (the whole literature on the strategic plan: culture, events, heritage, attractiveness, urban regeneration, infrastructure, etc.) Moreover, Turin's municipality could access significant investment (such as EU, national, regional, local and private). However, the process in Detroit was quicker and more dramatic, with much fewer social parachutes than in Italy, less inertia on the spatial configuration, and that reaction in Detroit came slightly too late, with no support from the national State. Now of course Detroit is making up for lost time in a very original way, in a way probably much more bottom-up and led by other actors and can become a model again.

Focusing on the connections of cities without concerns for hierarchies of power, researchers highlighted the multiple spatialities of place-making, networking, and sociopolitical relationships, which echoes the re-emerging recognition of the comparative logic of urban studies. To address the challenge of comparative urbanism, Ward called for a "relative comparative approach" to urban studies that incorporates

transnational studies and understands cities as “strategic nodes of financial flows, migration, policy formation and the practice of state power” [30] (p.408). Similarly, Robinson has developed a new phase of comparative urban research by offering ways to recast the methodological foundations of a comparative approach to urban studies by analysis of ‘topological spatialities and power relations’ [31] (p.2). McFarlene believes that “the comparative city” should be studied as a mode of thought that informs how urban theory is constituted [32] (p.726). Based on Brenner’s reading on Lefebvre, “the local, regional, the national and the global imply one another”, in the sense of being mutually constituted and constituting [33] (p.135). In the 1980s and 1990s, based on the world cities hypothesis, ‘global’ or ‘world’ cities were attributed to European or American cities [34]. At the same time, some other scholars discussed other ways of categorizing cities such as ‘post-industrial’, ‘post-Fordist’, ‘post-modern’ and ‘capitalist’ metropolis [35, 36]. In the case of Turin and Detroit, the multiple spatialities of place-making, networking, and sociopolitical relationships reflect the theoretical basis of the comparative logic in the process of spatial transformation of both cities. However, current narratives depicted an image of complex neoliberal socio-political relations as cities capable of fighting their industrial decline and reinventing themselves through a balanced association of the old and the new. In this interpretation, the exact definition of three concepts of post-industrial, post-Fordist and postmodern urbanism can represent a theoretical framework for comparative studies in urban theory that can define a framework to other former Motor Cities as well.

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