

Tensions and Convergence between History and Memory

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Cities are not made only of stone: they harbor ways of life, practices, movements, moods, atmospheres, feelings. Yet the ineffable nature of affects has long deprived human passions of a meaningful role when it comes to observing urban space and envisioning its future transformation. With this book, we explore the contemporary city and its transitional conditions from a different perspective: a quest to understand how the space of collective life and the feelings this engenders are connected, how they mutually give form to each other. In an interdisciplinary collection of essays, *The Affective City* means to open a discussion on the "soft" presences animating the world of urban objects: beyond the city built out of mere things, this book's focus is on the forces that make urban life emerge, thrive, flourish, but also wither, and sometimes die. A task crucial for the survival of cities as human habitats, in an urban world that - with every passing day - seems to draw closer a crisis.

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Edited by
Stefano Catucci
Federico De Matteis

THE AFFECTIVE CITY



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Federico De Matteis

Vol. 1

THE AFFECTIVE CITY

Spaces,
Atmospheres
and Practices
in Changing
Urban Territories

LetteraVentidue

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TENSIONS AND
CONVERGENCES
BETWEEN HISTORY
AND MEMORY

MICHELA
COMBA

After 1989, many historians gave new vigor to the importance of the historiography/memory dualism. This article is born from a sensing of the fragility of collective memory, and attempts to explain its origin and vulnerability starting from a dystonia. The forty-year crisis of history (founded upon the document/evidence relationship), on the one hand, and, on the other, an abuse of memory, now used above all in subjectivist terms to support a dissemination tied closely to the effectiveness of the storytelling, would generate a distortion hindering the process of building the collective memory. This dystonia amplifies the uprooting of the inhabitants of urban areas affected by strong social renewal, where the group that re-elaborated the collective memory in progress was dissolved. While history and psychoanalysis continue to wonder about the difference between narrative and historical truths, philosophy, literature, and urban history today help feed a phenomenon of subjectivist radicalization of memory, using empathy as an intersubjective

experience that, however, does not contribute towards anchoring the history of urban settings. On the other hand, public history has in some cases revealed that it is still possible to anchor a community's identity through recognition of a place and architecture, if the process of mnemonic socialization is accompanied by a re-signification of design and by the writing of a historiographic interpretation.

1. Dystonias

It appears increasingly clear today that history (founded upon the relationship between documents and evidence) and collective memory (increasingly “empêché, manipulée”: Ricœur, 2003, pp. 69-82) follow independent, often divergent paths. This dystonia can generate a history called upon to excite actors and memory, as François Hartog writes (1992; 2015), and can call into question the fragility of collective identity, at least as it relates to the manipulations of memory made – mainly for ideological reasons – in the second half of the 20th century. The dystonia is nourished on one side – that of history – by a disciplinary crisis, begun in the United States in the 1970s, as academia grew aware of the loss of history’s social utility in public opinion; on the other side, by an abuse of memory that is first and foremost still an *abuse* in the use of oblivion.

This last aspect is particularly evident in those areas of large Italian industrial cities that for nearly thirty years have been affected by strong social renewal, associated with now-recurrent economic crises, but also with the inadequacy of cultural policies. The social group that reprocessed the collective memory of neighborhoods that, even in the recent past, have played an important social, political, and economic role for the cities’ capitalist development, has dissolved. Here, the level of individual memory is now completely extraneous to the history of the urban space, which on the other hand might – according to Halbwachs (1950) – instead represent the privileged dimension of the subjects’ bond with society at large and its “extrinsic gaze”. Are not the most considerable recollections those of places visited and experienced together? In order to consolidate their collective identity through the history of places and inhabitants, the stories that until a decade ago gave voice to the individual memory of certain Italian working-class neighborhoods did not include the emerging groups that today experience the same places with disenchantment and unfamiliarity¹.

The uprootedness of the social parties today inhabiting those areas (often located at a short distance from historic centers) bears witness to a split between historic representation (safeguarding of images) and imagination of a new, possible urban scenario². Can the design act (at an

1. For different viewpoints: on the inhabitants’ relationship with what is built, see Eleb and Bendimérad 2011; on the identity of the inhabitants of an Italian public housing neighborhood of, see Coccoresse and Romito 2011; on the issue of uprootedness in the peripheries, see Camiz 2017.

2. The first Italian translation of Simone Weil’s *Lenracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) was written by Franco Fortini (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1954). On

urban and architectural level) perform a re-signifying of the collective dimension, excluding a process of diachronic analysis, where the bonds between memory and history are in crisis?

The subjective extraneousness from places and the distance between individual and collective memory are a paradoxical phenomenon, if one considers above all that the notion of “patrimony” saw a spectacular and exponential extension during the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st centuries, gradually taking shape as a cultural, political, and economic phenomenon. This “patrimonialization” from the conservation of an aesthetic order that presupposed a socially homogenous one (from the perpetuation of urban forms of a specific social group), strives to understand rather than to include or exclude³.

The story (the “narrative reconfiguration”) has always represented the vehicle of transference between subjective and collective memory: it has become a fundamental resource for *public history* and, at the same time, the point from which two roads – that of history and that of memory – tend to diverge. The resource of the story becomes the trap, as Paul Ricœur writes (2003, p. 636).

The intuition of the impossibility of truthfully translating a memory into words comes from Freud. In recent years, D.P. Spence has also argued his scepticism over the utility of this transfer: the more memory glows, and the better it seems to fit into a narrative profile the more it would be false. On the contrary, the most truthful account would appear in the less intriguing form. What counts is the past: the rest would be a deception⁴.

Problems of interpretation influence the ways in which experience is ordered and argued, even after the birth of cultural psychology (Bruner, 1990; 2006).

Public history spreads hand in hand with the valorization of the relationship between identity, storytelling and memory; but it indirectly returns to the centre of the (not only disciplinary) debate the criticism of the sources used for historical analysis. It draws inspiration from the conflict among players in interpreting juridical, judicial and economic *querelles*. It is no accident that public history is so widespread in the United States, where law is formed in the jurisdiction. This aspect enriches the reflections on the relationship between history and memory, also because it again proposes a theme that has always traversed historiography ever since Herodotus, that of applied history (Lepetit and Olmo, 1995).

contemporary urban design and its relationship with a subject widely understood in an overly abstract sense, see Bianchetti 2016.

3. On patrimonialization see: Choay 1992; Nora 1986; Rigaud 1980.

4. See Spence 1982; Dorella 2014.

After 1989, the historiography-memory duality was deeply questioned by the historians Martin Sabrow (2008), François Hartog and Krzysztof Pomian⁵.

Starting from the definition of collective memory, those same years saw the structuring of the reflection that accompanied the design of certain contemporary monuments in Berlin, such as Berlin's Jewish Museum and the *Topographie des Terrors* (Calabretta, 2015). In particular, confrontation over the initial design by architect Peter Zumthor for the *Topographie*, with the historians tasked with its organization, clarifies the role of "mnemonic socialization" (Zerubavel, 2005)⁶. Public history attributes this task to the construction of history museums and, more generally, of places of memory (existing places that were the scene of traumatic events), for which architecture can make a unique and important contribution in the phase of design, providing new meaning. The musealization process that has transformed places of persecution into places of memory has required citizens of former East Germany – called upon to critically question their past, in this case in light of the renewal that, in parallel, has involved the historiographical debate – to confront memory.

In other settings, like post-Franco Spain, what emerged with the construction of places of memory during the democratic transition was the tension between history and memory: leveraging on memory for political purposes on one hand, and on the national dimension of history on the other (Brandy, 2009).

2. Subjectivist radicalization of memory

Public history (also known as "people's history" and "radical history") and more generally the contact with society made through the culture industry (websites, television and radio programs, documentaries, exhibitions, museums, the involvement of youths and the elderly for the recovery of individual memories, family and photographic archives), but above all the phenomenon of storytelling that supports these initiatives for the purposes of dissemination, rarely leaves room for dialogue with classical historiography. Through this "distorted" system of alternative

5. See the monographic issue of *Quaderni Storici*, edited by Carolina Castellano and Guido Franzinetti, dedicated to *Memoria, fatti, giustizia*. See in particular: "Storia e finzione" and "Dalla storia come parte della memoria alla memoria come oggetto della storia", in Pomian 2001. This debate was continued by the *Journal of Contemporary European Stories* (4, 2017), dedicated to "City Memory".

6. For Peter Zumthor's design, see Baglione 2007.

practices – rarely spurred by the need to bridge “memory gaps” –, history loses its function of reflection, its value (Moroni, 2018)⁷. The attempt to counter the public use of history (the practices that require history to submit to contingent forces of political and ideological will in order to create useful collective memories) with a civil function of the historian (not instrumental but of service to the development of a more harmonious collective memory), in fact unleashes an egological problem, a subjectivist radicalization⁸.

This tendency perhaps prolongs the effect of the profusion of monographs that for several decades has also characterized art and architectural history – a genre will seemingly never age, since it discusses the artist and architect above all as individuals, and that European and especially North American publishers have continued to concentrate on (Rosso, 2013).

Nor does the subjectivist turn spare a privileged field of analysis for the formation of collective memory: urban history, which investigates the link between the city’s spaces and memory.

In this regard, it may be useful to refer to a didactic experiment on the issue of urban history, carried out for four years within a workshop that involved 200 members⁹. Students at similar skill levels were invited to relate the histories of certain neighborhoods in Turin in the form of brief illustrated texts and graphic novels. These neighborhoods formed between the late 19th century and the 1970s, as heavy industry developed in their vicinity. Over the past thirty years, they were heavily struck by deindustrialization and the forces of social renewal, remaining however unaffected by gentrification or urban regeneration.

Lacking a classification of pre-selected significant architectural objects or places, the autonomy in identifying pre-existing historic elements resulted in nothing. Faced with a given list, the students demonstrated a predilection for analyzing places and objects “close” to their own lived experiences, and a disinterest in the unknown, in that which was different from what they already knew, revealing a highly circumscribed capacity for identification and a limited emotional contagion.

The weight of current events and rhetoric obsessively focused on the issues of the places’ decay, insecurity, and dangerousness: this plays an

7. On the importance of distinguishing distortion from history and mystification, see Bloch 1997.

8. For personal memory and collective memory, see Ricœur 2003, p. 133.

9. *L’Atelier di composizione e storia: Torino dalla grande trasformazione alla rigenerazione urbana*, was held by professors Paola Gregory and Michela Comba as part of the Bachelor degree in Architecture (Polytechnic University of Turin). Academic years: 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019.

important role in the students' difficulty in recognizing the existence of a different identity (historical) from the current (or apparent) one: a collateral effect, perhaps, of the phenomenon that Hartog (2007) denounced as the "omnipresent present"?

Especially from the narrative perspective, the need to identify protagonists (and not processes) was essential for the students. The main difficulties emerged where a "classification" of historic buildings and places (by types, for example) was required, as well as in the relating of historical events, circumscribed and developed by them, even in detail, to broader and more general phenomena and contexts (and vice-versa).

Although the students produced highly effective texts and drawings ("screen-images"), only in very rare cases were these representations functional to and introjected into the envisioned urban regeneration design proposals. The produced "screen-images" are therefore emblematic on the one hand of a paradoxical refractoriness to projecting history into a dynamic, current dimension, on the other of a tendency to keep the produced design vision sharply distinct from a diachronic perspective.

As the analysis of places becomes the object of historical research proven by sources and documents – albeit re-elaborated using the instruments of individual storytelling and representation – the historical perspective loses the subjective value that instead constitutes the characteristic trait of architectural design.

3. Storytelling and subjectivism

In the wake of the Durkheim School of thought in the early 20th century, it seemed that private consciousness could no longer be scientifically believed: as a consequence, individual memory and collective memory dialectically clashed. Later, from a phenomenological point of view, individual memory and collective memory were considered to have been formed differently, although they sometimes overlapped. What resulted is that the individual lost his or her claim to have any memories, turning into a virtual dead weight for historical research.

Recognition of the empathic component as a fundamental factor for comprehending and facing dilemmas of current society on the analytical and cognitive level (from literature to philosophy, the neurosciences, and even storytelling), has at any rate accentuated not so much the role of the "inner gaze" as that of a subjectivist position, quite distant from the one used by Wilhelm Dilthey (1999; Aragona, 2015).

This tendency is associated with the influence of the narrative valorization of the history-novel duality – an issue around which a debate has developed over the past fifteen years, enlivening the new cultural history

born from the crisis of social history¹⁰. Emerging from this is not the importance of literature as a source (Bloch, 1997; Febvre, 1982), but its effectiveness in revealing history to the public, through the recounting of feelings and emotions.

Initially studied in the setting of philosophy, empathy involves psychology and the neurobiological sciences. Emotions, actions, and sensations would be shared at the phenomenological, functional, and sub-personal level: in the 21st century, empathy is described as an intersubjective experience (Gallese, 2003)¹¹. The neurosciences even reach the conviction that intersubjective human understanding does not originate from a propositional approach, because it would reflect an automatic and immediate mechanism.

We can use our understanding of ourselves and others to interpret social events in an analytically linguistic perspective. This is a potential for understanding that makes it impossible for us to understand others through empathy. In fact, empathy should always be felt before we try to interpret anything, and this feeling of empathy goes beyond interpretation. But is there an empathy free of categories and concepts? Is there an empathy that does not presuppose hermeneutics?

Having proven the importance of empathy on the social and intersubjective level, how can it be incorporated in historical narration? On the other hand, Pomian also suggests walking in people's shoes and rendering the experienced dimension, while not neglecting to describe the affective states produced in the protagonists (Pomian, 2001, p. 39).

However, we have recently witnessed a use of sources of oral history that is perhaps not overly careful¹², and an almost reckless reliance on interviews as a source and expedient for involvement. This fundamental instrument of sociological analysis ends up representing not only the source but also the narrative expedient of numerous recent accounts of urban history.

After Philippe Boudon's study (1969) dedicated to the inhabitants of Pessac – a reflection of a historiographical season from an economic and social angle –, for the history of residential neighborhoods alternative forms of storytelling have been tried out: from biography to autobiography, to stories about houses, making broad use of interviews with the

10. See Caglioti 2005; Ottaviani 2005; Gay 2004; *La Lettura* 2019, issues 419 and 420.

11. As to the possible interactions between human sciences and neurosciences, see Comet *et al.* 2008.

12. On oral history, and in particular on individual memory, present, past, and future, starting from the subject and the critical relationship with a current situation see the work by Luisa Passerini 2003.

inhabitants (Boudon, 1969; Portelli, 2007)¹³. From the standpoint of the history of architecture, the constructive, formal, and material analysis of buildings has been gradually worn thin to the point of disappearing – while various levels and phases of historical and sociological research are blurred (Comba, 2017).

On the other hand, Keith Oatley has emphasized the strong bond between narrative and empathic fiction and their impact on the imagination. According to Oatley, narrative reading and narrative fiction (invented stories rather than stories of reality) would lead the reader to simulate a sort of social world making it possible to experience understanding through a strong empathy.

The cognitive potentials of storytelling were also long reflected upon by historian Carlo Ginzburg (2000), for whom every history can take on a meaning that opens new visions for an entire historical period. However, the historiographical reflections dedicated to the writing of a leading figure in social history and the history of mentalities – Georges Duby – above all shift attention to the ability to unite “*création historique*” and “*création poétique*”: his *Nouvelle Histoire* of anthropological inclination, and the ability to reconstruct a cultural environment in which a historic event is prepared (like the Battle of Bouvines, for example) and to open perspectives for the reader that even go beyond cultural history (Brandy, 2009).

Will the construction of a collective memory around the recognition of a place or of architecture succeed in anchoring a community’s identity, starting from individual experience, without the contribution of an anthropological/cultural history?

13. For the broad use of interviews see Sotgia 2010; De Pieri *et al.* 2013.

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