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Procedia Engineering 21 (2011) 1104 – 1109

**Procedia  
Engineering**[www.elsevier.com/locate/procedia](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/procedia)

2011 International Conference on Green Buildings and Sustainable Cities

## Sustainability and place identity

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### Abstract

The idea of sustainability is based on the need to preserve the natural resources which already exist, so earth could provide them for the future generations. If it is valid for environmental resources, it should also be apply to the maintenance of place identity which plays a direct key role in shaping both individual and community identity.

When the typical features of places are preserved, their peculiarity is highlighted, as well as the relationship between the human being and their living environment. Such a heritage, enhancing the individual development in relation to the place features, can be an important life anchor left for future generations as a part of their own history and tradition, especially now, in the historical period we are living in, where relationships are characterized by high mobility and virtualization.

The experience acquired in Comacchio (FE), where a Project of Airworthiness for its historical centre was presented few years ago, can be an example of intervention to retrieve the local identity. This project intended a recuperation of the fundamental relationship between land and water, typical of human settlements, which interventions in the 60s have severely jeopardized, compromising place characterization and, subsequently, the identity formation of population.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of APAAS

*Keywords:* place identity; Comacchio; city; places of relationship; cultural space.

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### 1. Sustainability and place identity

According to the definition of sustainability coined in 1983 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present

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without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

The concept of sustainability is linked to the concepts of durability and permanence, with particular reference to the environmental and energy resources, allowing the continuation of living conditions on the earth, whose deterioration has heavy repercussions in the economic and social development.

But if the concept of sustainability is mainly referred to the maintenance of environmental resources, it is also true that the needs of human beings that have to be satisfied in the present and in the future, concern not only issues of subsistence, but also involve the aspects of relationships that go by the name of culture.

In order to ensure a sustainable development in the architectural and building activity, it is necessary but not sufficient to operate according to the canons of saving energy and the attention to land use. In fact, the architecture is not only an activity aimed at responding to the needs and functional materials, but also it involves the cultural and relational aspect.

The human being is interwoven by relationship and by the communication. With the surroundings and other aspects, it draws its basic identity. As Heidegger argues that the full meaning of Living space is to establish a relationships between 'heaven, earth, human and divine', to organize the living space in order for a chance to communicate with their surroundings'.

In connection with the surrounding area, there is a need to establish meaningful relationships with the world of 'things'; for the sense of direction it is important to catch the space between things we talk about 'where is', but the relationship with their surroundings is also necessary to ensure the development of the identification process, which talks about 'as is' in reference to the quality of things[1].

As Norberg-Schulz argues that to gain experience in a safe supportive, the human being must be capable of directing, but he must be able also to identify with the environment[2]. To live in the full sense of the term implies that we have established a significant relationship between a human being and environment and this relationship is an act of identification, namely the recognition of belonging to a certain place[3]. In fact, as Norberg-Schulz argues: by identifying, a human being takes over ownership of a world and, therefore, an identity[4].

If the relationship with the place and its natural and cultural features is crucial for the structuring of human identity, we understand that building in a sustainable way means not only respecting the rules of energy saving, but the concept of sustainability must be extended to the preservation of the characteristics that make every place and every city a unique cultural environment with specific architectural constructions.

In the desire to give future generations a reality imbued, with the values of the built significant and able to be a solid basis for the formation of identity of human communities, someone may ask: which elements can be considered as worthy of being preserved and transmitted to future generations? Which components of the natural environmental and of the build, participate in a matter of priority to the construction of human identity? Which actions are possible for the maintenance or recovery of the characteristics of places?

Surely one of the first elements that must be considered in the build of a place is the reference to the natural elements that have led predominantly to the character of history built.

The lights, the colours and the shapes of the natural environment are usually found in the characteristics of the building practices of the story, man-made environment to give their identity: the light strong and resolute in Bologna highlights, the pinkish clay with which the bricks were built and the city is characterized by the nickname 'Red'; 100 km along the Adriatic coast, the wet soft light softens the colours and the prevalence of green and blue inform the early Christian mosaics in contrast with the simple volumetric forms in dark brick building. The Serena stone quarries in Tuscany are used in the Florentine building and determine the style.

These few citations are sufficient to understand that the traditional architecture is always considered as

a part of the natural environment, interwoven with its lights, its materials and construction, customs that have developed over the centuries; it has allowed the development of special edificatory procedures that have generated the local character of buildings.

The independence of today compared to the local materials due to new construction techniques, no longer tied to a specific place allowed independence of the forms and the characters of the buildings compared to traditional architectures.

However, a break away from the *genius loci* generates a loss of identity and a sense of loss in the urban environmental, now, tending to uniformity. However, if Jerusalem has imposed an obligation on all new development of to use the local stone cladding, this means that it has become clear that the character of the city in this case depends on the particular stone with which it is built; this stone reflects the sunlight in the unique way and the city is called 'Golden City'.

Sustainable building means first of all restoring and maintaining the characteristics of a dialogue between the artifice and the nature that have been interpreted by the tradition architecture creating new modes of expression which do not disperse the identity that is born of the relationship with the 'earth' what has come down to us as a shared heritage of a culture of the community

In addition to construction methods, History has also left in the territory of the signs and artefacts that bear witness to uses, economies, and ways of social life that must be taken into account when we approach to editing of the territory.

In the Bolognese countryside, roads, canals, proto-industrial buildings such as mills, dye houses, palaces and manor houses form a complex and integrated structure of the territory, which is poorly taken into account in the design of buildings and infrastructure; often overrides the logical functionality over the more difficult and laborious development of the system and upgrading of existing resources.

In this case, sustainability, works to include meeting the needs of today's within the existing landscape and cultural context, aware that meeting the needs of today only if you are still in a cultural continuity with the historical development can be bearers of identity values for the future and enrich the heritage of memory that you necessarily need when you work in the construction of identity of people and community.

In the fast flow of contemporary events, In fact, we tend to dismiss the past as obsolete, place without sufficient attention to the importance of sedimentation events and historical memory.

In a city that invented its image every morning, as proposed Rem Koolhaas, each heritage is considered an unnecessary burden[5]. However, as a basis for anchoring identity, can it provide its residents a living environment without history? Some links with the past has proved, that it is essential to build a sense of belonging to a place and thus to allow the development of a personal identity and community.

The experience of French new towns built from scratch since the 70s of XX century, shows how a first time rejection of local history in the name of a proposal for ostentatious modernity of life, was followed by a deep identity crisis in which it went looking for a reference to the past and the character of the place, and they are looking for new ways of interaction between the new and the existing and between the planimetric provisions of the new urban realities and the old lines of fields, canals and roadways.

But sustainability, that is the transmitted of architectural and cultural heritage of the area to new generations, can also be interpreted as conservation, restoration and creation of places which are symbolic and representative of common life.

If human experience is necessarily relational, the places of relationship in which you can interpret the values of coexistence can only be a legacy; preserved, improved and transmitted.

In individualistic and atomized culture of today there is the need to find points of convergence that embody the elements that unite people in a given society and city namely, that represent 'on' the agreement between people who live a single territorial unit.

So have a sustainable approach in building the modern city, could also mean not forget to highlight those buildings that embody the agreement, both architectural and urban planning as available: The town hall is the 'home' town, the place chosen to host those whom society has identified as capable of making decisions of common interest, the school is the place where knowledge is passed on to the future generations and makes the citizens of tomorrow, a theatre is the drama of living which gives interpretations, the court is a place where the principle of justice is the basis of protected social life, while the hospital acquires more and more importance, given that the pivotal moments of life as birth and death take place there.

But if the concept of sustainability is related to a sustainable over time, then we must also transmit it to the future generations, a proper attention to those places more than others, materialize the concept of persistence related to the idea of eternal: the cultural space.

As pointed out by Norbeg-Schultz, these places do not understand the special aspects of human society, but are the culmination of sense, and speak in general terms; the condition of the transience of human existence and the desire to continue beyond the boundaries of time makes the significant moments of everyday life.

Sustainability in the full sense can also mean to bring attention to the relationship between 'heaven and earth, human and divine'; that is the deeper meaning of living space, being human on earth.

Conservation of important characteristics of building, preservation of the signs that history has given in the territory, gives importance of buildings that express in visible form the agreement between citizens. They are some key measures that should be proposed as vehicles of identity for the formation of the future generations.

On the possible actions necessary for the maintenance or recovery of the characteristics of places, we can take the example of a detailed plan that has been done a decade ago and that, unfortunately, has not been achieved, but is still representative regarding the preservation of local identity. It is the detailed plan of Airworthiness in Comacchio, to whom I participated in writing myself.

Comacchio is a case of cities with features highly characteristic and deeply rooted with the environmental that in the twentieth century has undergone a major depletion in the level of relationship with the surrounding.

The village was originally born out of twelve islands located at the mouth of the river Po Adriatic and had been for centuries a small village nestled in the valleys Ferrara, connected to the mainland only by waterways, whose inhabitants were the only means of subsistence fishing. (fig.1)



Fig.1. Comacchio. Foto1910

With the work of mechanical reclamation in the early twentieth century the sequence of islands linked by bridges, air brick, she found herself suddenly placed into a new landscape, although it remained associated with the valleys south not cleared through the canals that still exist today. (fig.2)



Fig.2. Comacchio. Aerial photo 1970

60s of the twentieth century, however, this connection with the natural environmental original was prevented by the creation of sluices placed between the city's canals and the valley, with the demolition of some old bridges replaced with new bridges driveways that prevent the navigability of the canals.(fig.3)



Fig.3. (a) Comacchio. Foto 2011; (b) Comacchio. Foto 2011

Channels until a few years ago were the real roads connecting the city with the surrounding environment, but today they are useless stretches of water.

This radical transformation and the consequent loss of relationship with the valley, created a difficulty in understanding of their living environment by residents; the inhabitants of Comacchio are no longer tied to water, but do not even have a culture tied to the land.

The Plan of Airworthiness was made to perform a recovery of identity allowing to re-open the connection between inland waters and waters outside; so we can restore the function of the channels connecting lines that still could be a valid and distinctive way to reach the coast or to penetrate the silence of the valley.(fig.4)



Fig.4 Comune di Comacchio, The Plan of Airworthiness, 2001

Through a sequence of planning actions ranging from simple to complex, was thus proposed to construct Leonardo's close link with the valley, sub navigation to rebuild bridges in place of those of recent construction and place of the landing, give value to the city by a recovery of memory; in this way it is given a new identity that is linked to local waters, but 'purified' by elements of insecurity, for example, the risk of flooding, or lack of drinking water. Until the 60s drinking water had been brought from the floor on a boat.

Operations like this are unfortunately often faced a lack of understanding of the social benefit and economic prosperity of a return to the places of identity; Comacchio, it is in the Natural Park of the Po Delta, in an environment with a great potential for tourist attractions.

With a recovery of cultural identity of the city, the community can give to future generations an environment that benefits from the technological possibilities of the contemporary and exceeded the hardships of isolation and poverty of the past, but preserves as a precious treasure its characteristic features, not lost its urban environment, but emphasizing the elements that make it unique.

In this way the concept of sustainability takes on a much wider-ranging and comprehensive, which takes into account not only the material needs of existence, but compares with the needs of a spiritual order that the living 'on the ground, under the sky' implies.

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