Draft Version

Maps, texts, icons into the European cities
A long way for public ownership

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1. Can urban planning shape cohesive public spatial representations?

Urban planning plays a fundamental role in shaping social representations among citizens and visitors, as their contents are important to understand how a city is perceived and lived by citizens and outside actors. Urban planning and its design remain a long-term process, concretely demanding a constant work by local government.

Unfortunately, actual urban governance is increasingly using policies from private actors and, thus, short-term changes often become the fastest solutions which guarantee immediate or visible results. This is a problematic and evident limit from many cases of urban regeneration. Another frequent problem from urban renewal concerns with the gentrification process, especially if the primary community may no longer live in its area, as spatial elements have changed too beyond their ordinary assets (new offices, trendy boutiques and expensive café-bar). Besides, as a further limit, many goals from urban renewal have not achieved by residents' participation, often having a mostly elite-led with a top-down approach.

Under these conditions, the city becomes the frame upon which are inscribed new images, texts and logos where - in this reshaping - citizens can feel as distant from the used urban atmospheres or places, sometimes loosening their previous sense of public belonging.

Policymakers are involved in spatial re-shaping of urban places, whose transformations imply a concrete re-invention of a locality by a renewed identity construction (Czarniawska, 2002). It is a sort of urban re-imagination of it, like writing a new text by a new plot to be told to a public (Jensen, 2005), whose final effect consist of a new overall city's representation, often overlapping the 'real lived city'. At the same time, it is known as social and spatial representations cannot depend only by urban design - as Bohigas says: *"(…) architecture is the element that defines public space and so the reconstruction, transformation and modification of the city must begin from the public space…. (…); by aiming at small realisable projects that could be built immediately, we felt that we were ensuring a sense of public participation"* (Bohigas, LSE Lecture). Urban design cannot be the only condition for reinforcing the public belonging among citizens: it is necessary a vivid social life, too. As Jane Jacobs suggests: *"the poor quality of its' public realm is directly linked with the poor quality of the social life of the city."* (Jacobs, 1961).

This draft paper tries to analyze how these two aspects - a urban planning by a clear syntax and a vivid social life - can help forging spatial and social representations among

citizens, whose inner contents can express a sense of public belonging. It is divided into two sections. In the first, I underline the role of urban planning and renewal in reshaping urban spatial representations, specifying how media, analogical communications (for instance, brochures, advertisings and so on) and new architectures can contribute in this process and generate overlapping public representations where new images, signs and words can hardly work with the previous ones. In the second one, following Lynch's approach, I examine the relationship between the 'real city' (the lived place) and the 're-invented city' (the imaged place), marking when and how a large numbers of citizens share the same urban representations.

The unifying idea beneath this reflection is the following one: the highest level of shared representations among citizens is expressed, the highest capability of a public sense of belonging can be arising among them. In the building up of common representations shared by citizens, urban planning and its organization play - undoubtedly - a crucial role. But, in my research, it emerges that it is not the sole fundamental element.

1.1. Difficult interpretations for spatial representations

Many are the methods and techniques for the analysis of spatial representations as a coherent whole. For example, according to Jessop (1997), three temporal elements are also necessary in the comprehension of a city as representation: a selective appropriation of past events and forces; a time sequence of them; and a relational 'emplotment' of recent and past facts events to be transmitted. But it is recognised nor an unique method and neither a set of procedures to correctly check spatial interpretations.

Nevertheless, there are some important clarifying statements to be made in this draft version. Firstly, spatial representations are always smaller entities nested within a larger territorial context. Secondly, all urban representations need clear identifying characters where spatial symbols and concrete points of reference are to be embedded. Thirdly, it is always kept a link between the spatial representations and the spatial interventions made in a city: any urban change produces different mental maps among citizens whose final representations can be understood by using a set of heterogeneous codes. It means that planning interventions can also be framed by the voices from social actors, whose words are embedded within local stories in wider discourses. That's why spatial representations can be also socially transmitted by words and discourses embedded in territories.

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Spatial representations can be valued as a mix of images and words by diverse sets of sources (municipal plans, branding documents, local developers' ideas, business or cultural scenes): for instance, stakeholders, local market and civil society can express variegate urban dimensions and social values where the matching between the 'imaged city' and the 'real city' is hardly achieved. Their spatial representations can be pinned down by opposing discourses.

Mapping the spatial representations in words suggests that radically diverse stories can be told by social actors about same places; or mapping the urban representations in symbols and drawings can reveal a diverse typology of spatial references (buildings or shops to be differently recognised by inhabitants). The higher complexity is in mapping social practices because of those sets of stories without a precise description: they are hard to be identified and here the most common and unsuccessful results arise. Unfortunately, not every story is clear or successfully translated. As Soja (2003) suggests, it is of primary relevance understanding the relationship between the representation and its place-bound context: that's why the drawing actions - for instance to depict architectural icons - are central to recall a storytelling and represent it.

In this research, I use representations in terms of mental maps, which can be expressed by merging drawings, symbols and words. I combine the usages of maps, symbols (icons), words as an overall whole of representations in order to understand as a placed is read, shaped, told and thus re-shaped by its inhabitants.

2. The research: Lynch and not only

According to Lynch, a city should have essentially two proprieties: figurativeness and legibility. The first recalls the idea that a city needs to be represented as a map so that people can find concrete points of references where easily moving in terms of sensorial fluidity; the second property implies that a city occurs to be told through its places, thus evoking social or public stories. Figurativeness and legibility mean that a city has to be lived as text (its places telling many comprehensible stories) and thought as a picture (a map by strong images and legible characters) whose main coordinates may have a social sense for citizens and visitors. Their capability of clarity e vividness expresses 'if and how' urban planning works, that is, if/how it is able to construct both public images and a sense of place by citizens.

Besides, Lynch adds that this interpretative evidence can be achieved by applying a specific syntax in constructing the city's skeleton: districts, nodes, references, paths, borders are the principal five coordinates for a clear urban skeleton. By correctly using these criteria according to peculiar characteristics, urban planning can better reach a final shaping whose properties are the following ones: a clear structure (a functional organization where paths have a central role), a recognisable identity (its urban specificity or recognisability which is usually embedded in local culture), a vivid social content (places are able to tell a collective story or to express a quality of public and social life).

Furthermore, Lynch specifies that the more readable a city is by a large amount of citizens, the more works its planning and concrete organization. A high sharing of common representations among citizens reveals the quality of legibility from a place as well as the chance to forge a stronger public sense of belonging.

Together with Lynch approach, in the research I have integrated some further considerations: I have chosen cities under conditions of urban promotion, trying to catch a more 'superficial' dimension: their spatial representations wedged as message and as image, aimed at re-branding a place. The actual production of signs, symbols, icons and other forms of immaterial economics can make the 're-invented city' stronger than the 'really lived city', especially when newest urban renewal is mainly constructed by mass-media, by archi-stars or sophisticated forms of consumption: in a word, when it has received a 'lifting' for consumers, tourists, multinationals. Within this process, there is often a certain gap between how a city is effectively and how it is 'sold' outside. Urban marketing needs to promote appealing messages from single places for visitors, consumers and investors and, thus, overlapping and opposing signs risk creating contradictory meanings in inhabitants.

2.1 Some partial evidences from case studies

This draft version paper synthesizes some partial results from a research where a restricted group of citizens from twelve European cities by a diverse extension were invited to describe specific spatial zones of their city, in terms of *maps* (clear functional parts), of *texts* (words with the adjectives) and *icons* (symbols, brands, architectures). It was also asked to draw their lived spaces and the renewed spaces in different periods of their changes, by merging maps, symbols and words in their pictures. The aim was in verifying the

following idea: the wider the gap is among these three aspects, the more difficult the sense of public ownership is felt by citizens. These are synthetically main partial results:

a) As verified by other case studies led in similar researches, results tend to change according to territorial wideness. Mapping simultaneously a city as map, as text, as icon becomes amore difficult job for large cities. Here, it is more problematic to collect and transform a large sets of spatial representation into a few range of signs. As we know, large and medium-large cities use more flagships buildings and iconic architectures, essentially because they have more money and more space to pursue their urban policies. They need evident point of strong references and significant physical structures and that's why - partially why - citizens more frequently recall them. Differently, small cities and towns tend to work and communicate best with atmospheres of a place, and that's why - partially why - citizens shape their places in terms of texts and words. From a general viewpoint, the built city (that is, the urban organization) and the lived city (that is, the shared spatial representations) are not often convergent among representations from citizens living in large places; the results seem to be the opposite for small places.

b) As far as the largest cities, the more frequently words used to catch urban images are grouped in these concepts: architecture; art; heritage; attractions; mélange of technologies-businesses. As far as from medium cities, they have the more numerous results where hard and soft aspects (that is, planning and community participation, for example) tend to be better represented as an unique mixture. In this case, I hypothesize that it depends on the successful waves of their process of regeneration. Besides, in small centres, the theme of authenticity is more felt: most part of drawings tend to evoke elements closer to environment and traditional signs. That is obviously due to smaller resources that they can put at work. Nevertheless, all this has some consequences on the kind of linkages existing between the real city and the imaged one. At any rate, it seems that this connection is stronger in small places representations.

c) From a more specific viewpoint, when the Lynch suggestions for urban syntax have not been respected the renewed places were not easily recognised by citizens. Their places are depicted and told by using previous images. Differently, when some spatial codes have been respected in the renewal, the sense of spatial recognition is higher among inhabitants. For instance: when paths were interrupted becoming margins and when spatial point of references were not associated to a social activity, it was problematic for

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places to be simply recognised and lived. It means that the problem was not due to the refusal of urban renewal but to the weak grammar of spatial elements.

d) Where spatial density and social heterogeneity were high, results reveal how spatial points of interruptions and of confusion can be easily overcome by citizens so that the places are more lived and produce more vivid images.

(see three samples of merging languages in citizens' images below)
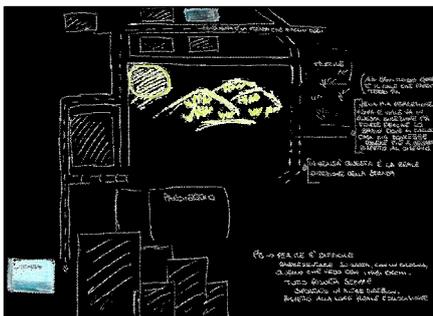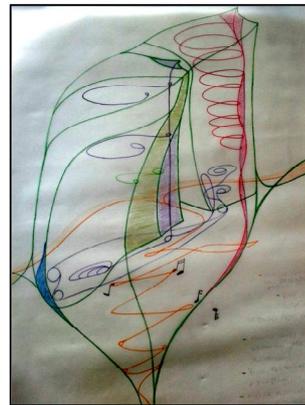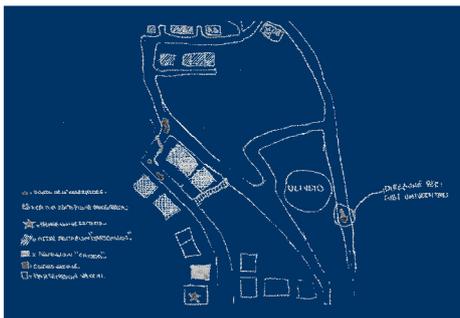
3. Conclusive Remarks

Public spaces have a material dimension (local artefacts, heritage, consolidated landscape, periodical events) and a immaterial value (relationships, shared memories, habits, experiences, old identity, historic backgrounds, community participation). Testing a public sense of belonging, it means trying to create a strict correspondence between the places of words and icons (where structures are at the centre-stage), from one side, and the concrete places (where a living community is at the core of change), on the other one. Following Lynch's criteria, small places seem to have many more matching between the 'real city' and the 'image city': here, the city of words and of images seem to better recall a concrete sense of place. Differently, in large cities, physical icons help synthesizing its territorial complexity. The medium-sized cities, differently, represent a sort of 'litmus test' because

when urban design is correct, it is possible to obtain the same results received in small places. In this case, the answer can be in urban planning and in its capability to organize places where the social representations and the spatial maps converge within an unique whole: briefly, words, images, spatial paths express a clearer degree of figurativeness and legibility. By telling a place as story and by representing a place as a territorial map should be considered as the primary coordinates when local urban governments are going to promote a urban renewal.

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