Filling in gaps in the urban landscape with a patchwork of open space. A proposal for the dispersed city.

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Abstract. Urban landscapes configure themselves like a mosaic of synchronic concurrences and a stratified diachronic palimpsest, at the same time, where the phenomenon of spreading dwellings out of the urban settlements is a raising question in the European context. The irregular growth of living neighbourhoods wears the landscape out, or in other words, we are talking about *urban sprawl* or spread city: "unplanned, incremental urban development, typified by a low-density use of lands on the city threshold." (Gibelli e Salzano, 2006).

This new kind of horizontal city is diffused, widespread and growing on itself. It modifies the countryside leaving "interstitial segments, remains and fragments" among buildings: maybe they can be seen like "urban gaps".

But where have we find answers to face that problem? among architects and urbanists? among people living in spread cities? How to make people aware of the potentialities of open spaces? How to represent the gaps? Which can be the role of representation and first of all, of communication technologies?

The paper intends to show the update examples on the issue:. a patchwork possibility is taking place, sewing up parts and fragments of not homogeneous fabrics, while awaiting a new urbanity re-build, a new landscape. How that patchwork can be made? By open healthy spaces, public spaces, green spaces…, linked each other in order to compose a huge patchwork, more relevant than buildings, the real net able to invert the relationship between built spaces and open spaces.

Key words: Sprawl, Urban Landscape, Open Spaces, Landscape Urbanism, Ecological Urbanism

Introduction

The theme that this paper intends to address relates to a reflection on the increasing size that the "dispersed city" has taken on today, developing some particular observations on the situation of the European context and identifying some possible design strategies.

In a book published a few years ago - *Walkscapes* - an interesting description was presented of those recognizable urban landscapes via a walk among the residual spaces created by urban sprawl, which represent a diverse range in scale and nature of a branched system potentially capable of "patching up" the empty urban spaces. "Despite its amorphous figure - writes the author of *Walkscapes*, Francesco Careri - in reality the design of the city which is obtained by

separating the full areas from the empty areas can be reinterpreted as a "form" with complex geometry, used to describe these urban systems that self-define their structure and appear as clusters of matter "without form" (Careri, p. 132).

This new type of urban configuration, recent images of our civilization, generated independently by the theories of architects and urban planners, is a real living organism in the making, which transforms leaving around it and within it parts of the region in ruins that are more difficult to control. However, these voids, gaps, can be not only places waiting to be *filled with things*, but spaces waiting for new meanings. As the author of *Walkscapes* suggests, this does not mean transforming a non-city to a city, but trying to understand and find solutions to the parallel city with its own dynamics and structures, still waiting to be understood" (Careri , p. 133).

Such a reading of this *urban amnesia* changes the meaning currently attributed to empty urban spaces, namely that of residual spaces waiting to be more or less saturated with buildings, with little chance of obtaining sustainable living environments, a place of new possibilities and challenges for living.

Places where there is predominantly a disordered urban conformation are traditionally the suburbs of both large and small towns, in other words, large areas that are outside the so-called consolidated city, areas that often include destinations and functions other than housing.

The growing disorder of low-density neighbourhoods that erode the landscape on a European scale, was first addressed by English scholars who identified them with the term "urban sprawl" or scattered cities, "incremental unplanned urban development, characterized by the use of low-density land at the edges of cities, which tends to saturate every available space over extended areas," largely a result of the absence of effective forms of local governance (Gibelli and Salzano, 2006).

Among the French studies on issues relating to sprawl, Donadieu's positions in *Campagne Urbane* and those of Gilles Clément are of considerable interest. Both of them, albeit with different nuances, were concerned with this new sort of horizontal city, diffused and dispersed, that grows on top of itself, changing the landscape, leaving "interstitial segments, residues and fragments" between the buildings, useless for agriculture, but not (yet) suitable for housing, resulting in a sort of "gray area" that resembles a *place of indecision* (Clément, 2005). And therefore into this space which has not yet been transformed into city, at least not in the traditional sense, resources and ideas must be invested, primarily to avoid increasing surfaces built haphazardly and, consequently and equally important, to prevent further erosion of the landscape.

But where can we find useful answers to address this problem? Is it right to refer only to proposals from architects and urban planners? Or, in a more reasonable way, must one also question the communities living in the regions?

Other issues appear immediately related to the above: In addition to listening to the opinions of the people, how can one manage to communicate clearly the potential that open spaces have to offer? Or in other words how can these gaps be represented? Also what is the role of tools of representation, above all that of communications technology?

Methodology: Representation, Communication, Design
This series of questions opens two ways of thinking and consequently examples.

The first point concerns the issue of the urban landscape in relation to the debate and experiences related to the European Landscape Convention; the second question, connected to the first, takes into account the slight rapport between planners and populations in the definition of housing solutions at all scales: it could be argued that the landscape, both urban and natural, is increasingly becoming a social landscape.

The European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000) gave voice to the people's need to regain their own living environment, taking into consideration also the sensory perception of the natural and cultural elements. In particular, before the threats of environmental degradation that inevitably end up influencing the social balance as well, the search for quality landscapes can be associated with the affirmation of cultural and regional identity that brings with it a better quality of life, triggering with it sustainable economic development (Priore, p.20).

As the representation of the region is a mark of identity for social groups, the landscape contributes to determining the value of the same region, through governing its transformations.

There is no doubt that such a sense of landscape, custodian of both tangible and intangible values at the same time, the latter expressed by images of identity, needs to use communication channels to express itself that can truly give voice to those who do not have a technical language or can decode the project proposals that architects and planners submit on behalf of stakeholders.

In this problematic context the role of representation and communication turns out to be of strategic importance; In fact, it is customary to modify the domains of technical papers on urban analyses and projects, the result of specialized languages to broaden the scope of informative and communicative codes based on easy accessibility that are able to reach even "not-experts".

In addition to the mapping technique, how many ways can we now borrow from the field of digital technology to better show the contexts that we intend to enhance?

To explain with clear reasoning via communication and information, one must use images, primarily photographic images. This is the common code widely diffused in the contemporary culture of image: that which people receive with greater immediacy.

There is no doubt however that, apart from being imbued with a culture of images, our society tends to be a digital one: the proliferation of social networks and blogs is a recent but growing phenomenon, which together with the diffusion of browser tools such as Google Maps, are helping to create "new styles" of information, as well as communication.

The digital image, no longer static, sets out to be a visualization that is increasingly accessible to a growing number of people and able to be managed and manipulated by a growing number of users with a few clicks.

There is therefore a real possibility to overcome the conventional image of the urban landscape that was usually that of maps and plans, prepared by local experts, but with little sympathy for ordinary people and what's more inappropriate to record a series of important relationships for those who inhabit a given region, like its symbolic value, or the ability to convey the sense of place and the roots of social groups in a segment of its own space.

However, as Noguè noted when the regions have lost their "speech", at the same time they lose the link with the imaginary and their legibility, or the ability to understand their potential, becomes very difficult: if therefore we are in a crisis of representation of some reference landscapes, it is also for representation that we must return to give voice to a new imagination of the urban landscape.

Leading Experience and Discussion
Now the question to be addressed is whether on what we have defined as urban gaps, undefined spaces but ready to acquire new usable value in the vision expressed by the European Landscape Convention, there is already an ongoing work of reflection and project proposals from architects and planners (or even geographers).

In the Italian context as early as the mid-eighties of the last century, Bernardo Secchi initiated a shift of focus from buildings to the surface that remains between them, suggesting the key concepts of: land project, modification of the existing structure and construction of the city within the city.

Such a position, which still exists today, is opposed to a widespread practice of urban planning, little attention paid to the multiplicity of urban forms coexisting in the contemporary region and therefore also to the multiplicity of landlocked spaces, largely indifferent to the landscapes and environments which should relate to each other, thus disappointing the expectations for reassessing its value.
But recent visions and methods for approaching the urban landscape affirm the need to work on the design of the structure perceived as a useful device to guide policy and at the same time are an expression of stepping back from urban planning based only on quantitative parameters, of which mapping is the main vehicle of communication.

In this new perspective, the undeveloped open space, used for various purposes, becomes the guarantor of spatial continuity, assuming the role of "infrastructure" *par excellence*: "Open space, not dug out of the fabric, but rather dilated and largely residual, is the potential infrastructure in which destination and accommodation affect the "re-composition" of the contemporary region, namely the possibility of linking settlements in sequences of spaces that constitute new cities within the old" (Gabellini, 2010).

Such a direction of work would result in different but related spatial structures, articulated for different functions and which result in planning on a large scale, could be likened to a patchwork, which is a work of "patching up" the gaps in the urban fabric, mainly in peripheral areas.

On a similar wavelength, but with a strong interest in the social component are Danish researcher Gehl's projects. Gehl works to create sustainable environments within a framework of holistic lifestyles, where the city "opens" to include people by offering different activities and opportunities while ensuring at the same time the values of multiplicity and diversity. Together with a widespread use of sustainable materials and alternative transport, the holistic lifestyle requires attention to the quality of life, health and safety in an inclusive environmental dimension, without distinction for ethnicity, social differences, disabilities. At the same time, innovation and new technologies are seen as key devices for the overall progress of the community. The central hub for the realization of these projects is a close collaboration with local organizations and participatory practices.

The methodology of Gehl's work is based on three stages: First life - then space - then buildings (Figure 1), thus ensuring the highest standards in the development of the city. Even the communication strategy of the assumptions and the design method that constitutes housing solutions "around" the social space is particularly interesting for the redevelopment of urban "gaps" that revolve around a "social life".

Another interesting example both in terms of the analytical profile and the operational one, is represented by the *Landscape Urbanism* proposals for the regions of the contemporary city, whose program is defined as *open*, able to take into account "porous" assemblies making up of city and country, in which the "traditional" components now appear indistinguishable, at any scale one attempts to make it. Again we are seeing a reversal in priorities: what is essential is in between the buildings, the "landscape" that is not the architecture, because it is the landscape that can and should organize the contemporary city, improving the urban experience.

Another interesting trend is made from the *ecological urbanism*, on which Mostafavi and Doherty have recently written a book. Again the proposed redevelopment of urban spaces arises from the need to find alternative approaches to the project and thus to consider the large scale in a different way from what has been done in the past. *Ecological urbanism* means working with complex economic, political, cultural and social structures, starting from the knowledge that the

true integration of ecological systems implies a necessary adjustment of scale (beyond the site) and interdisciplinary strategies suited to address this variation in size of the context.

In this overall framework Mostafavi assumes that one must consider the fragility of the planet and its resources as an opportunity for indirect innovation regarding the project rather than a form of technical legitimation to conventional solutions. Imagining an urbanism that goes beyond the *status quo* requires a new awareness - something that has the ability to incorporate and compose the inherent conflict between ecology and urbanism, thus defining the actual territory of the *ecological urbanism*.

This idea of human ecology seems to border on a kind of "ecosophy" which includes environment, social relations and subjectivity of the individual, placing special emphasis on the role that humans play in ecological practices. A radical approach, when applied to the urban domain, would lead to a form of ecological design that not only takes into account the fragility of the ecosystem and resource limitations, but would consider said conditions as the essential foundations of a new form of creative imagination.

To summarize what *ecological urbanism* seems to propose is a methodological combination of old and new practices that work in tandem, providing a range of sensibilities and practices that can enhance our way of dealing with urban development in a trans-disciplinary dimension and considered through the lens of ecology.

Conclusions

Addressing the issue of urban gaps implies changing the scale of the problem: first, we must begin by noting that it is not possible to consider the urban and regional phenomena independently because they are rather two sides of the same coin, for which the dichotomy of city / country is now totally meaningless.

The issue of urban empty spaces, open spaces created by urban sprawl, opens to the possibility of a "patchwork", a stitching together of non-homogeneous tissues, parts and pieces, waiting to give rise to a new urbanity, a new landscape.

The idea of the "patchwork" stems from the variety of functional destinations that these spaces can play in the future, while maintaining the basic idea of a great "infrastructure" that preserves the green spaces.

At the same time, open spaces without construction can be considered as places to be re-qualified on a wider dimension that goes through a change of scale, city/landscape scale to an ecological extension, not only undetermined regional surfaces but interdisciplinary issues related to the environmental issue.

Figure 1. Design methodology of J. Gehl

(from the website: http://www.gehlarchitects.com)

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Biography

Full Professor of Theory and Techniques of Representation at the Faculty of Architecture and Society of the Polytechnic of Milan, Head of PhD "Territorial Design and Government" in the Department of Architecture and Planning. The themes of research have been amply published in essays and volumes and are closely linked to the field of representation although related to interdisciplinary problems referring to history, planning and the preservation of the environment. Scientific contributions have been made in the fields of Representing the territory and environment and Theory and history of methods of representation. Cultural and educational exchanges with the Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona Paisatgisme, with the DESS at the École d'Architecture de Versailles, the Université Lyon III, the École d'Architecture de Lyon, the École d'Architecture de Paris-La Villette, the École d'Architecture de Grenonble. Many the talks at conferences and seminaries, with invitations arriving especially from France and Japan to expound the theme of representing the landscape.

Congress proceedings

To inform our attendees that submitted an article in the congress, we apologize for the lack of information, but we like to reinsure the publication of the congress proceedings.
Due to unexpected working load with summing up the event and some other reasons, the work with the publication has slowed down. We will certainly get in contact with you soon related to the working process with the proceedings. It is estimated that the proceedings will be printed by this fall (year 2012).
The Congress Organising Committee will contact the authors of the articles to confirm their postal address and the publication will be sent by post.

For those who need basic information of the publication, the congress proceedings will be published as a special issue of Tallinn University of Technology landscape architecture proceedings "Acta Architecturae Naturalis". The ISSN number for these series is 2228-1320.
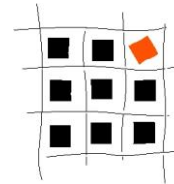
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