

3 Centralities and peripheries:

A new strategy for the recovery of the urban environment

1 The city and its public spaces

The city has always been identified in its public spaces and vice versa. Public areas have always constituted the focal points of 'centralities', in other words of the town itself.

The hieroglyph for a town (a cross inside a circle) symbolised the focal point and the town's crucial role as a meeting point, that is as a public space. There have always been meeting points: the Greek agora, the Roman forum with its surrounding public buildings (temples and basilicas, theatres and arenas), and subsequently the town churches and cathedrals with their squares and the market places; then later the public gardens, the esplanades and paths, the main boulevards with their pavements, the railway stations, the shopping complexes and centres, the bars and cafes, and (alas today) the fast food restaurants and snack bars for youngsters. These have always been (public) places where people could meet in order to build up social, cultural and political contacts, to take part in local events, and to benefit from community life.

In short, they are places and spaces where everyone can enjoy the city, thus becoming 'civis', in other words 'citizen' and 'civil' at the same time.

So public space represents the town itself and produces the so-called 'urban effect'.¹

The city is what it is because of its centrality; and its centrality depends on its public spaces. A city which doesn't have sufficient public areas is not a proper city in the full sense of the word.

Bringing back the idea of public spaces simply means relaunching the overall concept of town and city.

2 The decline of public spaces and the disequilibrium of loads

In effect, we are faced by a problem of declining public spaces in our towns and cities.

Even though public spaces have always been given priority in the history of urban design and planning, nowadays they are undergoing a destructive influence, a mortal blow. Why is this happening?

It seems that the principal reason is to be found in the enormous expansion of urban population. This expansion is concentrated in the areas where the quality of urban surroundings is highest, thus creating an important new demand for centrality and public spaces. Faced by this demand (which was neither foreseen nor planned), it has been difficult to create a corresponding supply in the availability of centrality and public areas.²

The result of this lop-sided relationship between supply and demand for public spaces has been the 'overloading' of pre-existing areas, deforming them by overcrowding and by improper use.

This main cause - overpopulation in large cities with respect to the available space - goes hand in hand with two other factors: a) the persistence of the old-fashioned method of urban planning known as 'zoning'; and b) traffic engineering.

3 Two typical, inadequate responses: zoning and traffic engineering

3.1 The old-fashioned method of 'zoning'

The aim of the old-fashioned method of zoning was to ensure functional quality for the various areas of the city (administrative, residential, recreational, etc.).

Such a method is perfectly suitable for towns of a certain size and within the threshold limits of the city effect. But when these limits are exceeded, the zoning method increases the imbalance between supply and demand of public space because it tends to overload the traditional focal areas. At this point, it is important to create, through preventive and far-sighted planning, secondary focal points or centralities with relative public spaces.

The absence of such an approach on a large scale has forced the old urban centres (some more 'historic' than others) to become the only desirable location for all the functions and advanced services that effectively produce the city effect, while at the same time being too small to cater for the new level of demand.

3.2 Traffic engineering

The second factor, closely linked to the first, is the outcome of traffic planning. In the hands of the traffic engineers, and because of the overloading of the old urban centres, the main requirement has become that of 'fluidity'.

By adopting a sort of 'hydraulic' view of towns and cities, and with the aim of maximising access and minimising time, traffic engineering has created one-way systems, computer-controlled traffic lights, urban freeways with priority lanes where no stopping is allowed, link roads, underpasses, and a hotchpotch of other expedients which have reduced our urban streets to flyovers and race tracks (irrespective of the speed limits required by law, generally on the low side). And our squares and piazzas have become car parks. What sort of centrality, with its related social aspects, can one achieve under these conditions?

The inevitable degeneration of urban centres makes traditional public spaces obsolete - they are no longer places to go to, to strike up a conversation, maybe to learn something and to enjoy oneself. Furthermore, furnishing the streets and turning isolated areas into pedestrian precincts (although praiseworthy) would be disappointing and insufficient if not carried out hand in hand with the removal of the cause of the degeneration: overloading traditional urban centres and ignoring the balance between supply and demand of public spaces.

4 The loss of centrality in small and medium-sized towns

The decline of urban centres and public spaces is common not only to large cities but also to the other parts of the urban scene: the small and medium-sized towns.

Small and medium-sized towns, in spite of some pleasant features that improve the quality of life, have lost all meaningful centrality. Many of them have not achieved that critical level of development as modern, functional 'urbanity'.

In fact, when we talk about 'centrality'³ we are referring to those major features of urban development which the average European citizen of today (and presumably tomorrow) looks for and expects in towns and cities. It is the centrality that the inhabitants potentially (if not always effectively) expect so much, so that if their expectations are not met they will leave the small town where they were born and grew up, thus impoverishing it still further.

5 Outlines of a new policy of recovery of the urban environment

5.1 Changes in centrality and the critical mass for city effect

In our present cities and towns the concept of centrality has changed considerably, as shown by indicators such as the effective quality of urban life. There is this parallel historical movement relating to the increased demographic intensity which has become stabilised around all major urban centres. This demographic element has always been considered as the 'critical mass' for achieving new centrality and city effect, together with other variables such as the increase in per capita income and consumption.⁴

One has to recognise that today (viewed for the first time against the historical background), the increase in per capita income and consumption (in each urban

centre) has noticeably lowered the threshold level of population required for the 'critical mass' to achieve modern centrality and today's city effect.

Some twenty or thirty years ago, it was felt that in order to achieve such a city effect and sufficient centrality, one needed at least a million inhabitants as a 'market area' or 'catchment area' to enable the setting up and the continuing operation of those functions and advanced services that produce the 'urban effect'; in other words, that quality of the urban environment which attracts and holds the population.⁵

Nowadays, half a million inhabitants (sometimes even less) may be able to create the necessary conditions for a high quality city effect.

But I don't believe that this 'critical mass' (whose level is certainly decreasing) will disappear altogether, either as a result of substituting physical accessibility by computer communications, or as a result of increasing personal contacts on a worldwide scale (otherwise known as the 'global village' effect).

To put it another way, I don't believe in the alleged 'post-urban society'. Consider these two categories: on the one hand, my jet-set friends (who represent a minute proportion of mankind, even though I wish them all the best for an increase in their number); on the other hand, the hundreds of millions of people who spend their days glued to the TV set (and soon to Internet). I don't believe that either category threatens to bring about the death of the city as we know it - that is, the place that satisfies the need for physical contact in public spaces - after at least twenty centuries of its existence.

I am sure that even jet-setters and TV (and Internet) addicts would not want to give up those physical and social contacts that urban public spaces ensure. If such a thing were conceivable, the demand for public spaces would already have declined in our towns and cities, as opposed to increasing everywhere (as has already happened) thus creating the real problem of the deterioration of the urban environment. And the city effect would have reduced, not increased, its requirements.

5.2 The 'depolarisation' of large cities and towns, and the integration of small and medium-sized towns into new poles

This is the reason why today's urban centres, historic or otherwise, that are a multiple of the minimum threshold level of the city effect, should plan and develop other focal points or centralities within their own boundaries, as alternatives to the traditional ones. I have called this a 'depolarisation policy'.

This is the reason also, at the same time, why those urban centres that still have populations below the critical threshold should combine into 'urban systems' which together would reach the required level, and together would achieve the city effect. The possible city configuration thus created would reverse the traditional gravitation towards the old town centre areas that have become overloaded and hypertrophic. I have called this the 'policy of integration and polarisation'.

In western countries, especially European ones, if we want to help large cities and metropolitan areas to lighten the heavy load of traditional centrality and to improve the quality of the urban environment, we must organise and bring into being new 'cities' - both within the bounds of the existing large cities, and between small and medium-sized towns (below the threshold required for modern urban quality).

In both cases (bearing in mind their very different points of departure) it is important not to violate the constraints that render the operation feasible: the achievement of threshold dimensions and the efficiency of urbanity.⁶ Many of the usual steps taken here and there are aimed at improving a particular local situation without an overall policy relating to the urban framework described above. Such steps are often dispersive, costly, likely to be wasted in large measure, basically inappropriate and often counter-productive.

As an example, we might mention the scale of investments made in large cities to improve accessibility by means of vast traffic infrastructures and the creation of 'satellite' areas with low centrality. Or, in the case of small and medium-sized towns, the investments made in order to create 'monuments' of social welfare (such as universities and hospitals) without the necessary links to a sufficient catchment area.⁷

In this sense, a national urban policy (possibly supranational) is required to provide a 'framework of reference' of appropriate urban and territorial standards for the many projects and financial programmes carried out at the local level.⁸

6 The question of 'modernity' in urban planning

6.1 The proper way to request more public spaces

From what has been said so far, one can deduce the proper way to request public space for improving our urban environment.

We certainly have to insist on more public spaces, but directed towards the new centralities (not merely in order to beautify the old or new urban surroundings).

There is no question about restoring buildings, restructuring the visual surroundings, improving urban furnishings, checking the pollution of our urban atmosphere; these steps are so essential as to be self-evident.

In order to carry out and emphasise this aim effectively, we must be careful not to overlook some of the crucial points that affect the real improvement of cities and towns - both those that are overloaded and those that are losing their urban qualities.

The crucial point is that these enlarged public spaces must be used as strategic tools to create new opportunities for centralities.

On the other hand, I don't feel (like some people) that the development of new centralities (as alternatives to the 'historic' ones) in our cities and towns will impair the vitality of the existing downtown areas. In a period such as today,

dominated by business services, leisure time, tourism and cultural research, our cities and town centres constitute a resource that is becoming scarcer and scarcer, but which is certainly not obsolete.

On the contrary, the only thing we have to fear and keep clear of is using our cities beyond a 'sustainable' dose, thus avoiding the risk of killing them by overdose.

And it would be foolish to imagine that 'gentrification' could be an overall solution to the problem. Gentrification is a useful tool for improving the urban appearance of certain old and abandoned areas of cities and towns, but it has nothing to do with the problem of creating new spaces for centrality, suitable for present-day requirements and levels of urban quality; in other words, focal areas that have the same attraction for the inhabitants, the same values and urban functions as those that are being challenged and substituted.⁹

6.2 The risk of an outmoded model for urban life

There is an element of risk inherent in the conventional approach to improving public spaces in cities and towns: that of seeing the answer as the revival of a previous way of life, against the modernisation of new urban living. This belief, this wishful thinking, can lead one to misunderstand and to underestimate the obvious requirements for a modern urban centre.

There is widespread nostalgia (or *laudatio temporis acti*) that harks back to the way of life in towns and cities when the population didn't exceed 50-100,000 people, composed mainly of noble and patrician families, bourgeois and artisans. The majority of the rest of the population lived and worked outside the town.

A correct sense of historical criticism (rare enough in conventional thinking) should lead us to compare our despised peripheries, not with the social life of our old urban centres, but with life in the countryside before the arrival of running water, sewers, electricity and other modern comforts. Europe's finest urban heritage comes from towns and cities of the size mentioned above. And a large part of the urban environment and setting, which as visitors we come across and admire so much, was more haphazard in its evolution than we really imagine. We have to beware of mistaking the warm mantle of time for inspired design and planning. In any case, that particular urban dimension is no longer recoverable, except in confined circumstances: such as special areas for tourism and recreation. And even circumscribed projects like these may suffer if, on the one hand, the problem of overloading and, on the other, that of city effect are not resolved.

Our past is a source of inspiration, but it also constrains us. If we don't want to destroy it forever, we must not lean too heavily on it by trying to invent an impossible 'modernisation' or by applying present-day criteria to our old cities and towns.¹⁰

We have already seen what this modernisation brings, through the slow adaptation of our old streets and piazzas and our old public spaces (conceived in

their time for other uses and other users) to today's tangled mass of innumerable people and cars.

We are left with uncontrolled congestion of our public spaces, their deformation with respect to their original use, a serious problem of pollution (deriving from exhaust fumes, noise, visual perception), and a generalised move towards 'garagisation'.

6.3A suitable approach to modernity

We have to satisfy the eternal demand for social life and public spaces in our cities and towns (bearing in mind its changed dimension) with new and updated tools, on the scale of the critical mass required for new urban values.

The following formula has been put forward: 'Restore downtown areas and monumentalise the suburbs'. I wholeheartedly accept this formula as long as 'monumentalisation' also means including other alternative focal areas and public spaces; and as long as steps are taken to stimulate and plan (outside the main urban centres) alternative integration between small and medium-sized towns with the aim of creating new functional units capable of providing the urban effect for all the inhabitants.

In my opinion, this is the main approach to be followed in order to resolve our problems of urban environment, included those connected with environmental pollution which, to a great extent, is caused in the last analysis by poor territorial distribution of built-up areas.¹¹

¹ On the role of public spaces in assuring the quality of the urban life, see Gehl (1993).

² For some interesting considerations (but outside our angle of vision), see Warner Jr. (1978).

³ It is useless to say that we are continuing here to conceive centrality as that town-planning 'quid' which determines a critical threshold in the scale of urban services that produce the city effect (see what has already been said in Ch. 1 and more extensively will be said in Chs 5 and 6). Thus we do not mean 'centrality' as conceived in the regional analyses or in the theory of central places à la Christaller (1933) with the strand of extensive literature on regional sciences connected to it (for an up-to-date survey see, for example, Camagni [1992], in particular Ch. 4). Our opinion is that if this latter concept of centrality is assumed (which we will call approximately the 'descriptive-analytic' or 'positive' approach), the numerous critical objections which can be expressed are justified (and in fact in the literature they have been in part expressed: see for example, Bullinger [1986] and Boeventer and Hampe

[1988]) on the possibility of defining an 'optimal' centrality; whilst with the concept of centrality preferred by us (which we call 'policy-oriented' or - better still - 'planological'), the 'theoretical' formal objections desist, and strategic-design motives of maximum importance take over. We have already better explained this position in Ch. 1, paras 6, 7 and 8.

- ⁴ The concept of 'critical mass' would involve - on the theoretical plain - a vast examination and debate on the 'theory' of urban aggregations, which has always been a fertile ground for sophistry in regional and urban (neo-classical) economics. We are very careful about facing our subject from this angle, being satisfied with the observations that we inserted already in para. 6 in Ch. 1, on the relationship between the concept of centrality developed and sought by us, and that present in ordinary 'economic urban theory'. We are convinced, in fact, that this type of abstract analysis does not contribute anything on the operational plane, and luckily it stops at didactic and/or academic exercises. Nevertheless, for information and evaluation, we will indicate - among the very vast specialist literature of this type (for which the writings included in the manual by Mills [1987] can be a good survey) - that we have found a writing by Arnott (1979) and Ch. 5 ('Urban aggregates and city sizes') in the manual by Fujita (1989), two excellent scholastic readings concerning the theory of the 'urban dimension of equilibrium' and the 'optimal urban dimension'. For a general overview, reference can be made to an excellent and well-structured manual on 'Urban Economics' by R. Camagni (1992) which has been recalled several times.
- ⁵ We will return more extensively to this point in Ch. 5.
- ⁶ For a general discussion, although not conclusive, on urbanity, see Häussermann and Siebel (1992).
- ⁷ On this subject, see some other points of view in Murie (1994).
- ⁸ Further considerations in Sternlieb and Hughes (1975).
- ⁹ Further considerations in an interesting paper by Alpass and Agergaard (1978).
- ¹⁰ It is in this sense that the interesting proposals of modern architects must be adopted - but also carefully controlled - on the revitalisation of the old centralities. See, for example, the well known theses by Victor Gruen (1973). See also by the same author an older but very important text (1964) which anticipated many of the current questions on alternative centralities.
- ¹¹ On the problem of peripheries, an important critical literature has developed. See an old work by Carver (1965), and the well-known and discussed work by Jacobs (1977), Ravetz (1978) and Herington (1984).