

THE CULTURAL CHANGE IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

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1. The cultural dimension in the transformation of urban spaces: points for discussion

1) In recent decades urban landscapes have been modified in different ways by many factors, as well as by the movements of increasing masses of people between extremely diverse areas. New points of aggregation are creating new urban scenery and new symbols are emerging. These include power symbols and symbols of economic transactions, which often occupy spaces previously given over to housing or manufacturing industry. Town fabric of old and new buildings is now interrupted by voluminous temples of entertainment like: multi-screen cinemas or leisure complexes. Different types of housing are built according to the dynamics of the inhabitants. This happens both in cases where old areas are in decline or in revival, and, as well as, where suburbs are in decline or being developed.

In this paper I would like to discuss some of the consequences of the most recent economic and cultural transformations on urban structures regarding functional and spatial renovation and restoration. Conceptually, these consequences are making redundant the concepts and observations put forward in previous studies (Miani, 2001) and from the spatial point of view they are revealing a certain weakness of the current system.

This observation is based on the fact that web cities, which were expected to free the individual from spatial and distance constraints through IT and the globalisation of the economy, are showing signs of weakness.

The possibility of communication and remote control without physical connection between different parts of a town undoubtedly offers increasing flexibility and eliminates many organisational problems, but it inevitably gives rise to new complexities. It appears that although technology has on one hand simplified many daily functions and activities, on the other hand it has brought constraints which are often perceived as oppressive. Technology brings about contradictions in the use of urban areas, and these can be seen in the daily journeys from one part of town to another to work, for leisure and for services. Paradoxically, the post-modern town generates new lifestyles but also causes increasing urban congestion which hinders the enjoyment of the diverse activities and structures intended to guarantee better quality of life. Very often we are simply unable to reach them or we give up the idea of going there, aware that the costs would be higher than the benefits!

It is high time to think of a new urban dimension where humankind can really rediscover our technological supremacy and use and govern it with the aim of a higher quality of every day life. Contemporary urban landscape is now dotted with architectural and urban designs which have a plurality of meanings. The complexity of the culture is shown in the complexity of its manifestations, clearly visible in our recognisable urban landscape.

Towns today are changing increasingly rapidly, as is the way of perceiving, interpreting and planning them on the part of institutions and townspeople and citizens. The speed of cultural change is continuously affecting urban environment which is adapting to new requirements of the resident population and especially the towns users and visitors.

“Rituals” that distinguish urban and metropolitan lifestyles are in a continuous state of change. These rituals need different spaces and symbolism, many of these being difficult to identify and comprehend, as they are very subjective and dictated by ephemeral and constantly evolving models and homologations. So that places which for centuries were the focal points or symbols of a town are now subject to fashions and the effects of marketing, and sometimes become even less well recognised than the ‘non-places’, differently localised places which have new aesthetical and functional identities (Miani, 2004).

New structures and architectures are coming into being everywhere. Shopping centres, stadiums, exhibition halls, multi-screen cinemas, but also stations, airports or even motorway tollbooths are focal points of urban living nowadays. These are the new “symbolic capitals” of towns and are more heavily charged with collective significance. They constitute a genuinely different system of identification symbols, fragmented within the urban or historic space. They

are often located outside the town, and their characteristics and functions make many of them destined for rapid obsolescence and recycling or re-utilisation according to fashion and needs of a market that incessantly requires new stimuli and innovations.

A town by definition is a place of perennial change adapting to different requirements of society, and the continuous variation in forms and functions within a town is not new to our times. But while the symbolic town of the past lasted for hundreds of years, the new forms of land use, today's urban "symbols", are created, developed and overtaken in a much briefer cycle of time before they give over to other forms of expression of society and the economy.

The town square and old arcaded streets have been replaced by shopping centres and anonymous undifferentiated places. People think they can find human relationships in the frenetic noise of a supermarket rather than an old street in the city centre, which is more difficult to reach, has no parking space and no air conditioning (Miani, 2004).

Especially in towns with historical development, now that urban expansion has given way to requalification of the existing urban fabric, recent years have seen "consumption of urban landscape" in a society in continuous tension between two conflicting desires. There is the desire to retain unaltered the historic image of old centres with the institution of increasingly strict regulations on protecting monuments etc., but there is also the contradiction that giving space to different or more profitable uses of land or space leads to the transformation or even 'destruction' of many sites that are less rich in history, but equally important in the urban context.

2) In recent works attention was focused on culture as a new expression of a better educated, more careful society. Urban landscape, previously modified by economic growth and urban activities developed in a town was seen to be organised and influenced by increasing attention to factors such as the individual and his or her requirements linked to new lifestyles and the new economics (Miani, 2004).

Reality shows that this type of growth indeed constituted an important idea which transformed spaces, restructured entire urban areas and spread economic growth. But the idea is now being modified as new objectives are coming into view. The way in which cities are perceived, particularly the relationship between people and the urban landscape, has changed profoundly. The citizen feels increasingly a sense of not belonging to the town. Classical points of reference which provided the identity of the town are being lost. 'Going to town' used to imply going to the town centre, where a town today shows its universally recognised symbols: the network of streets, the wide prospects dating from the Renaissance, important buildings and churches. There was an "outside" and an "inside": the art and the heart of an urban organism, which could be identified in various geographical contexts and in various architectural components.

Nowadays it is no longer the town square, but rather exhibition centres; no longer the street market, but shopping centres, not to mention motorway junctions, which are increasingly the site of shopping centres and retail outlets. These are often dressed up as medieval villages, but behind this façade they hide warehouses full of goods produced for a low price market.

Town nowadays are lived chiefly through traffic signs. These signs show us which way to go now that our perception of north, south, east and west has been cancelled by the new ring-roads and bypasses, and link roads that have altered the outer urban areas. Numerous roundabouts are being built in towns and cities of all sizes, and are changing the prospects of streets and squares. They are taking away the relationship with space as it is lived and diminishing the capacity for orientation which was once typical of the historic European town and constituted a difference with an American town.

New measures to control urban traffic are changing the overall organisation of the town. In order to facilitate traffic and eliminate problems, new constraints are being introduced, without a priori analysis of their scope. In fact, the dilatation and outward spread of markets and communication networks means increasing movement of goods and people, which inevitably go into urban areas. Web city has not seen less movement but amplified movement, and there are always new flows.

Consequently we are rapidly losing a sense of place, especially of that place, the historic town, which has for us Europeans a strong significance and is charged with a sense of belonging and identification.

Towns now are recognised by the presence of obsolete objects; production machines which no longer produce and “living machines” which have lost value and function. Even the architecture of buildings is taking on new significance. Are they buildings for new symbols of change or new business?

The container does not always reflect what it contains; there is no immediately interpretable form-function relationship. There tends to be a search for a spectacular architectural design to give an image, rather than functionality. Often there is no close relationship between constructive aesthetics and the urban context of reference. A good example of this is F. Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, where the architect’s fame, his large-scale architecture and his oblique lines constituted an extraordinary idea to amaze the public and guarantee success. But we have to ask whether the effect of “Bilbaoism”, as a spread of spatial innovation, is always going to be valid everywhere.

Today’s town appears to be mainly a product to sell through aesthetic restyling and functional re-qualification. It promotes attraction and image able to produce economic effects of greater international competitiveness.

However, the exterior image of buildings spread by the media and the impact of publicity of “the town as product” are giving rise to rapid imitation which is often positive, in that town authorities are required to adapt to the market by promoting real time initiatives and speeding the decision-making process on urban changes. This happens particularly as a result of new urban regulations and private-public synergies which allow adequate levels of finance. But at the same time, if the transformations are not realised according to correct and clear objectives, they may have overall negative or counterproductive effects.

Let us examine urban re-qualification following the building of a new museum on disused industrial sites or similar. Articles and photographs in non-specialist magazines are increasingly drawing public attention. Examples are the San Francisco SMOMA, the Bilbao Guggenheim, in Rome the very recent MACRO museum with the ex Peroni brewery as its main building, and in the ex barracks of Montello the MAXXI, the national museum of the twenty-first century designed by the Iranian architect Zaha Hadid. This is due to open in 2005 but it is already being talked about. They attract public attention not only because of the artistic and cultural content of the buildings, but mainly because of the design of the building or the fame of the architect. I also feel because of the idea of the museum itself, a symbolic representation of space, a tourist destination, which makes the visitor feel part of a “cultural” group who visits museums mainly in order to be able to say “I have been there”!

But care needs to be taken, because the product is becoming standardized. The museum, although it still represents culture to a great extent, a typical place within the town, has become part of the “here today, gone tomorrow” type of culture, like big exhibitions or the other shows in towns and cities attended by thousands of visitors. Many probably retain very little from their visit once the excitement of it is over, except the desire to have another travel adventure in another destination publicised by the media.

At this moment in time, the positive effects of this type of intervention especially on places as tourist attractions and the consequent business opportunities, mean that there is a lot of talk about how to create new attractions for large tourist flows.

All towns, from large to small, want to have a “museum”. The economic benefits are clear. The museum in the small town of Rovereto, designed by Swiss architect M. Botta, was visited by 150.000 people in first six months after it was opened in December 2002. What can have made so many people want to go to Rovereto? There is some doubt that they were all interested in the inaugural exhibitions. The name of the architect and the marketing of the museum undoubtedly increased interest in this small town which was starting to be rather overlooked because of its geographical position, but whose history and potential makes it worthy of the attention it has received. A look at figures shows us that again in the first six months, takings in the ticket office were € 536.000 and in the bookshop were € 413.000. This shows us the cultural importance of the museum. The bookstore now has become so big that it has a separate entrance from the museum and can be visited without buying an entrance ticket

to the museum. So you could in fact buy a souvenir from the shop to show you had been there, without even going into the museum.

Even exhibitions are becoming “monsters” attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors in a short space of time, not only in big cities but in smaller towns too. A clear example was the exhibition of Impressionism in Treviso in 2003 which was seen by six hundred thousand people in just five months. This number put considerable strain on the building itself and gave food for thought to the Foundation which had organised it regarding future exhibitions.

We are in fact seeing an increasing desire to be present at events, and for all exhibitions, shows etc. to become events. An example of this is sporting events, which are linked not so much by sport, but by the requirement for a meeting place where the needs of society to get together can be met. Big competitions or championships, bringing together large numbers of heterogeneous spectators, are containers for a vast and diverse public, not only sports enthusiasts but anyone who wants to be present at a grand and unrepeatable event.

Another symbolic ritual, less obvious but more frequent, pushes urban society to meet up in other places; multi-screen cinemas, shopping centres, or the outlets mentioned above. Necessity has made even shopping into a social activity linked to a particular type of culture. Another sign of our times, fast becoming a ritual, are the entertainments and markets organised by local administrations on “Environment Sundays” when the town is closed to traffic. There is a fixed calendar of dates when town centres are closed to vehicles and shows and leisure activities take place in streets and squares. The population is involved in this, but they are living the town in an artificial manner. Street artists and entertainers have nothing to do with daily urban life, everyday activities and problems. These too are performance events which are regularly organised. They are a way of obtaining finances and of advertising local authority plans, but they give only a temporary illusion that the town belongs to its citizens, pedestrians or cyclists as they may be.

In this differentiated and heterogeneous framework, what cultural value can be derived from these events and all those increasingly common promotions? It can be significant to promote an event and boost an urban space, but only if this event is unique or extraordinary and very wide in scope. An event involves the consumption of time and space, and the movement of masses of people with implications for the quality of life of the resident population. Is it always worthwhile? Forgetting that a human being was made to live a day of twenty-four hours, and has to follow rhythms satisfying biological functions, and forgetting that these needs are also basic to the whole population can have grave consequences and lead to a society of displaced people. Unfortunately this is happening in modern life.

The Sunday morning bike ride and the various events, added to the rhythm of a tertiarised working economy, are all factors that make time meaningless and disallow real knowledge and a real sense of belonging in an urban context. The creation of a virtual space for exhibitions, mediated through TV, the creation of an unreal space for shopping, the loss of points of reference in space lead us to ask: Where am I confined? Can I identify with this place? Do I feel part of a cohesive urban society?

Answering these questions requires a careful anthropic reading of the area. Interpersonal relationships, the sense of community, remain, and must remain, the lynchpin of local geographical organisation. The media and web city should have brought us more well being. But in reality it has brought us a greater work load and greater urban complexity. And in spite of progress and available technology, it is still time that manages man. Movement is slowed or even prevented by a new area framework that is too complicated and too busy. The telematic town multiplies the opportunities for work and lengthens working hours at the expense of other daily activities.

3) Current debate concerns the problems of historic town centres at the crossroads between “museumification” and consequent migration of their inhabitants, and the retention of their current mixed functions. At the same time, suburban areas too are facing contradictions.

On one hand there are the “scrap heap” suburbs, built in the early years of post war expansion, with their burden of social problems and their poor quality building. On the other hand, wealthier residential areas where environmental and building factors guarantee a high quality of life are coming into being, along the lines of the invasion model of the Chicago

school in the 1930s. Suburban centralities and central suburbs are equally present in towns, giving rise to increasingly intense imbalances within towns and cities. The topographical centre runs the risk of becoming the economic, social, political and symbolic suburbs of the town, unless its main function is identified. The decision needs to be taken as to whether centres should become museum pieces or should remain residential or tertiary economic areas in contrast with the new shopping centres proliferating in the suburbs. An inversion of the centuries long process of urbanisation means that a certain conception of the town is now open to discussion. There is a need for new methods of understanding the phenomena at the centre of the fragmentation of the contemporary town. Neither is the process of urban renewal without problems. As a look at any town will show, few examples of urban renewal have actually improved the previous conditions. In most cases, shops or offices have been inserted into what were previously disused industrial areas, and together with pre-existing traffic flows the strong new flows practically paralyse the town. No-one is happy in this type of place. But there appear to be no strategic plans on the part of institutions which are not simply bids for grabbing funds or events. Fashions are followed, experiences are copied, but there is little attention to the context of the area. But paradoxically, sometimes when an area is renovated with particular attention to quality, the area is not sold.

Local identity, which used to be a natural result of sharing conditions and physical and other types of cohesion of firms and the area, is now becoming an artificial product. It now tends to be based on political action and the ability to offer collective goods regarding the quality of life, vocational training and services. The commercialisation of our urban areas, and their use for show, has to stop. We need to go back to the understated old-fashioned towns where the local area was important and where human relationships, rather than the ephemeral rites of consumerism, can take place.

We need to re-examine the traditional urban values and slow down our hectic communications. We need a town where real relationships are genuinely possible, not the illusory transient ones of today. This would require us to go back to the silence of the stone built city, and regain our identity there. But this solution is a long way in the future. The most listened to slogans are still radio and TV adverts for events like concerts, street music, "special shopping days" with shopping centres open 24 hours a day and masses of people moving around the town. These events generate excess flows of traffic, but the extent of upheaval, risk and precariousness of arrangements only becomes clear when unexpected problems occur at the same time. In Rome in summer 2003, a national power cut took place during the dark hours of a "24 hour shopping day", and the organisational limitations of such events were made very clear.

It could be that in this media and globalised society a real sense of cultural identity could be found by reflecting more on the real essence of human society, the meaning of living together, the meaning of being a citizen. There will always have to be a compromise in the perennial struggle between historical and local identity and new energies for renewal and transformation. This compromise is not so much political or economic, but rather in the field of opportunities and options which have to be chosen in the light of thorough and aware knowledge of a place. This is the challenge for geography today: new energy must be given to the problem taking account of the validity of traditional research methods as well as the search for cultural innovation.

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