

## **Transformation process and spirit of the place**

*Historic ambits*

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**Abstract.** The transformation processes of the natural and built environment represent a threat for the Spirit of Place, which cannot be obtained by artificially reproducing architectures and spaces.

The Spirit of Place, linked to intangible values of a territory, is built up and consolidated through the stratification of uses and meanings that are deposited in places according to the evolution of the community's ways of living. Although intangible factors mainly affect the morphology of architectures and urban spaces, the Spirit of Place is, in a certain sense, independent of the physical support, because it exist also after that support has disappeared. The contribution suggests a reflection on those themes by joining tangible and intangible components and later analysing the aspects of the transformation processes which threaten the Spirit itself.

### **Identities and spirit of the place**

In describing a community we often refer to its peculiarities or elements considered as characteristic and defined as identities, which are given a semantic value. The identity can refer both to tangible or intangible elements and is shaped according to what men have been shaping in the course of time, more or less consciously. It has not an intrinsic value and needs a community or some people that perceive it as a basic character allowing the identification. The identities are built and consolidated by stratification of uses and meanings, which settle in the places according to the evolution of the community's ways of living and cannot be artificially created by simply reproducing

buildings, spaces or man-made elements. Therefore, in its evolution, the identity requires an active behaviour of the social component. It is not by chance that people's feeling of belonging to a context is shown through its culture, activities and traditions as well as building typologies, colours and materials used.

While identity expresses characters being not necessarily linked to a place, we talk about spirit of the place and *genius loci* referring properly to the place/identity interaction. The concept of spirit of the place is just based on the anthropological meaning of the word "place", used to define all the spaces with the prerogative of having got an identity, and being relational and historic (Augé, 2005). As Norberg-Schultz<sup>1</sup> wrote, a place is a total qualitative phenomenon that cannot be reduced to none of its single characteristics. We could say that the spirit of the place contains and helps read and interpret the "memory" of a territory, its environmental knowledge, growth rules and system of relationships and governance.

The fast processes of de-territorialization are producing radical and deep transformations in the habitat and changing the way of conceiving the relationship with the place. They undoubtedly increase dyscrasia and slit as regards the identity, due also to different rhythms of sedimentation and lack of the long settling, required for defining the "spirit of the place". It is just as regards this fact that often at present, the neologism of "non places"<sup>2</sup> is used to indicate all those spaces built for a specific purpose (usually transportation, transit, trade, free time, entertainment, and so on), but not only, characterized by absolute precariousness, temporariness, transit and passage, and a lonely individualism. The territories of the sprawling city, clear expression of the fast alternation of destinations of use and changes in the life styles and space fruition, become more and more "non spaces" because they lack identity unlike the consolidated contexts.

If we can affirm that intangible factors affect the morphology of spaces architecture, it is also true that the "spirit of the place" is not affected by the physical support. An example is given by the present places of mystification, which try to reproduce, through new buildings, relationships and appearance of historic cities with trade scopes (*shopping mall*) or luxury residential ones (*gated city*). The

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<sup>1</sup> Norberg-Schultz C. (1979), *Genius loci*, Electa., Milano, p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Augé M. (2005), *Non luoghi. Introduzione a un'antropologia della surmodernità*, Elèuthera, Milano.

produced places are different from the original ones mainly for the lack of identity and *genius loci*.

The deep meaning of the identity of a place does not consist in the repetition of something that has existed, but in the continuous invention and creation of what can be carried on in evolutionary way, according to the new needs and expectancies that address to the future. (Mannelli, 2003). As Norberg-Schultz assessed, the structure of a place is not a fixed, everlasting condition: as a rule, places change and sometimes in a fast way too. This does not mean that the *genius loci* should necessarily radically change and/or get lost. Norberg-Schultz observed that the places preserve their identities for sometime and that any place should be capable of receiving *different* “contents”, obviously within bounds. A place being suitable for only one particular target would soon become useless.<sup>3</sup>

Surely the identities and the presence of a *genius loci* can represent important resources for a community and their recovery and exploitation can help reinforce communities and re-establish old links. The safeguard and exploitation of those resources, on the contrary, insofar as they depend on several factors, see continuous threats in just the same processes started for their use: the survival of the *genius loci* and its capability of resisting strong external stresses depends on the different contingent conditions, but also on the rooting will of communities.

### **Problems of historic urban ambits**

The safeguard of historic heritage has become more and more the central subject in the contemporary debate together with the widespread awareness that environmental quality and the conservation of landscape and collective cultural memories cannot be disregarded.

In a system characterized by its instability, also because of the fast processes of deterioration which threaten the exhaustible heritage of resources, it is clear that we should pay attention to the possible impacts of the transformation processes. If the elements promoting the cultural development can be different, certainly a bad management of

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<sup>3</sup> Norberg-Schultz C. (1979), *Genius loci*, Electa, Milano.

the several initiatives implemented at present can produce many types of threats.<sup>4</sup>

During the years the historical towns have been the crucial point of many policies and strategies of development. We have often considered them as important deposits from which unconditionally drawing off. In them, apart from their architectural heritage, there is much wealth linked to the history, economy, social organization, powers distribution, geography of the territory where they are placed and which they are indissolubly linked to. The notion of historical town does not simply refer to a physical context, but implicitly to several components and values, as well as to a range of intangible values.

Recognizing the existence of intangible values in historical towns produces two relevant effects. The first of which points out the qualitative characters that do not consist only in valuable buildings, but refer to identity values, sometimes shared not only at local level. I refer, for instance, to the identity character of Valparaiso, considered the emblem of city-port<sup>5</sup> or in other places of memory become by now heritage of the collective imagery, such as the historical centre of Urbino. The second effect, deriving from the clear recognition of the identity elements, can become a powerful tool to contrast the many risks threatening the heritage of historical centres: from *museification*, to *gentrification*, to the transformation into a thematic urban park (*dysneyfication*). The simple conservation and requalification of the physical structure of historic towns, without preserving the identity values, indeed, produces a fast change of population and destination of uses, leaving empty cases deprived of what was the spirit of the place. This does not mean that we should consider the identity values according to a pure logic of conservation, but stresses how they are to be built and consolidated by the uses stratification, in strict connection with the evolution of the communities' lifestyles. The rites, sacredness

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<sup>4</sup> An example could be given by the activities and processes that policies targeted to tourism development could start, monopolizing logics and interventions liable to produce negative effects on pre-existent contexts. A good reference about that can be given by the six "principles" stated in "The International Cultural Tourism Charter" (adopted by ICOMOS at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Mexico, October 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Motivation declaration of World Heritage good, n. 959, criterion iii, of Valparaiso, Chile: "...exceptional testimony to the early phase of globalisation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it became the leading merchant port on the sea routes of the Pacific coast of South America".

of ceremonies, spirituality and, contextually, the territoriality of the man-nature relationships have made, in the course of time, communities capable of perpetuating the species without destroying and offending what offered by nature and its products. The more or less recognizable signs left by the evolution of the man-nature relationships differentiate the places giving them uniqueness and specificity.

### **Conservation and transformation in historic towns**

The concept of historic town has been progressively enriched by new values. Apart from the different elements gradually introduced, as important and referential factors of the question, the evolution has led to a new approach to the “conservation”, which leaves space to interventions meeting the exigencies of transformation necessary for adapting the city to the new needs.

As consequence, according to that new meaning, the subject of conservation asks for reconsidering the historic town in relation to its territory, taking care that it:

- would have its peculiarities exploited in order to allow a good fruition;
- would increase its value according to a sustainable development;
- would play an active role in the context.

It is clear that the intervention on the historic town should not require action targeted to “restoration”, but an integral and multidisciplinary effort that, starting from a complete view of the reality under investigation, would give proper roles to those *nuclei* and foster useful integrations.

The transformation in the historic towns is always a controversial question. If, indeed, in theory the dynamic nature of those areas and the need for making transformations and interventions in the existing context are generally known, in practice the introduction of new buildings and architectures often produces contrasts and controversies. The implementation of guidelines to direct the planning and introduction of new buildings represent one of the most complex challenges that the subject of historic towns sets.

It is important to observe that the crucial question is linked to the definition of criteria and actions to implement, according not to a static view of conservation, but according to a process that, referring to what expressed in the art. 4 of the World Heritage Convention

(Paris, 1972), would attain the principles of sustainable development. The historic heritage layered in the course of the years issues from an evolution and as such should be tackled following the new needs and expectancies oriented to the future.

The capability of foreshowing the results looked for can be found in the definition of goals and actions allowing to hit the aim. If it consists in social welfare, i.e. the satisfaction of cultural requirements too, the goals should consider also qualitative characters and be targeted to a full aware and respectful use of resources.

### **Landscape and Territory**

What emerged after the adoption of the Landscape European Convention (Florence, 2000) by many Countries leads us to assess that landscapes result from the interaction of several tangible and intangible elements which characterize their aspect and value and as such become the expression of deep cultures and identities of the single territories, linked to the populations living inside them. Therefore, the concept of landscape contains both the analysis of the places and the configuration of the identities.

What changes when a space is considered as landscape instead of territory?

Territory is generally meant as the physical space on which economic, social, cultural and ecological processes interlace. The space layout characterizing it is the result of those processes. What clearly distinguishes the concept of landscape from that of territory is the importance given to the perceptive aspect: to the way in which the space layout is composed and perceived, to the different modulations in the harmonious arrangement of spaces, to the reading of forms and meanings.

Reading landscape leads to consider the forms and the way in which they compose an overall view, as well as to study the spaces and the relationships among the objects, with their symbols and meanings. The forms, both of natural and manmade elements, are the expression of the processes that affect or have affected the investigated element.

The analysis and reading of landscape describe an opposite route in comparison to the territorial analysis. The landscape study starts from the analysis of the physical lay-out in order to grasp the processes producing it, while territorial and urban planning studies

start from the analysis of the processes (demographic dynamics, employment levels, economic resources, political set-up) in order to assess the consequences on the spatial lay-out. Looking at the historic town leads to analyse the historic urban ambit as a specific type of “landscape” and helps stress a peculiar “life environment”, full of references to activities and traditional stylistic features that nowadays often risk being eliminated either by exogenous homologating processes that affect the communities, as well as by the will of encouraging economic processes aiming at promoting new development forms.

The study of forms, relationships among spaces, visual and perceptive balances, materials, colours and relation between particular and general represents a specific and consolidated investigation field of the landscape approach. It is from the analysis of the historic town as historic urban landscape that those formal, dimensional, material bonds can issue, which should be the guidelines for any intervention.

As in the previous phase - concerning needs identification, quantification of the necessary spaces and definition of strategies - the town planning analysis prevails over the landscape considerations, in the operating phase - regarding the intervention definition - the landscape considerations should prevail.

### **An integrated approach**

Starting from the assumption that landscape represents a key element to assure personal, social and economical wellbeing, pursuing the aim of landscape quality asks for a detailed definition of the characteristics that the dwellers wish for their life environment, after it has been identified and described in its overall characters. The communities play a crucial role as actors in the process of identity definition, but also as subjects which the project of development and re-qualification is targeted to. Identity and quality represent a strong binomial and two categories characterizing the process of diversification and cultural supply.

It is important to pay attention to the identity value and the never-ending collective processes of re-appropriation and building of meanings introduced by the actions of all the subjects connected with a territory, even in if not in a stable way. That fact asks for dynamically considering the endogenous, tangible and intangible, elements that link the history of a territory to that of the people living

in it. It is not the case of crystallizing the cultural “heritage” of the place, its identities, but to recognize them and, at least, to succeed in building landscapes.

If under the theoretic view there are no big problems, it should be underlined that the territory often shows characters that make very difficult to read local needs and identities. The possible presence of non stable users, but being more or less regularly present (like the tourist areas), can mostly affect the social dynamics and consequently the possible characterizing elements, changing the identification characters. It is a matter of fact that the heterogeneity of actors/users, on the one hand, increases and affect the socio-economic-productive system, on the other hand, influences the social dynamics which could produce transformations unrelated to those typical of them historical territory itself.

In the traditional process of Plan, knowledge should be given the right space, in order to define the characterizing elements for assessing the identity and performance characteristics, by referring to the single elements and to the system of relationships. Either if we talk about landscapes, or about historic towns in particular, we should admit that they express cultures and identities deeply rooted in the territory, and strictly related to the people living and working in them. Starting from a performance assessment of urban planning matrix, targeted to assess the needs and quantify the deficit, in order to work out overall strategies of future layout, we should refer to parameters capable of assessing the *structuring*, *symbolic* and *perceptive* capacity of the elements (apart from the assessment of the performance values), in view of determining the quality and vulnerability levels in relation to the restoration interventions, to regeneration actions and/or to the different forms of change management as well.

The problem should mainly be faced following two modalities: by assessing the single element/intervention according to its expressive, representative and performance value; by considering the element/intervention in relation to the context. It is clear that, according to context peculiarities, permeability and stability of its characters, the transformability can change, otherwise functionality and usability will be affected in a negative way.

A good quality of landscape implies an effective social organization, assures the individual and common welfare and ends be increasing the capacity of those places to attract investments, contributing to stimulate the territorial competitiveness.

The landscape management should be seen as an entity related to people's either economic and social needs or the natural and cultural processes issued during the years.

Starting from the above assumptions, we should stress the importance of defining policies and actions in relation to quality purposes according to the identity and performance characters.

In particular as regards some recently discusses interventions in historic ambits, the real problem cannot be simply traced back to the eventual opportunity of introducing new mega-architectures – since they are sensational elements in the existent skyline - , but in assessing the impact of the intervention under the environmental, social, economic, functional and least but not the last performance point of view.

Facing the problem of introducing new buildings in historic areas, as if the problem were exclusively to consider the impact of a prominent element on visual level, would be reductive and would lead to underestimate the externalities on functional and performance level. For a proper assessment of the transformation, under the quality view it would be better to previously individuate the elements characterizing the context in the course of time, in order to catch the different values in relation to its evolution, as well as to go on by reading the elements considered as characterizing, or the respective identification and performance characters.

So doing, we can assess, under the *structuring*, *symbolic* and *perceptive* point of view, the importance of the character which identifies the context and, under the *functional* and *usability* point of view, the importance of the performance characters. In details, it is a question of working out a matrix with parameters for assessing the elements/interventions. Only by doing so, it will be possible to assess the vulnerability of the reference context.

The plan/project should contribute to increase the value of identity allowing it to be known in ambit of higher scale. In this sense the policies and strategies to be implemented could follow different routes: from the one linked to morphological characters, to that connected with the places of community life and production.

In view of the safeguard and development of the identities, it would be necessary to foster the following actions:

- promotion of the territory
- safeguard of settled tangible and intangible heritage
- recovery and re-qualification of the characterizing elements

- preservation of specificities
- re-qualification of places under decay
- monitoring of communities and contexts
- making people aware of the resources value according to their specific attributes
- stimulate interactions and synergies
- promotion of professional and entrepreneurial persons capable of helping, through their activities, the safeguard and development of identities.

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