

The Art of Completing the City: From Recovery to Reuse?

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Abstract: The intervention on the city's heritage — building, urban, territorial — is an increasingly topic with which urban planning reflection and practice is measured and compared. What was once the building restoration of historic centers, today highlights a significance including interventions that involve the overall reorganization of an area or an urban part. So recovery has become a way of interpreting many aspects of the city and the territory: environmental recovery, recovery of the building heritage, recovery of disused areas, recovery of suburbs etc., with a proliferation of differently defined tools — from redevelopment to regeneration — that involve practices of intervention in the existing, up to the more or less temporary reuse of many urban and peri-urban spaces. Taking care of the existing — the landscape, the historical and consolidated city, the redevelopment of the recent territories of the suburbs and of the urban margins — often links to punctual interventions required by occasions, and implies an interpretative approach in the search for new spatial and organizational relations, to which attribute a more general sense: this approach calls for a new representation of the city and the territories, an idea of the city, and a strategy of intervention that cannot be attributed only to processes of densification and resilience. In this situation, it is not important searching for a sovereign order, but rather finding *more stable rules* of urban space, defining its constituent materials: a return to the art of completing the city.

Key words: scenarios, urban design, urban renewal

1. Urban Renewal as a Disciplinary Category

The need to understand the current situation of the city favors its multiple narratives and rhetoric. The reflection moves in search of definitions that struggle to stabilize because they are linked to phenomena still in progress. Whenever a phase of expansion of the cities ends, we take care of the existing and the attention of urban planning turns to urban renewal, redevelopment, regeneration, reuse.

The intervention on the existing heritage once concerned only the building recovery of historical centres; today the recovery — building, urban, territorial, landscape and environmental heritage — highlights a much wider meaning, a field of application

and practices extended compared to the original concept. Interventions on the *existing*, intended as an *object* to be cared for or to be brought back to new life, aim to re-configure, to re-signify a place and to attribute new functions and new forms to it; and therefore imply dealing with areas with different problems and characteristics, for context conditions, specific materials to work on, roles they can take on. All these aspects require peculiar approaches and, at the same time, an understanding of the condition of the city and the current territories as well as an idea of the city, and rules for the construction of the urban space and its components.

Urban renewal, in its various forms of recovery and redevelopment, calls into question motivations and tools linked to phenomena of declining of urban growth. The transition from a phase of expansion to a phase of transformation is not a neutral event, it does not involve only changing and replacing some terms. *Urban*

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renewal was born to face the reality of the American city of the 40s and 50s; it represented a tool for the modernization of cities carried out mainly through the replacement of entire districts; it was an instrument of urban planning. In Europe it has been present since the 1960s in various ways. The first *urban renewal* and *rénovation urbaine* policies of the 60s were aimed at the demolition and reconstruction of degraded central areas, with heavy technologies, aimed at building and establishing and expanding executive areas and residences for medium-high incomes¹. The *urban rehabilitation* and *réhabilitation* policies of the 70s were specific (punctual) and widespread housing policies — of a welfare nature —, aimed at keeping the inhabitants in place, by the use of soft technologies and the relationship between administrations, designers and inhabitants². The interventions of the 80s were oriented towards the redevelopment of recent suburbs, especially the public ones, with integrated policies — housing, social, employment, infrastructure — and interventions aimed at modifying spaces and functions of large parts of the city [1].

In Italy a different path has been followed in practice and different tools were adopted. Urban renewal took on specific forms with regard to objectives, locations, dimensions and types, because of the conditions of the building heritage (age, state, use, ownership), of social and economic transformations, of the times with which the need for urban renewal arose and of the particular structure of Italian cities. In particular, the typical urban structure of the Italian city with an ancient and stratified historical centre, often also an urban centre³,

was very different from the model of the European city where the city centre, the *inner city*, is represented by the 19th century city⁴. Because of the size of our historical centres and the delay in economic processes, in Italy the historic centre had for a long time fulfilled the functions of business centre; in European countries instead the 19th century city was affected by the construction of business centres. The Italian urban renewal of the 60s was carried out through punctual substitution interventions rather than through a real urban renewal: policies that stood alongside those of urban expansion as secondary. This difference from the European model of urban renewal also derived from an immature ability of the public-private relationship in these operations: a private individual not yet equipped for large and complex operations, a public that was still too bureaucratic and unable to imagine its own managerial and entrepreneurial role.

2. Once Upon a Time It Was Recovery

The recovery, as practice of urban planning to intervene in historical centres⁵, on existing fabrics and on stratified and historical urban parts, quickly crossed these boundaries. *Recovery* has expanded to include all interventions in areas suffering from physical and social degradation, interventions that involve the overall reorganization of an area: historic centers,

share of unauthorized buildings; peripheral industrial areas; lack of specific directional areas.

⁴ The model of the European city is characterized by historical centres greatly altered in order to be transformed, or abandoned historical centres that constitute the areas of greatest degradation (inner suburbs); the 19th century city, the true centre of the city, the inner city, very extensive, with complex, residential, productive, managerial functions, with a functionalistic and hierarchical structure; presence of suburb, low-density residential areas, with high typologies (public building) and low typologies (private building).

⁵ The *Centro Storico* becomes an explicit object of planning with Law no. 765/67, known as “Bridge Law”, and the subsequent Ministerial Decree no. 1444/68. The Bridge Law introduces the concept, giving it its own urban identity. Law no. 457/78, known as the “Ten-Year Plan”, establishes the “Recovery Plan” with which it was intended to direct the urban planning activity also towards the residential reuse of the historical centres after decades of continuous urban expansion and new buildings. In fact, at least 15% of public funds are assigned to the recovery.

¹ *Rénovation urbaine* in France, *urban renewal* in Great Britain, *flächensanierung* in Germany, *sanering e reconstructie* in the Netherlands.

² *Réhabilitation* in France, *urban rehabilitation* in Great Britain, *objektsanierung* in Germany, *rehabilitatie* in the Netherlands.

³ The typical urban structure of the Italian city roughly presents an historical, ancient, and stratified centre, mostly protected and safeguarded, often also an urban centre, which contains the privileged, directional and administrative functions; a consolidated 19th century expansion with purely residential and directional features; low-density residential areas built between the two wars; speculative post-World War II residential and high-density districts; public housing districts; a

portions of suburbs, ex-productive areas, disused or abandoned areas. Recovery has become synonymous with a wide-ranging operation on areas that require unitary and articulated intervention — with attention to functional, typological, morphological, even socio-economic aspects — which cannot be exhausted through simple intervention categories or the assignment of destinations use. In this way recovery assumed the meaning of a way of interpreting numerous aspects of the city and the territory with a proliferation of differently defined tools — from redevelopment to regeneration — that involve intervention practices on the existing, up to the more or less temporary reuse of many urban and peri-urban spaces.

But while discussion and dissemination broadened the meaning and the field of application, practice not always were able to grasp the diversity of situations; in addition, the narrowness of legislative references (regulatory apparatus), of tools and operating methods didn't always favour the experience and application of recovery as a widespread practice. The very theme of the protection of the historic center has been marked by long years of debates and proposals, very often disregarded and misunderstood, starting with the 1960 Gubbio Conference and the proposal of the *Charter of Cederna and Manieri Elia*⁶.

The attention paid to the recovery of the building heritage and especially to historical centres was not enough to take the opportunity to make recovery the central theme of housing and urban policy and an alternative to land consumption. It ended up implementing new building policies with public support (the expropriation of Law no. 10/77⁷, the

Ten-Year Plan for housing, although social conflict posed the question of housing and home as a social asset and although a crisis of over-production of housing, together with the stock of deteriorating housing especially in the historical centers, made people talk about a real *building waste* [2]. Even the Recovery Plan⁸ did not have the expected outcome: its use was very limited. The Recovery Plan was mostly used for building renovations concerning individual properties and only rarely included multiple buildings or entire blocks; it never became the urban planning tool capable of elaborating an overall recovery-reuse strategy [3, 4].

Recovery has also contributed, and continues to contribute, to the awareness of the limited nature of some essential goods — the territory is limited — and, at the same time, implies and demands more careful behaviors towards the goods we use: attitudes ranging from environmentalism to health, all aiming to establish a less consumerist relationship with goods and resources and to propose a reflection on models of development, progress, growth.

The recovery imposed a rethinking of the planning tools that need to be adapted to new practices, and of the objects of planning: the city and the territory, bringing the reflection not on the growth models — expansions — but on interventions and modalities concerning mainly the existing — built and not —, which has to be reorganized, redeveloped and enhanced⁹. The recovery of urban areas, the recovery of marginal areas, the recovery of urban voids and also the recovery of the peri-urban landscape, all express an instance of *renewing* our cities and our territories without resorting to models but recovering, in fact, fabrics, settlements, voids and disused areas, open

⁶ The *Gubbio Charter* is the final declaration agreed at the end of the National Convention for the Safeguarding and Restoration of Historic Centers (Gubbio, 17-18-19 September 1960) promoted by a group of architects, urban planners, jurists, scholars of restoration, and by the representatives of the municipalities of Ascoli Piceno, Bergamo, Erice, Ferrara, Genoa, Gubbio, Perugia, Venice. Opened the conference a report by Antonio Cederna and Mario Manieri Elia.

⁷ Law no. 10/1977 introduced the principle that the exercise of the right to build is subject to a building permit issued by the

municipal administration against payment of a fee, proportional to the value of the building.

⁸ See note no. 5.

⁹ The urban planning law of the Tuscany Region n. 5/95 *Norme per il governo del territorio* [Rules for the government of the territory] explicitly set the problem of sustainable development and natural and historical resources as elements with which to compare planning acts, and the recovery of existing settlements as a main guideline.

spaces and agricultural areas. The semantic expansion of recovery has led it to generate other names: from urban renewal to urban regeneration in a continuous search for evocative rather than relevant terms, specific names for the urban renewal policies that have followed.

3. The Many Names of Interventions in the Existing: Interpretations and Rhetorics

There are many efforts to understand the transformations and changes taking place (in society and in the territory) in order to propose indications for action. Transformations and changes that are not always easy to define and understand, transformations that have particular aspects and more general references [5, 6]. Every generalization, however, risks being homologating and simplifying a reality that is increasingly complex and that, in order to govern it, and even before understanding it, must be assumed in its complexity. The need to understand change and, at the same time, the difficulty of interpreting change and offering answers and proposing solutions, if not through certain aspects, can foster its narratives and rhetoric, first of all the *rhetoric of change* itself, and the many rhetoric that involve the city and territories: the rhetoric of the *sustainable city* and innovation or the rhetoric of the *smart city* or even the rhetoric of *cities* and *resilient territories*.

Even the many names that in recent decades have been given to urban intervention policies and in particular to interventions in the existing, from the historical city to the territories of the contemporaneity, highlight a continuous recourse to different names that act as a kind of rhetorics: “rhetoric as a tool to tell and make credible a better city inevitably develops in phases of change and seems indispensable when, in times of crisis and rapid changes, the guiding principles and traditional values fluctuate and, in any case, are no longer unanimously accepted. In such situations, moreover, the new appears and appears as if it were possible. What exists, in fact, is taken for granted and

needs no justification. Either it can be exalted or rejected but, in general, it is there, accepted and invisible. It is the new that needs consent” [7]. However, if understood (also) as the *art of discourse or communication*, “rhetoric is therefore not, as the Greeks well knew, only lies or exaggeration but also a compelling tale capable of motivating and pushing forward” [8]. Rhetorics are useful if they are ways to explore and investigate, to understand and promote a better quality of life and a wider access to the city, and not only to sell better cities and territories¹⁰.

The many names given to interventions in the existing appear as a search for intervention methods and strategies, experiments or even opportunities to be seized to recover, to redevelop to regenerate; and they show the awareness of the difficulty of acting in the existing, of its complexity. Confirms this complexity the asynchronous character of the changes, which involve society and physical space in different ways. For example, the fast ones of lifestyles and economic and social forms, and territories and subjects that respond differently and more slowly [9], or the many *slow territories* [10] — internal areas, small countries — which are not to be considered lagging behind the social and economic changes of the country but territories that express a kind of *resistance* to certain changes and propose others, of a more complex nature.

4. Contemporaneity Is the End of Classical Urban Planning

Corboz, drawing up a balance of town planning of the last century, identifies 4 phases in twentieth century town planning: *town planning next to the city or outside the city* — the garden city; *town planning against the city* — CIAM and rationalism; *town planning in the city* — against rationalism; *town planning of the urbanized territory in its entirety*, the

¹⁰ Amendola reveals all the possible drifts and interests hidden behind the rhetoric of the city, behind its narratives, behind its plans to be new and competitive cities, and how change is implemented especially to win the competition of other cities, for more profitable urban marketing [7].

perspective of tomorrow [11]. The first three definitions refer to somehow concluded historical processes, the fourth to those in perspective. What we said about slow territories should, or could, indicate a different perspective from a future represented by total urbanization, already proposed and desired by Cerdá with his *Teoría general de la urbanización* [12] which proposed: *Rurizad lo urbano y urbanizad lo rural* and in the epigraph reported the *Replete terram* of Genesis¹¹.

Contemporaneity is certainly the end of *classical urbanism* and *urbanism against the city*, the end of the models of the new or expanding city and the negation of the existing city. The end of classical urban planning produced hopes but also created a great void since “our theories analyze growth, not loss [for which] all planners bewail decline” [13].

For a long time urban renewal has been viewed with suspicion because it sanctioned the end of classical urban planning and the primacy of the plan. Without the plan it seems that the main vehicle for a rational idea of layout and operation doesn't exist anymore. Probably “for a long time there will not be an idea of a city, a defined image of a city” [14].

5. Thinking Back on How to Change the Existing City

Some research on the city and on the territories of modernity, in particular those on the settlement spread and urbanization processes, reveals that the ongoing transformations have eroded the image of the (modern) city: transformations in the morphology of the city and its nature appear so marked as to call into question the very concept of the city and the paradigms through which to analyze it. These kinds of statement certainly

have elements of truth even if these perspectives are recurrent in times of crisis, when the difficulty of defining the object calls its very existence into question. Mumford wondered whether “the most precious collective invention of civilization, the city, second only to language itself in the transmission of culture” [15] had reached a critical point: “The origins of the city are obscure, a large part of its past buried or effaced beyond recovery, and its further prospects are difficult to weigh” [16]. Some years later Françoise Choay claimed that we are in the *post-urban era* because the city is now an anachronistic object that belongs to the past: the city is a pre-industrial concept [17].

It is evident that there are two cities: one woven of spaces (the historical centres, the consolidated city) and the other composed of objects (the suburbs, the urbanized countryside) [18] and, therefore, that the city has lost some of its main characteristics: breakage or loss of relationship with the historical settlement system; mutation and mixing of the density of the built; lack of structure, form and urban design; poor quality of urban space; disappearance of public space as a communication and mediation space. In other words, the city no longer seems to express a general form, “a memorable and inclusive topology” [19] that allows us to read the meaning of things through their forms, and that the *culture of form* seems to have slowly cracked, altered, matted [20].

We have to face *great questions* and it seems “the time is ripe for a new representation of the city, also because the known and practiced interventions are inadequate if not irreparably obsolete and the emerging ones need a frame of meaning” [21]. The representation of the contemporary world in a spatially ordered form seems to fail; the idea of a compact city appears worn out and reality seems more like an *archipelago of patterns* without any possibility of reconstructing an urban form clearly distinguishable from the rural one. So the only conceivable scenarios in the medium and long term are possible by comparing

¹¹ Genesis 1:28 *Replete terram: benedixitque illis Deus et ait crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram et subicite eam et dominamini piscibus maris et volatilibus caeli et universis animantibus quae moventur super terram* [And God gave them his blessing and said to them “Be fertile and have increase, and make the earth full and be masters of it; be rulers over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing moving on the earth”].

“the idea of the city with a resilient horizon” [21]. All this can be shared, but can it be generalized? Is it the incontrovertible future, is it the destiny of our territories and cities despite their great diversity? Or is it the trajectory of certain urban realities, however extensive and important they may be? Are these categories that we may apply to slow territories, to small and medium centres, to the scattered heritage that we cannot assimilate to that of territories of diffusion?

6. Art of Completing the City and Bricolage

The project of the city is the outcome of several components: the *material to be worked* on consisting of the existing city, the *new material* or the invention of new urban materials, and *ideas of cities*, given by religion, treatises, utopias, theories.

Beyond what will be the future of the city — of the different cities, of the enlarged city, of the archipelago city, of the augmented city [22] — we have to operate within more or less dense tissues, therefore also rediscover the sense of town planning in the city, the awareness of town planning as the *art of building the city* [23], very often confused with the aim of beautifying the city, or the *art of rebuilding* the city. Some Grumbach’s considerations still remain valid: “I love cities with passion — the matrix of my culture — worked field of my drifts relentlessly. [...] An aristocratic city or a suburban village, towers and slatted buildings of the *grands ensembles* with the evil of living, I always board you full of urban proselytism, with my bag to plug the holes, recover the breaches, fill in the cracks and measureless geometries. Traveling the built lands, I have gained a sense of time, of the long duration that shapes the cities on themselves and I no longer despair of seeing the suburbs urbanize and the restricted sectors regain density. The city is built on itself. Always restarted, the redistribution of spaces ensures the establishment of a collective memory without which one would no longer breathe. [...] Fatality does not exist, the order of construction, blind to the recovery of all the

potential of objects that are ‘already there’, is not inevitable. Learning to see architecture as the art of completing cities is something that today is being developed with increasing confidence. [...] we must [sustain] a rhetoric of minor composition, a subtle knowledge made by the figures of addition, transformation, substitution, inversion. An urban bricolage in which geometry will finally find the place it should never have lost: that of indispensable knowledge for the articulation of contradictions and no longer the sovereign order dressed up with formal independence” [24].

The city has always reused the existing, has always triggered practices of reuse and re-appropriation of spaces, activating processes of re-signification, has always resorted to *bricolage* to build fruitful relationships, generate fertile synapses, produce new economies and accelerate innovations [22].

The art of completing the city shall be measured with the different faces of the city and the territory, not deriving from an a priori model but returning to the art of intervening in a specific place, starting from the materials present and the possible outcomes of their transformation and also with an idea of the city [25, 26]. And urban planning deals with the rules of urban space, the rules of the urban structure that organize the urban structure and its constituent materials: rules more stable than those of architecture, more subject to the whims of architects, fashions, media success [27].

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