An Introduction: Post-suburban Age and Sustainability

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Nowadays, we can talk about a unique urban context which consists of the town and the metropolitan area, considering the use of both time and space also in presence of an apparent dissimilarity of shape. The forms, assumed by the urban settlements outside dense towns, are often seen as a network forming an alienated habitat rather than as an opportunity to create a new urban model based on environmental quality as opposed to a traditional urban one.

The unregulated development of infrastructures offering the myth of spatial independence and the spreading standards of environmental expectations are based on similar wishes and behaviour in term of the use of space. A global non urban logic is thus continuously imposing itself, bringing with it a process that has been defined as conurbation.

The traditional dichotomy between the town and the outskirts seems to dissolve itself in the metropolitan conurbation since as it is based on the dynamics of post-suburbia structured in networks formed by knots, lines and additional settlements.

In these areas new public spaces leave the open spaces to the demands of increasing traffic use and move into buildings which are similar to mega containers where the new rites of a consumer society are performed and celebrated.

Some urban planners view this process positively and in defining this complex phenomenon, talk about a new emergent city characterized by the growth of semi-public enclosed spaces and the contraction of traditionally public ones. This tendency is accompanied, however, by an increasing demand for public use of large scenically and environmentally significant areas.

The urban expansion carried out through functional zoning and the extensive growth of buildings has greatly increased the urbanized territories and led to the growth of the motor-city. In the name of mobility's differentiation, of the fight against traffic congestion and pollution, as well as of the improving of accessibility and speed, great infrastructural projects have been carried out all over Europe concerning high speed railroad network, the development and renewal of ports and airports, the construction of new airports and so forth.

These projects have led to a change in the physical and functional structure of towns, to density intensification and functional diversification in the extra urban settlements as well as to the foundation of new towns. The consequences in the old city are often negative, with an increase in the abandonment of buildings and even of entire areas or the explosion of residents in order to consolidate just one or two hegemonic functions; in suburbia, on the other hand, the results are often positive, with more jobs and better infrastructures nearby the residential areas.

From an urban point of view, many of these projects are often limited by being studied from the perspective or a specialized approach.

The result of such an approach has been an increase in barriers, in urban as well as in

extra urban areas, the foundation of new suburbs nearby highway exit, of new villages around new railway stations, airports and harbour areas.

However, the size of investment and the complexity of the influences affecting the current and future quality of life in our cities create a need for planning instruments which can examine issues on different scales (national, regional, local, etc.) and evaluating the environmental impact of the new scenarios since the project phase.

Many people have welcomed these massive and sprawled developments as a way of affirming a new quality of life which is closer to nature and further away from the congested cities, ignoring the negative effects of these great projects on the environment, on traffic on the conurbation scale, on health and so on.

Other emphasise the problems of pollution and the un-sustainability of the present urban condition and see settlement sprawl as being largely responsible for this situation. These people support the idea of a return to the compact city as a condition sine qua non for a sustainable development.

Both attitudes have produced their own forms of ideological behaviour. The first is linked to a standardised form of modern architecture distributed in low density settlements, to the use of various different housing typologies, to the composition of fragmented areas located in green areas and to the promotion of individual transport mobility. The second is linked to a new classicism in architecture and urban design and promotes collective transport mobility and strong measures to limit car traffic. Both models are being applied in current planning, but mostly the first one, because it better suits the political interests of local administrations to satisfy locally scattered demands.

I think what we need to do is to develop a model that is capable of satisfying both life styles and is physically structured in such a way as to achieve development that is coherent in terms of sustainable objectives.

In fact conurbation can no longer be considered as a closed system ruled by deterministic laws and by only one planning model, but it needs to be seen as an open one, which is characterized by the vagueness, diversity and dynamism of its frequently chaotic and contradictory elements.

Therefore planners need to create new dynamic equilibrium between compactness and sprawl, moving towards the promotion of diversity in different settlements without disregarding the environmental and sustainability objectives.

The car, for instance, represents a challenge which should not merely be dealt with by proclaiming the death of the car, but rather should lead to the creation of urban shapes that suit individual and collective transport modes as well as to reducing the use of the car for local displacement.

In order to achieve this objective we are working on the following major points:
· Developing mobility strategies which take into consideration different systems of transport on different scales;
· Establishing new disciplinary tools to design different but coherent urban and territorial contexts that include nature, infrastructures and built up areas;
· Providing policy makers and administrators with appropriate instruments of evaluating different options;
· Setting up a specific information system that can formulate and compose different scenarios thus making choices "visible" by means of multimedia technique capable of managing digitalized pictures, video animation and alpha-numerical data.