

The Ilses urban sociology approach

How to design a 20th century metropolis

LA APROXIMACIÓN DE LA SOCIOLOGÍA URBANA DE ILSES;
CÓMO DISEÑAR UNA METRÓPOLIS DEL SIGLO XX

Corina NICOSIA*

Fecha de recepción: 2014.04.20 • Fecha aceptación: 2014.06.05

KEYWORDS

Ilses, urban sociology, metropolis, city region, Sixties

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Introduction

According to some economists, Italian cities dissolved in more complex and larger urban systems that have not find a balanced status yet, because after the «territorial revolution» we are still waiting for the «institutional revolution» (Calafati, 2009).

This implies the redefinition of the institutional relationship between center and periphery and between State and local communities. This is an old topic: in 1948 Regions were included in the Italian Constitution, in order to mediate different scales of power, and mobilizes the urban planning and political debate even after the 1971, when Regions became actives. During these twenty years, Italy experienced the phenomenon of abnormal city growing, which in the past decades had affected the major international cities. A new ‘order’ was developing, a new territorial spatial configuration, whose origin was to be found in the transformation of individuals daily life and their relationship with the urban environment. The pressure of population increased density, but also generated a continuous flow of relationships.

In the absence of appropriate terms to describe the on-going change in the daily experience of territory, planners created new territorial images – megalopolis, metropolis, city regions, etc. – that described and could suggest new design scenarios, which fed and regenerated the reflection on the large scale

* Politecnico di Milano – Department of Architecture and Urban Studies DASTU
Via Bonardi 3, 20133, Milano - Italia. 0039 3393344404, corinnanicosia@gmail.com

planning (Viganò, 2010).

Planners and architects tried to define what could be the most appropriate size for territorial planning: they talked about city region, *comprensorio* (district) and metropolitan region, but these were ideological images that, although anticipating different scenarios, could not be translated into projects politically sharable because they were not able of mediating instances expressed by local realities with the demands of economic reorganization of territory (Bonora, 1984).

It is still a topical matter because of the spending review (2013) introduced ‘metropolitan cities’ in the Italian legal system. Urban planners and, in general, those who describe territorial dynamics had understood, since the Sixties, that the overturning of the concept of ‘territory’ made difficult identifying the territorial dimension of development policies. Using the word ‘territory’ we were used to refer to that portion of land chose by a community by defining boundaries and drawing up their own laws, but changing the daily experience of territory the spatial extension of the institution did not correspond to the spatial extension daily experienced by the community.

How can we represent these spaces? How can we manage their dynamics? These were the key issues for urban planners and nowadays these issues become again relevant. We can rewrite the starting question: how to design a 21st century metropolis?

Between the late Fifties and the early Sixties, the first experiments of center-left government were considered as a turning point: city was considered as the expression of the community identity, therefore they talked about urban planning as a way to resist private interests end to planning a well-balanced development based on the common good (Della Seta; Zanchini, 2013).

In this perspective, the Milan metropolitan region is a paradigmatic case: here there were first signs of metropolitan regionalism and for the first time politicians, technicians and intellectuals had to formulate a new territorial organization hypothesis in order to manage the new dynamics (Nicosia, “in press”). The Institute for Economics and Social Studies of Lombardy (IlseS) was founded (1960-1975) in order to provide the knowledge upon which was built the first scheme for the Milan inter-municipal plane, the famous ‘Turbina plan’ of the 1963. The pioneering researches in urban sociology carried out in America between the Twenties and Thirties, that tried to study structu-

res, processes and changes of metropolitan areas in an attempt to trace the new community identity, were the matrix for the Illes researches. The self-organization of society have been the driving force of development processes, understanding the characteristics of these mechanisms and setting a policies program on their potentialities can help territory to reach a new equilibrium. This is the Turbina plan starting hypothesis.

Metropolitan-ness

After the first industrialization was evident that when the capitalist process guides city development numerous contradictions emerge in the society structure. Studying and finding a solution for these social problems had inspired the birth of social research in England during the Nineteenth century. When the big American cities had to cope with a widespread social uneasiness these studies had become a necessity. In addition to the physical development of the cities, the massive phenomenon of rural exodus and immigration, from small town – also from overseas country – to the big industrial and commercial cities, increased the mass of poor people exacerbating the friction already normally present among different parts of a society (Crespi; Jedlowski; Rauty, 2002).

In this new urbanization process, that shortened the distances because of new transportation and communication methods, territory was like a set of organic units functionally related. The network that was established between these dependent communities allowed urban planner to talk about metropolis rather than cities (Hatt; Reiss 1951).

The University of Chicago Department of Sociology and Anthropology was the first that considered the metropolis as a laboratory for social research: the new urban organism was the result of the interaction of different parts of society, not as a neutral background but rather as the outcome of a specific social construction process (Crespi; Jedlowski; Rauty, 2002). In this sense, they tried to develop a new kind of research that aimed to identify the methods and characteristics of the aggregation of the different parts of society in space and time. Through interviews, field observations and collection of fragments of life they tried to reconstruct the complexity of social dynamics and how these affect the formation of a urban organism (Santambrogio, 2008). They gave space to issues rarely studied as the effects of transport on

the local settlement patterns, the functional specialization of urban spaces, the daily movements of the population, the effects of residential mobility, the structure of power into decision-making processes, etc. (Hatt; Reiss, 1951).

This objective approach to metropolisation process takes into account both the physical-spatial aspects of urban life and the interactions between individuals or groups in terms of systems of values and behaviours. Studying human behaviours becomes central because the way in which individuals and groups manage society and operate as regard their values and ideals – resulted from own culture experience and from daily urban life impulses – affects the form of the city (Firey, 1968). This perspective changes the way to understand urban land use planning because the urban land as well as being valued in economic terms takes on a social value: economic and social determinants interact continuously defining land specialization and slowly define territory identity (Chapin, 1965).

On the one hand, therefore, urban planning cannot be longer considered only a material operation on territory, but as a process of social change: it is no longer a linear sequence of actions, but a circular process where policies and the design of the plan are continually re-discussed. On the other, changes the way to understand the role of the planner in the design process: the circularity of the decision-making process puts forward new public and private actors and the planner is in the middle of this network of relationships, because he holds intellectual and institutional leadership that allows him to rationally direct this democratic decision-making mechanism (Chapin; Weiss, 1965).

Finding the metropolitan-ness in the Milan region

In a certain sense, we can compare the condition of the large American cities between the Twenties and Thirties with the situation of the Milan territory in the early Sixties. The urban community had considerably expanded its area of influence over the administrative boundaries causing the spread of facilities in the territory and, therefore, the progressive powdering of the previous ‘form’ of the city. It is no coincidence that Ilses researchers, who studied the social and planning problems related to the new urban dimension, took as a reference those American studies trying to track and understand the features of the new territory identity – the metropolitan-ness.

In this sense, one of the most interesting studies made by Ilses is a project

composed of several researches through which they wanted to measure the awareness of metropolitan-ness in the (social, economic and urban) structures of the Milan area. Initially they wanted to understand through what kind of criteria was possible defining the metropolitan area spatial extension: first they used some criteria developed by American institution as the Bureau of Census and the University of Berkley International Urban Research Center; secondly they tried to understand the level of interrelationship between principal city and other towns of the region by measuring the flow of telephone links, the intensity of public transport or by mapping commuting of people employed in the major companies.

Looking at the outcomes (Ilse, 1963) they talked about ‘relative decentralization’ (*decentramento relativo*): there were more people who, coming from outside of Milan area, settled in the outskirts compared to the number of people who moved from Milan to the outskirts. As a result, commuting flows were multidirectional – periphery-center and periphery-periphery. Contrary to the Americans studies outcomes, in the Milan case who moved to the outskirt was the lower middle class looking for a cheap rent. Ilse researchers defined this trend ‘*indifferenza territoriale*’: people choose to settle in a place according to the opportunity to find a home rather than to find a job.

In order to understand this new dynamics, Ilse organized a study about the immigration phenomena. They wanted to investigate the characteristics of migration movements (routes, social cost, etc.) and the impact on the settlement in terms of economic and urban effects (indispensable facilities, reaction to the invasion, etc.).

The studies reveal the presence of two kinds of forces: the difficulty of small communities to integrate into a complex organism; the great ability of this organism to continually change its economic, social and urban structures. The metropolitan area had to wear down the cultural and social resistances, that threatened the equilibrium of the whole system, in order to be considered as a social territorial unit.

Studying urban structures had different hint of meaning because, in an *indifferenza territoriale* scenario city did not grow on existing fabric so the social groups localization in the territory upset the natural evolution of the relationship among the forces that governed the development. On the one hand they had to investigate the relationship between urban structures evolution and the variations of the land (economic, social and urban) value, in order to

define if some planning operations were able to affect these variations. In this perspective, studying urban morphology they were able to point out the evolution of the urban form dynamics as a result booth of urban planning tools and of private and public operations.

During the first phases of the Milan region growing process, the economic land value and the accessibility to public transport were the main factors that affected people localization and these fell within the municipality's control. This municipality's power was drastically reduced when the intensive use of land increased population growth. This alteration in the localization process helped to highlight the discrepancy between the administrative structure of the territory and the reality of the metropolitan condition.

In the references used authors tried to cope with these problems quantifying the optimal size of a healthy urban organism, the Milan researchers instead looked at the question from a different point of view considering the 'functional efficiency' (*efficienza funzionale*) of an urban organism. Considering that territorial dynamics did no longer derive from physical and spatial factors, functional efficiency could be reach only assuring functional links and relationships among all the metropolis components.

The implied question was: what is the best form to manage the contemporary city growth? It is interesting a research about the role of agriculture in the metropolitan context: starting from a general question – would local production provide for the needs of a metropolitan center? – they tried to understand if was possible using the agricultural land as a planning tools to complete urban fabric – as the Grater London Plan showed – and, at the same time, to limit its growth.

How to design a 20th century metropolis

The first scheme for the Milan inter-municipal plane (Nicosia, 2013) was based on these outcomes and was very ambitious: one hundred and thirty-five municipalities composed the metropolitan area; the authors wanted to reconstruct the society common identity as the trigger factor of the designing process.

The 20th century metropolis, that authors and researchers were thinking, was a territory composed by remarkable places linked by dynamic flows of

relations. In this sense, re-drawing an orthogonal transportation network, whose privileged accesses points would have localized in the outskirt, meant developing the potential of the weakest parts of the territory. All the planning operations went that way: the authors blocked the operations planned for the center of the metropolitan region (Milan) and they diverted planning's efforts on minor centers; working on minor centers they could have strengthened local identity so these parts of the metropolitan territory could have activated flows of relations. The aim was normalizing urban values, in a broader meaning.

Talking about flows and relations and about remarkable places rather than zoning, also the design of the plan changed. The plan was no longer a prefiguration of a future spatial organization, but it should have indicated what kind of structures – in terms of infrastructure geometry and facilities localization – would have managed the development. Breaking away from famous designing examples, where infrastructure geometry and facilities localization were the skeleton on which urban fabric would have calcified, the scheme for the Milan metropolitan area released the form of the city from the form of the structure: only a few remarkable points of the network would have linked to the urban fabric, tanks to the localization of privileged accesses and community's facilities, while city would have grown looking for a more intimate relationship with the agricultural land. A modern community, that was dynamic and free, could no be forced in a rigid and predefined shape.

The shapes of this new formal relationship between empty and built space, between urban and rural, would have been planned by particular projects. On the contrary, the plan for the new territorial dimension would have indicated a 'procedure', a set of policies targeted by listening the society's requests and suggestions. Tanks to the '*piano processo*' the planner would have been able to control the equilibrium between the society values and the planning goals. Therefore, planning means represent the potentialities that territory expresses.

The planner had to understand these potentialities, through social research, resolving structures, changes and processes in it social elements – it is important to emphasize that the Kevin Lynch's researches were the principle references for the Ilse's work.

We can not say that this wide and ambitious program had real effects because the political compromise of the center-left government died between

1963 and 1964, therefore, the planning vision did not have the indispensable support. But we can say that some principles, some practices, some images and a new language slowly settled booth in the disciplinary debate and in the common *immaginario*.

The Ilses (and the Turbina plan) experience has the merit of shifting the focus from the center (Milan) to the whole metropolitan area, trying to suppose new kind of relationship in order to link all the elements of the region: the authors shared the idea of a metropolitan government big enough to ensure a balanced development process and small enough to preserve local identity. This idea, settled very slowly but, was able to cultivate participation practices that bring people nearer to planning process.

Moreover we can find this thematic stratification also in the most recent attempt to formulate new territorial images for this complex territory: the '*città di città*' image wants again to focus the attention on the different landscapes and models of development. Therefore, the plan becomes again a common and shareable platform composed by projects and policies inserted in specific territorial identity (Gabellini, 2011).

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