City ideologies in techno-urban imaginaries

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ABSTRACT

The idea of the city has been transformed over the past two decades under the drive of information technology and communications, creating a shift between the built city and communities that no longer seem so respecting the paradigm that for ages has seen them coincide in the same place. If the city -as a community - can today be so undocked from its physical structures, in parallel communication devices can generate new urban dimensions strongly influenced by technology. The paper intends to critically investigate how ICT contribute, beyond any rhetoric about hyper-technological innovation, in creating a new urban ideology (or post-urban) from the new forms of use and the imaginary that they bring to.

KEYWORDS

Urban and social space, digital media, urban imaginary, ideals in urban technologies

Introduction

A few years ago in preparing a paper for a seminar dedicated to the book of François Asher, Metapolis ou l'avenir de villes, 1 I first came across some types of digital representations of a map describing a practical use by groups of residents or even just temporary ones. With the belief that every map, as the saying dear to geographers, tells more than a thousand words, I began to wonder about the cultural significance of this new class of representations.

First of all, I think we can recognize them as a hybrid product that combines a top-down map, the result of a process of cartographic production consolidated, with the view of bottom-up data, the GPS track of a smartphone for example: so you can consider them as the crystallization space of the

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paper integrated by the temporal changeability of the local data; the typical representation of urban form is thus enriched by the diversity of its uses.

To understand these new representations I find convincing still today, the interpretative key proposed by Lefebvre, who described the experience of places such as negotiation between the ordering of urban space given "from above by those who govern, also by means of architects and planners, and the personal trajectories of the inhabitants, their stories, their memories, with the symbolic value coming from these.

However, I think that would be useful in this context also keep on the relationship between Lefebvre's thought and the Soja's one: in fact the structure of urban space in three distinct categories proposed by the geographer, can contribute to better focus the theme of this paper. The relationship between perceived space, mental space and lived space are at the heart of the volume.

Thirdspace : the first type consists mainly of real spatial forms, of objects that can be mapped, as result of human activity. It is essentially a physical space, produced by the society, measurable empirically and which can be perceived directly and therefore subject of descriptions. The perceived space is evident in the geographies of our life-worlds, ranging from emotional and behavioural 'bubbles', invisibly surround our bodies, to the complex spatial organization of social practices that shape our "areas of action" in the context of families, neighbourhoods, and then spread to cities, regions and nations.

The second space, the "conceived" one, is instead structured as mental or cognitive form (or, using the terms of Lefebvre, "imagined"). The space designed is expressed through systems of signs and symbols "intellectually processed", in the first place throughout the written and spoken word. For Lefebvre, space is dominant in every society and manifests itself by means of the representation of power and ideology.

Finally, the third category, or "lived space", consists of social practices and real space, the material world and the experiences of their realization. In this way, this overlaps with the physical space, making symbolic use of its objects, that is, tending to occur in systems of non-verbal symbols and signs.

For Lefebvre lived space was both physically and mentally distinct from space: instead, it embodies the real and imagined world of life experiences, emotions, events and policy choices. As Soja says, this space is "directly ex-

perienced," is the space of "inhabitants" and "users", containing all other spaces, both real and imaginary. Thus, Thirdspace is a way of thinking about space that draws on both the material and mental spaces of perceived and conceived ones, but extends well beyond their scope, substance and meaning. It is both real and imaginary, and more.

This broad concept of urban space seems to enable assign a "layer" also to digital media, including social practices as well as performing mere information functions. The question I ask is therefore, whether beyond pure instrumental effect, the tools of ICT do not imply, through their use, but also ideas, ways of thinking about the city.

What is the role of digital media?

There is no doubt that the urban imaginary in contemporary society, is conveyed also through digital media; by means of them in fact, true mental constructs of the city can also be manifested through visual effects.

In 1975 Jonathan Raban outlined an idea of Soft City for which living in cities is an art, so "we need the vocabulary of art, of style, to describe the peculiar relationship between man and material that exists in the continual creative play of urban living. The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture (1975, 10)".2

What did the digital revolution bring us of new or different in this qualitative way to look at the city, a way where an image can therefore be worth much, if not more, a statistic data?

-Why the urban imaginary?

As written by Jude Bloomfield on European Studies 26: "The argument for urban imaginaries is for the recognition of non-material, symbolic and psychological dimensions to the constitution of cities. Urban imaginaries focus on sensory and emotional experience and practices, on the imprint of collective memory on imagining how city could be, on the different, often conflicting, social constructions of the city's future." (p. 46) 3

In the same special issue of European Studies are also a reference to an essay by Silva for which if the urban imaginary, as social construction, affects the urban reality, it is also true that electronic communications have de-territorialized identity, thus risking to generate imaginary subjective, therefore more related to the life of the individual, rather than being tied to an objective place, to historical time or memory, and, ultimately, future-oriented, and not to the past.4

Another aspect is still taken up by Silva when affirms: "While the city concentrates multitudes of inhabitants within precise geographic limits, the urban comes from the outside in order to break the physical limits of the city and, in a certain way, to deterritorialize it. The urban, thus understood, corresponds to an imaginary effect that, above all, makes us citizens of the world". (Silva, 2003, 23)

Therefore, the electronic media have anything but minor role in setting up an imaginary city as a collective project in a pluralistic perspective on the future of the city.

In particular, we must reflect on ICT, or better to watch them critically investigating how the uses but also intangible and symbolic aspects related to them, can carry new visions of the city.

The first point to face is about the technological component in information and communication: the technology itself does not give rise to any displacement of sense, to any ideological vision, however their use is not at all be neutral from the point of view of the idea of the city that they can create. In this sense, it is important the point of view of François Asher when he states that: «Les techniques font rarement irruption dans une société. Elles ont une histoire. Ce sont des acteurs sociaux qui les sélectionnent, qui en choisissent les propriétés qui les intéressent, qui les mettent en oeuvre et qui pour ce faire mobilisent des savoirs, des savoir-faire ou des connaissances scientifiques particulières. Les techniques sont supports et expressions d'enjeux ; elles sont saisies et agies par des acteurs. »5

Social actors, communities, societies can then take and "address" the technological tools in relation to different political and cultural views. From this point of view, the debate is open: Martijn de Waal, in his recent book The City as Interface,6 points out that when thinking technologies we deal with first to their practical application.

No doubt they are the real solution to true problems or considered as such; so technologies allow making our lives easier or more pleasant and our cities "smart" or safe according to our desires or fears. Somehow we cannot escape their inevitable and magic power that helps make better urban society.

De Waal, in particular, helps us to focus on some key questions:

-What are the ideals contained in the urban technologies?

-What is the meaning of these new means of communication for the urban society?

-In general terms, the issue revolves around two scenarios: one foreshadowed by "the smart city" as opposed to "the social city".

In the vision of Bill Gates - reminds us of De Waal – smartphone personalize urban experience, appearing as a beautiful vision of the future. This vision, anyway, can be considered at the same time as a threat to society, why do not involve active participation in civic life, and may ultimately be a threat to democratic life. What philosophical ideals (ideologies) refer these two scenarios, in particular about the way that a city, as a community, it should work?

The City as Interface identifies three of them: the libertarian city, the republican city and the communitarian city; the first is based on an idea of the city as a market, where the inhabitants are consumers of different services; the cultural and political aspects of urban life fade into the background; many, but not all scenarios of smart cities, conform to this ideal.

The second is the ideal of republican city (from res-publica): the dweller is first and foremost a citizen and cannot withdraw from urban society.

The third instead is the ideal for city community, the place where it has to share a common identity; is based on a retro-nostalgic perspective that looks similar to a sense of community in the village.

These three ideals do not have clear boundaries: the organization, the use and the experience of urban public space can be seen as an indication of how a city can function as a community. Consequently, the way how digital media are involved in this process, also leads to the direction in which the urban communities develop.

Dematerialization of public space

Historically, the public space had been interpreted as a meeting place, a physical place for political debate. The typical example is the coffee in England during the seventeenth century, wrote Jürgen Habermas and Richard Sennett: the people you meet as citizens, to discuss matters of general interest.

In other kinds of urban spaces, such as the boulevards in Paris, described by Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, social worlds might look different: the emerging middle-high class could come across in the poor coming from slums. In the famous book "Life and Death of great cities" Jacobs however affirms that is the trust generated by occasional frequency in the neighborhood that leads to the public sphere.

In the examples just mentioned, the interaction between the inhabitants in each case leads to the creation of a public space. But today we experience that public space does not always require a physical place and that is in addition to these, public places are "virtual".

I return yet to another consideration of De Waal: to understand what is the public sphere in today's society, you have to look at the way the inhabitants live on multiple "stages" - from the Boulevard to Facebook - and the way in which this process can lead or not the development of a new social dimension.

It seems clear that the categories and terminology of the past doesn't help us to understand the problem: the urban public sphere, in the examples mentioned before, has been based on a simultaneous use of space. First, the function of the urban public sphere was to bring together spatially residents, creating a public space (temporary) characterized by people who do not know each other (public domain) or "kindred spirits", groups of users, groups of citizens (parochial domain).

In any case, what characterizes the use of digital and mobile media is that the public sphere is no longer the exclusive property of the physical spaces. When we use digital social media we take part in a public sphere that is in part "mediated" and partly physical. The question is whether the media are qualitatively changing the urban experience of physical space, which possibilities and promises they contain?

Focusing on urban ideals often implicit in digital media becomes neces-

sary for debating about the media can better serve the urban society. Connecting the ideas and ideals of urban to urban media discussion, it becomes evident that the process in which these technologies are designed, and then used, is open.

However, a critical point in this process is the way to look at digital media city: is not only important to look so to their intrinsic technological usefulness, that is, what they are, how can they improve a public service, for example, or invent new ones. It becomes equally important to consider the social and cultural values so that they can add to "make" city, to think, to interpret, and ultimately to live it. I return, to conclude, to the main issues that need attention in the future:

- The emergence of new media determines the removal of spatial overlap between the map and the territory, between social construction of dwelling and spatial-imagery perception of the same.

- The electronic multiplication of spaces, offering a plural dimension to the dialectic public / private partnerships, gives rise to the creation of hybrid and plural experiences of living related to spatiality that exceed the physical dimensions of urban living.

- Overcoming the objective dimension and topographic space opens up the possibility of the experience of living dislocative and plural, in part architectural and partly electronic-communicative-immaterial. [7]

Endnotes

[1] This text presents considerations derived from reading some texts dealing with, in a more or less central or lateral relationship between new technologies and the contemporary city, different ways to define this relationship, considering new urban (or techno-urban) landscapes. List of the main ones:

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