Crisis and change, What future for research and teaching in planning and architecture

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Crisis y cambio. Qué futuro para la investigación y la enseñanza en urbanismo y arquitectura

RESUMEN. Las palabras crisis y cambio pueden ser utilizados como palabras clave para describir la situación actual, tanto en Italia como en España. Serán utilizados para hablar de los problemas y perspectivas de la enseñanza y la investigación, especialmente en el campo del urbanismo y la arquitectura.
Algunos ejemplos de la relación entre los dos conceptos en la situación actual en nuestros países, y en los países europeos en general, se le dará y se discutirá su influencia en la enseñanza y la investigación

PALABRAS CLAVE: crisis, cambio, urbanismo, arquitectura, investigación, enseñanza

ABSTRACT. The words crisis and change can be used as key words to describe the current situation both in Italy and in Spain. They will be used to talk about the problems and prospects of teaching and research, especially in the field of urbanism and architecture.
Some examples of the relationship between the two concepts in the current situation in our countries, and in European countries in general, will be given and their influence on teaching and research will be discussed..

KEYWORDS: crisis, change, planning, architecture, research, teaching

Crises and change. What future for research and teaching in Planning and Architecture

Introduction

The words crisis and change can be used as keywords to describe the current situation both in Italy and in Spain. They will be used to talk about the problems and prospects of teaching and research, especially in the field of urbanism and architecture.

The economic crisis is having a very strong influence on the organisation and ways of living in our cities. The economic and social model on which they were built and developed in the second half of the 20th century had its roots in the welfare state established in Europe in the years after World War II, and this model influenced the paradigms that our disciplines were built on.

At the start of the new millennium, and increasingly in recent years, many things have deeply changed in that model, from the economic, social, cultural and political points of view. Crisis and change are questioning many of the paradigms that our disciplines are based on and ask for a new interpretation of the contemporary city and environment, and for a different definition of relevant scientific fields.

Some examples of the relationship between the two concepts – crisis and change – in the current situation in our countries, and in European countries in general, will be given, and their influence on research and education will be discussed, especially in the field of planning and with particular reference to Italy.

Changes come from afar: some examples

The crisis we are experiencing, with its economic and social consequences and changes in lifestyles, necessitates also changes in our discipline paradigms and in their reference values: changes that in fact come from afar, that we already knew they were developing, but that suddenly present

themselves as points of no return (Bianchetti, 2011) and ask for new analytical paradigms, new descriptions, new visions of the future.

The following are some examples of these developments and of how they impact on practice and research in the field of spatial planning and in part also architecture.

The 'fair city': what about public facilities

Historically, urban planning has developed a technical knowledge made of spatial visions and rules for the control of space-related political objectives. Cerdà's orthogonal grid expressed with clarity his political objectives: the goal was to build a more 'fair city', a suitable living environment for living, especially for those who need it most (Soria y Puig, 1999): the spatial control was functional to social and economic goals.

Urban planning history of the 20th century, though with many differences, moved along a similar track, especially after World War II: at the centre there was the public action, made of rules and direct interventions, based on the conviction that there were general goals to be identified and pursued on behalf of most of the population. Today goals such as Cerdà's, or the right to the city mentioned by Lefèvre in the 1960s (Lefèvre 1968), are more complex to pursue, and this i the technical knowhow.

For instance, epublic facilities for the majority of citizens has been a 'fair goal' for urbanism, pursued by means of planning rules – what in Italy is called *standard urbanistici*[1] – and public spaces design. This kind of technical answer encountered increasing difficulties in practice and has been subject over time to many criticisms. It is worth mentioning two of them. It is a concept which has a paradigmatic value associated with the model of an 'ideal liveable city', a city which should expand following a neat and organised plan. Today in the old European cities the problem is not expansion but transformation, reuse of existing built fabrics. But, most importantly in my opinion, it is a public response to standardised needs. Today both terms have changed: the public response is undermined by the economic crisis, while the needs can no longer be seen as standardised owing to the increasing fragmentation of the urban society. This undermines consolidated technical paradigms, requires a redefinition of the 'rights' to which urban planning and architecture must give answers, and calls into question the participatory processes.

Housing

A similar argument could be made looking at the housing problem and policy. For a long time housing has been a central issue either for welfare state policy and the defence of the individual and family well-being, or for the

processes of capitalistic accumulation and development. These approaches were differently implemented in different European countries with more marked attention for the first in the northern countries (higher percentage of public intervention) and a greater attention for the last, based on owned houses in the southern countries, including Italy and Spain (Allen et al, 2004). In the last thirty years these differences decreased under the dominance of so-called *neo-liberal housing policy* (Clapham, 2006; Governa & Saccomani, 2010). These different approaches have brought about different solutions, also from the point of view of housing neighbourhood design, but most of them show common and nearly homogeneous representations of housing needs: on the one hand, demand by working class and socially weak families to which public intervention had to answer, and on the other, an economically solvent demand which could find an answer in the private real estate market. It is a schematic common model of representing housing needs, even if the percentage of the two components is different, as already mentioned: the neoliberal policies have shifted the percentages, but not the model..

Today the situation has changed dramatically from the point of view of both supply and demand. Housing deprivation no longer concerns only traditional low income families but new population segments not previously affected by this problem (Tosi, 2006). New labour market flexibility, the diffusion of the risk of unemployment, the new family structure, the new immigration with related cultural and ethnic problems give rise to new forms of social fragility and poverty, which have strong repercussions for housing needs.

Such a highly fragmented society asks for new functional, architectural, economic and managerial solutions, that involve both analysis and design paradigms: a different spatial imagination, different modes of use, perhaps temporary use of existing spaces, different ways of involving social actors in the design process of these uses.

If we look at these things from the point of view of technical knowledge (technical planning), there is evidently a specific research question: rethinking the rules of the transformation of urban space.

Spatial dimension

From the physical point of view, cities historically have been characterised by the two parameters of density and compactness, and from the functional point of view by strong economic and social interactions. Today, these parameters are not longer sufficient to characterise contemporary large cities: the city has 'exploded', giving rise to the phenomenon called 'Cities of cities' (Nel-lo, 2001) or 'metropolitanisation' of the territory (Indovina, 2009).

These processes are not entirely new, if we reflect on the history of the studies developed during the 20th century about the evolution of the cities

and their surroundings.[2] In spite of this long history, in the period of great economic development which followed World War II – the *fordist* period in many European cities – these processes were interpreted especially in terms of centre-periphery relations, growth around the compact city, or welding of neighbouring conurbations: in terms of dispersion of the constituent characteristics of the city linked with the distance and with an accent on hierarchical dependence from the central city.

At the end of the 20th century what seems to have changed is not only the territorial dimension of the urban phenomenon but also its form: the city is fragmented, exploded, apparently dense but also less heterogeneous (Dematteis, 2011). In the past, the urban density and heterogeneity distinguished urban territories from non-urban ones, the city from the countryside. The description of the city today is particularly complex because it is increasingly difficult to identify and isolate the urban characteristics from the rest of the territory. In these territories the city no longer appears as an urbanised continuum. It is instead a sort of porous city, made up of built environments and open spaces; it offers large opportunities for the real estate market, larger than any actual demand, but at the same time it asks for very different infrastructures. In these territories there is a different interweaving of the production processes and lifestyles, the models of consumption and mobility are different, and the forms of living too. It is not only a question of a sprawling process, because it means new forms of relationships within an area whose borders are often missing, relationships no longer depending on the Christaller hierarchy, but emerging according to polycentric models.

In these metropolitan territories lifestyles are different and require different planning rules and government processes. Here the 'geographical city' no longer coincides with the institutional one: emerging forms of more or less spontaneous aggregation of territorial fragments emerge, there is a problem of relations between multi-level institutional structure and governance practices (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009).

What do these changes mean for research demand and teaching? At least new reflections and research in three different fields. First, new analytical paradigms are called into question, paradigms able to describe this fragmented reality. Second, it is necessary to develop a reflection about the new forms of institutions and governance able to govern such territories. Third a new description the relation between the new lifestyles and the physical forms of these urban fragments is required, in order to improve their urban design.

Sustainability

The fourth example is strictly connected to the previous three: the importance acquired by environmental issues.

Since the Bruntland Report (1987) sustainable development has become the target for any plan or design, including architectural and urban design. The theme is central to any European document. Sustainable development requires a balance between economic, social, and environmental dimensions; hence, there are many factors that determine the sustainability of urban choices. The theme is then defining declined in many ways: from energy saving in buildings, to changes in the mobility systems, to ways of organising urban space that allow greater equity as well as the involvement of citizens in decisions (Jabareen, 2006). The same issue of 'Smart Cities', which now reappears in many plans as well as research programmes, and which connects to most of fields related to architecture and planning, is part of the environmental issues.

Sustainable development requires more planning, more integration in decisions and in the same research programmes, even just to achieve those cost savings that today's technology would allow and that the situation demands.

However, my feeling is that while the issue has acquired centrality and has a large consensus, many times it is taken very superficially, a kind of flag, which interacts very little with the substance of the choices that affect the city and the territory.

The theme is also linked to the previous example: the change of the urban dimension and the process of metropolisation pose with force a purely environmental issue, that of a stop to the use of agricultural land for building: to stop soil consumption is now an unpostponable goal in unurbanised countries such as those in Europe. And this means again new analytical capabilities and new planning rules.

Crisis and change: what is their impact on research and teaching?

These are just four examples of the changes taking place; others might be made. However, all of them require new answers: political answers, answers coming from theoretical and applied research in many different fields, of which spatial planning and architecture are but two. But they require also new answers from teaching institutions in order to produce professionals with a new education background.

What about research?

In Italy (and in other European countries too, at least to my knowledge, research in the fields concerned with urbanism and architecture have been mainly developed within the universities, even if there are other research organisations operating mostly on sectoral themes.[3] Other public or semi-public research institutions are active especially at the regional level, supporting and advising regional governments.[4]

However, many of the most positive research experiences of the recent past on issues such as urban planning, urban regeneration, and design innovation have been carried out through close links between universities and public bodies (city administrations, provinces, regions). Many of the research projects that my department have been involved in were based on agreements with a third party, mostly public institutions. What makes them positive is the possibilities they offer for reflecting on concrete case studies – a sort of very fruitful theory-practice link.

This line of research is now almost at an end for the lack of resources by public institutions. European funds have become one of the few sources of funding for university research, since the Ministry of University and Research has also greatly cut funds. But to draw on EU funds is itself becoming more and more difficult, since to obtain them a local financial contribution is generally required.

What about University education?

The examples described above require education innovation both in content and teaching methodology, both in planning and in architecture. I summarise these requirements in the following few keywords:
- multidisciplinary. This is a typical feature of training in the field of urbanism and planning, which basically requires a multidisciplinary approach, even if today it is required in many training fields, certainly in architecture too. It is not a new requirement, but the changes I recalled give a new urgency and specificity to this kind of approach and to the necessary students' training in the ability to interact with different specialists, to understand their language, to manage their necessary integration by taking on the complexity of the resulting benefit;
- expansion in education fields. The changes mentioned above have greatly expanded the spectrum of disciplines with which nowadays it is necessary to be familiar. An example for all: sustainability issues. Both from the analytical and operational point of view, to achieve economic, social, environmental equity requires working on different scales and sectors of intervention (from bio-architecture – the single building – to a regional spatial organisation able to prevent environmental worsening). A single professional figure cannot cope with this task; a change to education curricula is required;
- a different relationship between general and specialised education. Actually, just the rapidity of changes, foremost the technological ones, seems to push education and training in two linked directions: it requires a self-training ability (what in European documents is referred to as 'long-life learning'), the basis of which is a generalist education, but at the same time it requires a thorough training in some fields; the task is how to co-ordinate these two directions in the education curricula;

- and last, but not least, the acquisition of a new ethical responsibility with priority over those 'common goods' represented by the city, the territory, and the environment.

Education in Planning and Architecture: the Italian situation

The Italian situation is quite different from the Spanish, but more similar to that of other European countries, especially the northern countries and France.

First, almost all courses in Italian universities have joined the Bologna process since the beginning of the new century; that is, they are organised in the following ways: a three years Bachelor-level course (BA) followed by a two years Master of a science-level course (MS); after these, a three years PhD course. There are also some one year courses in different fields, either after the BA or the MS (the so-called Masters courses). Second, the reorganisation of university education led also to the separation between courses in Architecture and courses in Planning.

The first feature is often the subject of criticism, the more common being that after three years the acquired skills do not fit the labour market demand. I must assert that, in spite of many difficulties, I am in favour of this organisation, especially in the field of Planning. I rely on my experience as co-ordinator of a BA and MS in Planning:[5] until two years ago nearly 20% of BA graduate students found work.[6] They, of course, are not 'complete planners', but they are 'technicians' with interdisciplinary skills that allow them to work with other specialists, performing different roles needed especially in public administration. Perhaps these intermediate roles are more difficult to be found in the field of construction and architecture.

The choice of different curricula for planners and architects relies, in my opinion, just on some of the requirements I mentioned before: that is a single curriculum is no more able to cope with the enlarged spectrum of the needed knowledge and with the co-ordination between basic and specialised training.

This reform was accompanied in 1998 by a reform of the legal professional association – *Ordine degli architetti, pianificatori, paessaggisti e conservatori* (Professional Association of Architects, Planners, Landscapers and Heritage Conservators) – to which you need to be associated if you want to practise as a professional in Italy. In the past, the only existing professional association was one for Architects; professional reform seems to cope with the university curricula reform, but actually the situation after more than 15 years is more complicated, as Planners are allowed to work within their specific abilities, like landscapers and heritage conservationists, while architects are also allowed to do the work of the others even if now they increasingly lack the necessary competencies.

Conclusions

The picture I gave you is not a glowing one. However, moments of crisis and change, despite the difficulties, are challenging moments. The reflections that may result from international comparisons, such as those emerging at this International Meeting of Architecture and Urbanism Research, can help to find new points of convergence and innovation both in disciplinary elaboration and in teaching practices.

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[1] *Standard urbanistici are fixed amounts of land that general and detailed plans have to identify for public facilities purposes and that must be acquired by the city administration. Something similar exists in Spanish legislation too (Càceres 2003).*

[2] *Geddes' concept of 'conurbation', the studies of the Chicago School in the 1930s about Chicago polycentric area, Mumford's 'regional city' in USA, and Gottman's Megalopolis, to name a few.*

[3] *Such as, for instance, CRESME (Center for Economic Research Social Market for Building and Land), a non-profit organisation with public and private partners, active since 1962, that carries out research in various fields with an interdisciplinary approach and, in particular, produces annual reports on the construction industry. Or Nomisma, founded in 1981, that carries out research activities on applied economic issues, industrial policy, regional planning, development and growth.*

[4] *For instance, Piedmont Regional government is supported by Ires, a public research institution, and by CSI, operating especially in the field of GIS.*

[5] *The title of both BA and MS courses is: Territorial, Urban, Landscape and Environmental Planning. The first was born in 2001-02 and the second in 2004-05.*

[6] *Now in Italy, owing to the economic crisis, unemployment is also hitting graduate people very strongly. One of the consequences is the strongly decreasing number of students that are currently enrolling at university, especially on courses in Planning and Architecture.*

Ponencia inaugural, V Jornadas Internationales sobre investigation en arquitectura y urbanismo, Las palmas, 23, 24, 25 octubre, 2013