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A Change is Needed. Urban Regeneration May Be the Answer

A Change is Needed. Urban Regeneration May be the Answer The limits to growth are clear from the '70s; nevertheless, a better definition and application of sustainable development is required. This is a global issue; however, it especially concerns urban areas. The challenge is to think against the tide, imagining the society of de-growth and using the concept of doing more and better with less. Resilience, flexibility and adaptability are key concepts in urban regeneration. Through the use of the Third Landscape, public spaces and urban agriculture it is possible to imagine a more sustainable approach to urban transformation.

Keywords: de-growth, regeneration, resilience, space in-between



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A radical change is needed, because we are near a “turning point”. The environment, the climate, the ecosystem, the cities themselves are asking human beings to change. This is not a choice: it is a requirement. The sooner we are able to answer this call, the greater will be the opportunity to succeed. *The limits to growth* of industry and economy are clear from the '70s (Meadows et al., 1972); nevertheless the regeneration of the environment and of the city has not yet found an application that is coherent with a sustainable development. This is a global issue, however, it especially concerns urban areas, where half of the world's total population now lives.

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Society and urban transformations are linked in a tightly knit relationship, but often mutual control and regulation of the transformation itself is not possible. Their timing is different but they influence each other continuously. Architects and researchers need to mediate between the actors of society and propose possible urban regeneration. Considering the complexity and fragmentation of contemporary cities, the achievement of this goal is a challenge. Studying and understanding urban resilience may help to bring about urban change.

1. A de-growth recipe for urban renaissance

A transformation that is not only physical, but also economical and social must take into account the concept of sustainability as an essential starting point and as a guideline (World

Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Given the ongoing rapid growth of urban settlement, the provocative concept of *de-growth* may be a useful strategy for urban regeneration. In the book *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine* Serge Latouche explains that it is possible to reach a “society of de-growth” through eight principles that can be applied to architecture and urban planning (Latouche, 2008). Latouche eight Rs are re-evaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, re-use and recycle. Attention is focus to the existing city and its hidden potential. The use of the prefix “re” does not suggest a radically new approach, but rather that a new direction is needed. At the same time the difficult translation of Latouche’s title gives an idea of how much the concept is in contrast with the current economic and capitalist globalization (Latouche, 2008). *De-growth* is a challenging term but it should not be considered as a step back, but as a step forward. It is not easy to accept this concept in contemporary society, where everything is done in order to have more. Lives are regulated by quantitative approaches, but qualitative aspects are increasingly entering people’s mindset.

The idea of *do[ing] more and better with less* (Gorz, 2009) strongly contrasts with capitalism, but at the same time it could lead the transformation to a better balance between human beings and nature (Latouche, 2008). The anthropocentric obsession should be replaced by a focus on the Earth and its ecosystems. The concepts of need and of wealth should be reconsidered in order to agree with a sustainable development. Understanding the context is fundamental to understand these ideas; it may seem obvious that in some parts of the world (generally identified as developing countries) the concepts of need and of wealth regard basic services such as healthcare, access to drinking water and food, education, provision of waste disposal, electricity and basic infrastructure. Therefore we must be careful with generalizations, even if we share a common future. On one hand global policy and governance are trying to set regulations and laws to guide the development; on the other

hand individual countries are doing their best to act between economical rules, political interests and the good intention for a more sustainable future.

This is not just a philosophical or theoretical problem. The transformations of cities and urban areas are recognizable around us; the problems within and outside their fragmented boundaries are evident or at least their consequences are clear. The solution is not so easy to find, probably because is not simple to respond to such a complex and fragmented space. Moreover, there may not be only one answer.

From this starting point, it may be possible to analyze the resilience of spaces inside cities and of the spaces between the cities. This may lead to an understanding of whether an alternative shift in growth is feasible.

2. The consumerist model versus regeneration: starting from the *space in between*

The consumerist model depends on the creation of more and more needs to be satisfied by more and more goods, therefore producing an increasing number of waste (Gorz, 2009). This applies also to cities: the population is rising, more buildings are erected, needs are becoming more sophisticated and disposable, mountains of rubbish are accumulated. Therefore it seems necessary to apply the “8 R” concept to the architectural and urban disciplines. The title of the *Turning point Conference* seems to refer to this, using new R words, such as Renaissance, Revelation and Resilience. In particular, Resilience, considered as the ability to resist to impact of economical, environmental and social changes, seems to answer today’s urban problems (Balletti, 2014).

Flexibility, adaptability, regeneration capabilities and the ability to recover can be considered essential to limit the expenditure of energy. As a consequence, it is better to use what we have in a more efficient way and to reorganize relationship between spaces and between people. Recycle is the key concept for

urban resilience to have build a better place to live in, to create new values for spaces that are often considered waste areas (Sommariva, 2014).

Gilles Clément (2005) defined the *Third Landscape* as the sum of uncertain, marginalized spaces without a specific function that are left behind rural and urban areas. These spaces have something important in common: they are a potential shelter for diversity. They aim to become something.

The application of this concept to architecture and urban planning can lead the regeneration to be more conscious and respectful. The third landscape approach should be considered together with the focus on *public spaces* and *urban agriculture*. This *space in between* can become the organizational structure for a new approach to urban regeneration. Working to build a solid social and ecological network through the project of an interrelated system of spaces can help urban transformation to become more sustainable. It can be used to rethink the potentiality of the urban open areas not only as meeting spaces (public spaces on the social point of view), but also as spaces for the production of food (urban agriculture). It is a way to maintain and use public spaces in different ways, adding qualities.

This approach can be bottom-up, but a broader plan is desirable to guarantee the efficiency of the individual projects. Therefore political guidelines should be introduced in order to help the sector identify projects that can be part of the bigger and more efficient network. The scale of the particular transformation is not important; it can start from local to become regional and beyond, but a coherent network must link all the renovation processes.

Urban regeneration can activate an alternative development toward this direction, starting from a new quality of existing or new public spaces. Recent projects are proposing urban agriculture as a new approach for designing resilient contemporary cities (Sommariva, 2014). These projects give an idea of a new attention to regeneration that could be considered a solution to fragmentation, so as

to connect the fragile ecosystems of contemporary cities.

3. Conclusions

The capability to comprehend the ability for resilience of existing cities has a key role in timing, in making the actors involved able to act efficiently. That is the reason why *the turning point* must be promoted by the academic literature as well as by practitioners working in the field. On one hand physical changes should evolve parallel to changes in society, on the other hand a different way of living is required to guarantee a sustainable development. Resilient spaces can be used to begin this urban re-generation, re-organizing and re-cycling waste spaces so that they become part of the new social and ecological city network. □

Sommario

È necessario un punto di svolta, un cambiamento radicale. I limiti dello sviluppo sono ormai chiari da decenni, ma la sostenibilità delle trasformazioni urbane necessita una definizione nuova. Il problema è certamente a scala globale, ma le città hanno un ruolo decisivo. La sfida della crescita urbana è pensare controcorrente, è immaginare la *società della decrescita*, attraverso il *fare di più con meno*. Il modello consumistico, con la creazione incrementale di rifiuti, rischia di condurci verso un sistema dall'imponenza ecologica insostenibile dal nostro pianeta. Attraverso l'utilizzo della resilienza, insieme con la flessibilità, l'adattabilità e la capacità di rigenerazione si possono limitare inutili dispendi di energia e ripensare così i cambiamenti urbani. Utilizzare il *Terzo paesaggio*, gli spazi di risulta considerati senza funzioni, può essere il primo passo verso una rigenerazione urbana compatibile con la città contemporanea di oggi e di domani.

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