



Genius Loci and Genius Saeculi: A Sustainable Way to Understand Contemporary Urban Dynamics

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Recent literature shows the limits of modern town-planning theory in front of the complexity of a new world which is the result of political and economic transformation: globalization, new forms of marginalization and exclusion, the advent of so-called “new economy”, the redefinition of the production base and labor market have built a different city structure, based on transactions and symbolic exchanges rather than processes of industrialization and modernization towards which modern city was oriented. At the same time complexity is also expressed by contemporary urban populations through upheavals taking place in the social context: intermittence of citizenship, to which cities are increasingly experienced and enjoyed by citizens of the world (tourists and/or visitors, temporarily present) and common citizens (suburban, metropolitan), the irregularity and flexibility of timetables, agendas and rhythms of the working population, social mobility, so that individuals have life trajectories and everyday practices less determined by their social origins compared with what happened in the past, the radical transformation of family structure, the growth of the elderly population, the rise of the education level, then the increased demand of culture, a strong social individualization.

The historic city that lives in the present time can be proposed as a sustainable model, able to collect and contain all instances of the contemporary world, to transform and express them through the continuity of architectural language inherited from the past. The historic city retains a character of great attractiveness and fascination, lived as a place suspended in a timeless universe, capable of representing the public membership recognition to *civitas*: *genius loci*, the spirit of place in the historical dimension of the city, is what survives to the ever changing functional structures and confers an indelible character to the city and the urban landscape, through different urban phenomena but part of a single and recognizable experience. *Civitas* of the historic city establishes feeling of his identity, his own *genius*, on collective themes that a common visitor can understand as a local version of representative buildings, recognizable in other world cities.

The contemporary dimension of historical city, namely *genius saeculi*, the spirit of time, requires a continuous updating of the collective themes, of public spaces, places of human relations, and contents that are assigned to the historical forms from people who lives and inhabit those places, and the inclusion of new meanings, new values, new forms of social life. In the contemporary city we are experiencing the onset of new public spaces, linked to the globalization phenomena: time-space acceleration, multi-dissolution of personal relationships, space of flows, new information systems and communications, experiences related not to sites but to images, way of quick, visual, not physical knowledge, loss of old solidarity forms and knowledge (family, community) and birth of new ones (distance and confidence), different and non-fixed scale social places.

Hence this is the challenge for the new Millennium: conciliating the spirit of place, *genius loci*, with the spirit of time, *genius saeculi*, retrieving history values through their preservation and combining them in the present time through a sustainable model.

KEY WORDS: Historic city, contemporary city, spirit of place, spirit of time, conservation, sustainability.