

GENIUS LOCI AND GENIUS SAECULI: A SUSTAINABLE WAY TO UNDERSTAND CONTEMPORARY URBAN DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

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 labour 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, so that cities are increasingly experienced and enjoyed by citizens of the world (tourists and/or visitors, temporarily present) and common citizens (suburban, provincial, metropolitan), the irregularity and flexibility of timetables, agendas and rhythms of working population, social mobility, so that individuals have life trajectories and everyday practices less determined by their social origins, compared to 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 its identity, its 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 globalization phenomena: time-space acceleration, multi-presence, dissolution of personal relationships, space of flows, new information and communication systems, 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.

PAST AND PRESENT OF LIVING CITIES

The city is the human settlement's place within territory, it is the transformation of natural landscape into built environment, according to certain morphology and urban arrangement, repeatable with different models and shapes, time after time in different territorial sides, subject to foundation and expansion, defined and edged by specific administrative codes.

The *historic city* is that built environment's portion which history passed us on as a legacy and heritage of the past, it is the consolidated face of our culture, result of a superimposition over centuries, it is the best expression of our cultural identity. «For a thousand years all over Europe - as Romano points out - citizens inside the

city formed a collective entity pictured as a real holistic subject, an organism endowed with an identity and will of its own, with a superior order in comparison to every single member and, while in other civilizations the city is essentially a geographical episode, only in the European context it refers mainly to morality, a holistic *civitas*». This means that in Europe individuals are socially established persons as components of cities. «*Civitas* bases its identity upon *collective themes* which appear to be a local vision of important buildings to visitors, recognizable in other world's cities, even if they actually have a different meaning, because they not only evoke a ritual behaviour but they show the *civitas* identity related to its citizens, comparing their material consistence with other European cities» (Romano, 1993). *Collective themes* inside the city - churches, walls, buildings, theatres, museums, public gardens - acquire their own autonomy as symbolic language's marks, valid as an instrument aimed to portray the urban beauty of a place. At the end of nineteenth century, far-seeing essays by Camillo Sitte (Sitte, 1889) and Charles Buls (Buls, 1893) expressed the widespread demand to keep aesthetics and urban composition into the design of the city, besides technical requests. The desire to build a beautiful town shows itself through the arrangement of *collectives themes*, they all related and compared into the urban mass: they are placed into the dense urban tissue not randomly, but following precise principles underlining the aesthetic purpose, ordered in authentic *sequences*, in a studied and pondered hierarchy. These *sequences* are possible in Europe due to their huge emotional impact because of thematic streets and squares built nearby *collective themes*, namely urban places able to mutually connect them through *sequences*, able to fix highly expressive objects with a place which elate its significance: these are main squares, market places, monastery squares, church squares, monumental squares and streets, the promenade and the boulevard, the tree-lined avenues. The historic city project is characterized by a deep connection between urban central *sequences* and distant, peripheral quarters so that the equality principle among citizens belonging to the *civitas* is clearly defined. The beauty of a city reflects this way the primary social purpose which is, as Romano explains, «the making of *urbs* intended as the appropriate *habitat* for the *civitas*, opened, dynamic, democratic and egalitarian». *Collective themes* and *thematic squares* or streets, each one with its own name and easily recognizable among others, represent a sort of catalogue to flip through in order to plan a beautiful city, a common list for every European city, slowly generated over the years and enriched gradually, generation after generation. The historic city retains a character of great attractiveness and fascination, yet topical and ready to answer to the present generation desires, lived as a place suspended in a timeless universe, capable of representing the public membership recognition to *civitas*: the *genius loci* (Norberg-Schulz, 1979), 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 urban phenomena, which are different in time and shapes but part however of a unique, recognizable experience. *Genius loci* is a Roman concept: according to an ancient belief, every "independent" being has his own *genius*, his guardian spirit. This spirit gives life to places and people, bringing them from the cradle to the grave, determining their character or essence¹.

The *modern city*, or rather the modern idea of the city, is founded on order, regularity, tidiness, equality and good government, aimed to the maximum wellbeing of singles and community, conforming to real people's needs. The modern world vision is based on valuable concepts and conjugated through paradigms of progress, universality of rights, work, factory, house, welfare state, family and freedom. Modern town planning turns to a society which has not yet completely expressed its needs, which hasn't voiced a request for services: urban planning counts services diffusion from neighbourhood to quarter to territorial scale, following a serial standard model, suitable for every place and contest. Inside the city it's possible to focus on four different functions: living, working, recreation and circulation². The city, through the creation of independent zones, is rationally planned and organized by specialized and functional parts - houses are pulled apart from production activities, from offices, commerce and leisure too -

¹ Regarding the interpretation of the concept of *genius loci*, see the opening address by Michael Petzet at the 16th General Assembly of ICOMOS, GENIUS LOCI - The Spirit of Monuments and Sites, Scientific Symposium, Quebec, 30 September 2008.

² So we read in IV CIAM proceedings in Athens (1933), "Constataions du IVeme Congres", chapter entitled "The present situation of cities and their needs".

connected and bound by a strong, hierarchical mobility system. People and things orderly moves in clearly defined and recognizable places, every citizen explores restricted and connoted sides of urban space (bourgeois or working quarters, industrial areas, trade centers, theatres, restaurants, shops along elegant downtown streets, canteens or outlying public facilities). The welfare state action is addressed toward social security (developing the pension system), public health, base level instruction, house policies, protection of working class in case of unenployment. These principles has been enacted with wide architectural and urban plans all over territorial expansion areas, outside the historic city, following methods and criterions quite common in several European cities. However this planning action turned out weak and incapable to transfer historical *genius loci* values, producing as a result debased peripheral quarters, from physical, social and environmental point of view. The problem concerning outskirts is due to the fact that they have been conceived and realized as something completely different from the rest of the city: in this direction, the English meaning for *sub-urb* and the French one, *ban-lieu*, remove the misunderstand the italian term *periferia* could represent, if merely intended in a geographical sense, namely a spatial dimension of living far away from the centre. The uncontrolled and unplanned growth of territorial settlements, according to the *sprawl* (Ingersoll, 2006) phenomenon intended in its double meaning of *diffuse city*³ and *urbanized countryside*⁴, has generated morphologically and architecturally homogeneous suburbs, mostly residential and inhabited by the same social or ethnic group, giving up that weave of public and private functions and activities that characterize the historic city. Modern city appears, therefore, as something much more different from the historic city, not qualified to answer to old and consolidated needs - the efficient, functional, productive, accessible city - but first of all unable to provide an answer to new questions, needs and wishes, either for consolidated services or for new ones - beautiful, usable, safe and sustainable city. Modernity's crisis in its ideals, instruments and representations, shows the powerlessness to define in its several aspects the present city and to edge it in a new post-modern or contemporary⁵ universe, which is investigated with inefficient and not precise knowledge.

The *contemporary city*, from the morphological point of view, is the place of discontinuity and diversity: it's recognizable the centre, intended as the historical one, the centre of *civitas* and *collective themes*, while the rest of the urban structure seems to be blurred, not clearly defined, deprived of reference points but mainly lacking in *collective themes*. Urban dimension has a policentric structure, resulting from political and economic transformations - globalisation, new forms of marginalisation and exclusion, the advent of so-called "new economy", the redefinition of the production base and labour market - in a wider and surely over municipal scale, in opposition with the monocentric one, pertaining to the historic city, so that geographic city doesn't overlap with the institutional city anymore. From the social point of view, contemporary city can be defined on transactions and symbolic exchanges rather than processes of industrialization and modernization towards which modern city was oriented. Elements at the base of this twisting are several: intermittence of citizenship, so that cities are increasingly experienced and enjoyed by citizens of the world (tourists and/or visitors, temporarily present) and by common citizens (suburban, provincial and metropolitan); the radical family structure transformation, so that the family-standard couple with sons, solid reference for economy and politics, is nowadays a minority; irregularity and flexibility of timetables, agendas and rhythms of the working population; social mobility, so that individuals have life trajectories and daily practises less determined by their social origin, compared to what happened in the past; the elevation of the education level together with increasing of cultural demand; the growth of elderly population and a strong social

³ Expression coined by Francesco Indovina in 1990 to describe the central area of Veneto Region (Italy), as a consequence of the occurrence of visible signs of urban sprawl and low density, in which the hierarchical relationship with the centre is very attenuated or even reversed.

⁴ Kind of urbanization linked to dispersive processes concerning residence and productive areas of Tuscany (Italy), which has a polycentric settlement character referred to a pre-district type.

⁵ The term *contemporary* refers to a system that is no longer modern, that doesn't possess anymore the structural characteristics on which it was formed. *Contemporary*, therefore, must be understood as synonymous of post-modern acceptance by J. F. Lyotard (1979) and C. Jencks (1977), as an expression of a real transition age.

individualization; the rise of poverty over the middle class, under economic pressure and almost in total absence of welfare policies, due to structural employment market modifications, origin of uncertainties and frailty for family systems. Besides, the more or less peaceful presence of contemporary minorities and majorities makes contemporary city a place of contradiction and conflicts: the relevant presence of immigrants inside consolidated communities, intended as citizens but *different*, less willing to exchange their own cultural identity with acceptance, according to Glazer's model of *melting pot* (Glazer and Moynihan, 1970) - which unifies diversity by virtue of powerful integration means - seems to generate new social forms and new examples of fruition for urban public spaces. In this sense, the theory which consider contemporary city as a *cosmopolis* (Sandercook, 1998) constellation is interesting. According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (AHD), *cosmopolis* stands for a «big city populated by people from different countries» (1992), namely by several structures which are expression of difference-based urban condition, intended as cultural difference. It's not surprising, therefore, someone proposed to change three main principles of modern cohabitation - freedom, equality and brotherhood - into freedom, diversity and tolerance.

SPACE VERSUS TIME

In the global era the conception of time and space has deeply changed: the world seems smaller and bigger than ever because everyone can easily reach any place or have information about it, the way of living and experiencing cities is influenced by images, reproduced and sold through the web, so that consumption of places is detached from a slow and physical knowledge, erasing affection and care. According to the model proposed by Francois Ascher (Ascher, 2000), cities are undergoing a complete metamorphosis, taking ever more on the character of *metapolis*: the transportation system and telecommunication software techniques, the so-called telematic *agora*, are the new social glue of a multitude of different individuals, replacing the square of ancient villages. Society of *metapolis* has a hypertext-based structure⁶, a network of social links which are established between individuals, so that society is organized and operates through series of multidimensional and interconnected networks that provide an increased mobility of people, goods, information, where individuals move between both in a real and virtual way into separate social worlds, several times a day.

The contemporary society is made up of multi-owned individuals who are able to belong to multiple different social fields: family, work, leisure, neighborhood, religious and socio-political organizations. However not all individuals, for various reasons but largely related to their personal history, have the same opportunities to build *n*-dimensional social spaces or to pass easily from one dimension to another. For someone, the stratification of network membership is completely flattened: inside *metapolis* they are not multi-owned, often inhabit large blocks of public housing, meet people from their district or neighborhood, so their business, family, local, religious areas are largely overlap each other. This means that the possibility of moving in a range of different field creates opportunities that are not accessible to everyone. To keep away and separate all differences there are not only social or geographic barriers: the global dimension of the contemporary city is characterized by a secular acceleration concerning capital, people and information movement, continuously expanding through geographical space, so that everyone can inhabit more than one place at the same time and can live experiences in a physical and not physical dimension, erasing memories of slow times of daily living. The contemporary city is, as Giddens argues (Giddens, 1990), *stretched* in space and time. An example is NYLON (New York - London), unified transnational space designed by academics and mainstream media: the annual flow of passengers on the London - New York air route, which currently is the busiest route in the world, is the expression of a set of economic, social and cultural interactions between the two urban centres, a vast urbanity which is the basis of a rebirth of the two cities, both developed after years of decline, hosting rich and heterogeneous immigrant populations that contributed to the vitality of their culture and economy (Burdett and Kanai, 2006). The experiment of a city as a result of two purely geographical

⁶ Hypertext is text displayed on a computer or other electronic device with references (hyperlinks) to other text that the reader can immediately access, usually by a mouse click or keypress sequence. Hypertext is the underlying concept defining the structure of the World Wide Web, making it an easy-to-use and flexible format to share information over the internet platform.

urban centres is not new: during 80's the mayors of Milano and Torino dreamed the meta-city called MITO, a continuous urban form within the same urbanized area, the vast megalopolis extending in northwest padana valley of Italy⁷. The proposal of Franco Purini at the Biennale of Architecture in Venice (2006), at the Italian pavilion, follows the same philosophy: he designed a new city, located between Verona and Mantova, near the intersection of railway European corridors Lisbon-Kiev and Berlin-Palermo, called VEMA. This is a total experiment, which explores every area of urban planning: VEMA summarizes and proposes, in a more complex structural key, embedded in European and global dynamics, the urban world of the padana valley, marked by a strong environmental and architectural uniformity, contradicted by specific, subtle differences and animated by powerful monumental presences (Purini, Marzot and Sacchi, 2006). VEMA aims to become, in its whole, an out-and-out think tank, a mental engine of society, through the application of the "three T's" theory by Richard Florida (Florida, 2002), namely talent, technology and tolerance: the first one clearly understood in the creative sense, the second one mainly in the computer science aspect, the third one in a social sense and, specifically, open to diversity.

The *contemporary city* has developed the ability to build its three-dimensional image through powerful spatial representations, searching for a new language and a new expression, which is closely dependent on technology, real urban high-impact utopias towards social, emotional and cultural imaginary, far away from everyday reality. Opportunities are offered by large voids left by the end of industrialization city processes, in large areas in different parts of central Europe, namely urban transformations through which rebalance the physical and functional structures of the existing city. Time, the fourth dimension in urban design projects, seems to be an elusive variable, flowing faster if technology that feeds it is high-speed and advanced, difficult to harness in a grid of predetermined factors, but capable of altering the physical enjoyment of urban places. Time, evolving through daily physical forms of the city, is linked to personal clocks of individuals - timetables, agendas, rhythms - and to modalities through which, during daytime and at night, the city offers itself to people, able to give services and to amaze at the same time. This duality in the contemporary world is strongly influenced by technological innovation that turns urban spaces into highly sophisticated and competitive places, in a global sense. But time is also intended as *genius saeculi*⁸, the spirit of time, the dominant spirit of our contemporary age, able to change the normal perception of things and of the whole world. The city, the place of humanity and society *par excellence*, is the truest physical representation of inner-time universe.

LOOKING FOR BEAUTY AND URBAN WELLBEING

In the contemporary city it is possible to identify four dimensions related to different ways to experience and enjoy urban places: real city, living city, imagined city, dreamed city. The living city does not necessarily coincide with the real city: everyone, in fact, daily lives, passes through, uses spaces and places inside the city, but everyone, in a unique way, composes each day his own city, defining the mesh of paths and connections, based on his place of residence, his working time and life, choosing entertainment and leisure places on his habits and needs. Everyone moves in an urban endless *continuum*, where public aspects, related to relationships, sharing, participation, social practices, mix up with private aspects, related to individuality, diversity, lifestyles. Everyone is inclined to build his own neighborhood, drawing in the real city a tailor-made city, a city *a la carte*. So the boundary between reality and image/imagery is increasingly blurred: dreams, fashion, myths, illusions, desires have become powerful factors in shaping the real city. No longer, therefore, a city of numbers, multitudes, actors,

⁷ The growth patterns of the last two decades, however, show that MITO does not really exist, although the two cities show the presence of forms of economic and functional interdependence and are supposed to be further influenced by the high-speed railway line under construction in this part of Europe.

⁸ Spirit of time, *Zeitgeist* in German, is an expression adopted in the eighteenth century philosophy which indicates the dominant cultural trend in a certain historical period. The term is found almost unchanged in a sentence of Mephistopheles in "Faust" by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (Was ihr den Geist der Zeiten heißt - *it has been the spirit of times*), but it is mainly known in the field of analytical philosophy of history, through Hegel thought and his lectures on the subject. The concept of *genius saeculi* is used in this paper referred to social and cultural practices related to a specific context.

entrepreneurs, interests, according to a Cartesian and overhead model. The urban planning culture today, more than ever, is committed to respond to a demand of beauty and attractiveness, both in its physical and morphological dimension, offering attractive models of transformation of places through huge, futuristic, powerful symbolic-architectures, self-expression of a specific language design and strong visual sign in the urban landscape. The mayors of many Italian and European cities establish a direct relationship with the renowned architects - so-called *archistars* (Lo Ricco and Micheli, 2003⁹) - in charge of performing major public works or spectacular infrastructures, because their implementation is considered exceptional and therefore it follows special procedures. Trade journals, but also mass divulgation magazines, tend to evaluate and enhance projects as such, its intrinsic value rather than its relationship with the existing built environment. The most significant evidence of new urban centrality are represented, as well as from established structures such as theaters, cinemas, museums, parks, also from new forms of entertainment shops - shopping centres that also offer recreational activities and games - or edutainment places - places of entertainment related to education - which require to come out the isolation and the puntual location in order to access the network, which is the city. The *cityscape* - physical landscape of the city - thus assumes new connotations, more ultramodern, technologically functional, projected towards the conquest of the coming future. At the same time public spaces needs to host new representations of leisure, entertainment, consumption, *flanerie*, in order to satisfy a wide dimension of pleasure, expression of freedom, all rights and all needs. The *mindscape* (Amendola, 1997) - symbolic and mental landscape of the city - materializing into physical forms within the city, becomes synonymous of a widespread urban wellbeing demand, intended both individual and collective coexistence, through wide forms of social security. Security has always been regarded as the essence of the city, already detectable in the fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1338-40) depicting the "Allegory of Good Government", considered the most faithful description of the Middle Age ideal city, the happy, beautiful and prosperous city. He puts an angel over the city, Securitas, who brings a scroll on which it is written: «...senza paura ognuom franco camini».

Contemporary public spaces, places of collective coexistence, are more and more linked to globalization phenomena: time-space acceleration, multi-presence, dissolution of personal relationships, space of flows, new information and communication systems, 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. They are scenarios of individuality, where the social dimension doesn't exist anymore, «the non-place urban realm» (Webber, 1964) as defined by Melvin Webber. Thus it is very clear and effective the distinction introduced by Marco Cenzatti and Margaret Crawford (Cenzatti and Crawford, 1993) of «quasi-public space» and «public quasi-space». The first ones, shopping malls, stations, airports and convention centers, are private places but open to public use, accessible to all people who have a credit card or can buy and spend money: they express a new form of social space, something between the domestic and public space, with a strong mechanism of inclusion and often, only formally, similar to squares. The second ones are sons of new communication networks, electronic mail, fax, modem, telephone, TV and have no relation between physical place and social experience: they create a new way of looking at the city, not a static organization of physical objects around one centre or more centres, but organization of networks, often invisible, able to multiply the possibilities of communication and interaction at a distance and to eliminate the need for a physical place. They represent new forms of place generated by the media and increasingly sophisticated technologies, which promote a home-culture service and contribute to the loss of all possibilities offered by interaction and conflict that generate social growth.

However, it is just in the public space, the physical place of human relationship between individuals, that the contemporary city can try to define its identity, because it is the place where everyone can exercise the experience of autonomy and uniqueness and at the same time of community, local and global, diversity,

⁹ This interesting essay outlines details of a rising inexorable phenomenon, in the world of Architecture: the term "spettacolo" (show business) refers to the jet-set cool atmosphere and the copyright on the word "archistar" is an expression derived from the fusion between marketing and culture, as well as the transformation of identity into a commercial brand which are dominant elements in the contemporary economic society.

comparison, hybridization, knowledge, contamination, socialization made of speech, listening, game, rules, transgression, recognition. The place, therefore, where every individual *can be*, where freedom and democracy are put into practice, where values of humanity are exalted (Scandurra, 2003).

CONTEMPORARY HISTORIC CITY

Today half of the world's population lives in cities. The United Nation report "State of the World's Cities 2006/7" calculates that 75% of the planet in 2050 will live in cities, while just a century ago only 10% lived in urban areas. In the light of the urban scenery complexity emerging at the beginning of the millennium, it is clear how the contemporary city has to reinvent and improve itself, acting on the growing demand expressed by its inhabitants, trying to bridge the gap between «methods of thought and methods of feeling» (Giedion, 1948) occurred in the previous century, trying to achieve an intellectual, political and emotional unity of culture. Such intervention requires interrelation of micro with macro-social, of quality with quantity, through the use of different and cross-learning knowledge related to urban planning discipline, in order to reconcile physical city aspects to those related to the living city and the subject (intervention on the city) with the object (community).

But how to design places that can generate affectivity and satisfy forms of desire for collective life within a complex global society that tends to level differences, that denies forms of solidarity because it encourages isolation and loneliness? It is obvious that it's not possible to design places accessible to everyone, to all existing human diversity, because exclusions should be inevitable. The paradigm of contemporary urban theory is to reverse the classical concept of public space, intended as a place where people gather to discuss the facts of the city, according to an ideal of political life based on dialogue and reasoning, and consider urban place as a comparing space between *different* people with the same rights, inside which everyone feels free and safe having dealings with others. The project of *agora*, namely the place of public-private urban sociality, and *ecclesia*, namely the public-public place of political power, must be closely linked to the *oikos*, namely private place of home and family, because the public decision affects in some way the private life, and at the same time the private sphere does not guarantee socialization of individuals (Castoriadis, 1998). In addition to being regarded as the first aggregation element in the overall design of the city, the house must be systematized with all the functions of the city. In European urban culture, since the late twentieth century, life style and behaviour of the inhabitants depend very largely on the geographic location of their houses, which is no longer regarded as the place of permanent residence but as an extension of the city: houses must therefore be able to meet the same requirements of beauty, usability, attractiveness, safety that contemporary city has to satisfy, must be technologically equipped, through an efficient system of networks and of energy savings of consumption. This need is reflected in an increasingly housing disorder: the upper-class housing estates, gated communities, restored blocks in the historical centre inhabited by bourgeoisie, degraded (sometimes historical) central areas, suburban middle-class neighbourhoods, popular quarters without services, semi-central autonomous districts, dormitory slats, emergency houses in the extreme periphery, barracks. The unequal spatial distribution of residences not only draws a physical geography of the city but also a social geography which is projected into the material concreteness of the city.

It is necessary to look at the city and its *genius loci* through new eyes, «the question of whether you can see and think differently from the way you think and see, is essential to continue to look at and reflect» (Foucault, 1984). This means to start a real epistemological revolution, which aims to establish a new knowledge able to understand our inner-world, consisting of our thinking and our feeling, the *genius saeculi*, that guides us in reflecting these thought and feeling in the historical built environment. The parameter is no longer Man, with capital M, intended as in traditional normative and universalistic models of Humanism, but *people*, with the lowercase p and in a plural sense, which means different populations living together in the designed city, intended for what they really are and not for what they should be. The imperative is to design the city *with people in mind*, having people as datum-point, getting into the diverse humanity that constitutes the contemporary social world, in order to answer to the growing desire to live and enjoy the city, as an expression of that «right to the city» mentioned by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1968) forty years ago.

So the historic city could be the instrument of a new genesis, an order-setting element inside complexity because it can collect and contain all instances of the contemporary world in the consolidated urban grain. *Genius saeculi*, the spirit of time, requires an update of public spaces content and *collective themes*, which are read and assigned to the historical forms from people who live and inhabit those places, and the insertion of new meanings, new values, new forms of environmental exploitation. The historic city is able to translate this need and to express it through the continuity of architectural language, inherited from the past, and through identity values of community, according to a sustainable model that has already demonstrated its effectiveness through history, adapting itself and creating layer upon layer, century after century. It can act as a centrifugal force to which all peripheral appendages converge, in order to connect all public spaces into one network, defining a system of *sequences* from the urban centre to outdoor districts, activating regeneration and rehabilitation processes of degraded areas, defining new focuses, becoming a hierarchical and scalar principle. It is able to generate a spatial oneness, in which different parts interact through the interconnection of public spaces, updated and adapted to new forms of social life, forming an evolved narrative plot, turned to a new ethical, functional and aesthetical dimension. The historic city is able to awake the sense of belonging of the contemporary man to the world that he has built himself, which is the purest reflection of his social evolution. Because the world that history has consigned us is a long process result, bound to change again and again by introducing new variables, where the only constant is and has always been man. And it is only through a comprehensive and clear knowledge of the human real world that it is possible to return to work on the city and to identify the meaning and value of all things. «For a split second, between the loss of everything that I knew before and the purchase of all that I would have learned later, I was able to embrace in a single thought the world of things as they were and things as they could have been, and I realized that a unique system held everything» (Calvino, 1967).

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