BUILDING THE GLOBAL DEMOCRACY
FROM URBAN PLANNING POLICY TO POPULISM IN ARCHITECTURE

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Key words: democracy, populismus, architecture, globalisation.

Introduction
It is possible to claim that there is an analogy, in terms of management and programming, between the modality of execution in political contents and the formalities of the application of architectural models, or more precisely in the methods of carrying out such proposals. The choice and the management of planning strategies go along with the choice of political strategies. The changes occurring in the politics and democracy can be also found in urban planning politics and involve mainly the public space and the design for the related public buildings. The emptying of social content in most constitutional democracies, together with the spreading of populist “politics” are phenomena that emerge in the architecture of public buildings and in the way in which the architecture relates to the urban form of their surroundings. Deprived of their contents, (which are related to their functions), public spaces and public building become non-rulled yet “objectified” spaces targeted for a collective use. The first analysis, which comes out of my background, led me to look at urban planning in Europe, starting from Italy and keeping the focus on the politics of public spaces and on the ways in which their conception, design and relationship to the city, shape the collective social values, attitudes and demands. These cases provide some opportunities for a reflection about governance and planning, focussing on the relationship between Democracy and Architecture.

Urban planning for Democracy. The Italian case
The term “democracy” in urban planning is strictly connected to “participatory” planning, born in the United States at the end of the Sixties through urban social movements, with the intention of generating opportunities for everybody to participate in common activities. Although that stream of ideas and practices was also experienced in Italy during the movement of 1968, with even a few poorly organized results emerging, only since the 90’s are we seeing the creation of more detailed and accurate forms of participation, something which started in Latin America. By analogy if modern democracy was born and developed as a representative democracy, the policy of intervention on territory or the urban realm aims to represent and respond to the
immediate needs of the population, for instance the urban planning for the re-building of cities in the post-second world war era and some further interventions.

By the end of the 80’s the different political interventions followed the same procedures, using a large number of executive instruments as “urban planning tools”, in order to manage the physical and the social dynamics in a political and geographical context and to promote the development of related activities in the territory. The common core is to ensure and represent the social welfare:

- Post-war Reconstruction Planning
- Political and social planning for social welfare (INA Casa- Piano Aldisio)
- The PTC (Piano territoriale di coordinamento) planning for the territorial coordination, from the regional scale to the town-planning.
- The Master Plan (PRG) - seen as a first opportunity to participate.
- The “preservation plans” (PCP) - developed exceptionally to preserve the 8,000 minor historical centres in Italy.
- The Social-housing program (PEEP) - to promote social-housing and Infrastructural plans, to respond at the real needs of the population.

The Aldisio Plan (1948) (INA-CASA) was created to boost the national economy, improving construction work to absorb a higher number of annual work units and at the same time promote public intervention to help families in need.

Figure 1 Social Housing-Aldisio Plan 1948

Source: 2015 Associazione Culturale no profit Tuttofrattamaggiore-Napoli.Italia

The environmental emergency during the 70s and 80s made people react against high environmental impact designs (such as waste deposit, cellular and Radio antennas and nuclear plants in Montalto di Castro). Opposing interests created extremely conflicted situations because of the lack of any shared pact of responsibility.

In the early 90’s, participatory design began to become more structured, with defined targets and actions as well as methodologies and tools. The intent was to help designers and local administrations to manage and realize most public projects and to produce results to be shared.
Out of this came the figure of the “expert” who, often, without specific knowledge of design made him unable to connect between the decision-making organs and the citizens who could neither comprehend professional advice, the proposals nor prioritise the needs of the population.

The Italian governments, in a similar way, turned more often to groups of technicians “super partes”, operating on a “virtual” political–social program.

In that way the re-interpretation in the first PGR (Masterplan) of Rome (2001) predicted a need to realize public and private buildings based on a non-existent population growth, which was estimated to be around 3.5 million people for the year 2000.

(Actually the population growth in Italy is estimated about ca. 2.7 million inhabitants).

In that case the goal was not the welfare of the population but profit; political power had been replaced by economical power¹.

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¹ Ash Amin (2006), Collective culture and urban public space, text produced for the Project “Inclusive cities: challenges of urban diversity”
Social Architecture and the “globalized Architecture”

Social purpose in architecture: political and economical process of globalization

At the core of social architecture, there is the choice by politicians and decision-makers to design for the public welfare or even more for the welfare of the society, therefore promoting the growth of civic sense and responsibility that is at the core of the community’s participation and inclusion.

Cultural and spatial needs are the fundamentals of social architecture, which generates space and evolves from the place.

“Urbanists have long held the view that the physical and social dynamics of public space play a central role in the formation of publics and public culture. A city’s streets, parks, squares, and other shared spaces have been seen as symbols of collective well-being and possibility as an expression of achievement and aspiration by urban leaders and visionaries, sites of public encounter and formation of civic culture, and significant spaces of political deliberation and agonistic struggle. While urban commentators and practitioners have varied in their views on the precise detail of collective achievement across time and space, they have generally not questioned the assumption that a strong relationship exists between urban public space civic culture, and political formation”. ²

Social purpose in architecture goes through the intensification of the political and economical process of globalization while globalization and the new communication and information technologies give rise to ‘virtual communities’.

We can almost say that the European city was planned in the past as an anti-model to modernity: it promised density, multi-functionality and management of the historical and regional patrimony.

On the contrary, today the image of the traditional European city has been internationalized, globalized, acquiring its own autonomy: we cannot talk anymore about exporting the cultural tradition of a place but instead of the bi-dimensionality of cities which paradoxically, even discarding such content, represent the Manifesto of the global cultural evolution.

“Today, however, the sites of civic and political formation are plural and distributed. Civic practices – and public culture in general – are shaped in circuits of flow and association that are not reducible to the urban (e.g. books, magazines, television, music, national curricula, transnational associations), let alone to particular places of encounter within the city.

Similarly the sites of political formation have proliferated, to include the micro-politics of work, school, community and neighbourhood, and the workings of states, constitutions, assemblies, political parties and social movements. Urban public space has become one component, arguably of secondary importance, in a variegated field of civic and political formation. This would almost certainly be the view held in cultural and political studies, with the emphasis falling on the salience, respectively, of media, consumer and lifestyle cultures, and of representative, constitutional and corporate politics. The dynamics of gathering in, and passing through, streets,

²Ash Amin (2006), Collective culture and urban public space, text produced for the Project “Inclusive cities: challenges of urban diversity”
squares, parks, libraries, cultural and leisure centres, are more likely to be interpreted in terms of their impact on cultures of consumption, practices of negotiating the urban environment, and social response to anonymous others, than in terms of their centrality in shaping civic and political culture". 3

The contemporary city is a mix of multiple uses and practices, at place of forms of complex mobility, a place of accumulating various materials, a place of multiple identities, a space of minorities; dismissed spaces of production, "planned fenced spaces", commercial streets, directional centres, shopping centres, suburbs, islands of repetition. All those offer the potential for social communion if organised and managed properly.

The globalised city is everywhere and nowhere. It can be seen in California as well as in Potsdam or southern China. It is not a real place but a concept created around the key images of the post-modern urbanization, something that architects and urbanites have been working on for the last thirty years; now known as "new urbanism" or "traditional urban design.

The urban system is about balancing the global economical system with the defence of the historical identity of cities.

“(…) material and immaterial components of urban phenomena are one and the same. Show the image of any unnamed city and everyone will immediately recognise it as a city, despite the endless variations of urban forms and types. But there is another city that cannot be seen: observes Martinotti – it is strictly not visible: not through physical wavelengths at least.” This is the urban society or the sociological city which not only is no less real than the one visible through physical wavelengths, but at the same time is the maker and the “product” of the visible city, with which constitutes an inextricable unity”. 4

“For centuries the basis of the financial sustainability of the city was the wealth produced by its inhabitants. Residency or citizenship was the basis for taxation”. 5

Today the economics of cities rest increasingly on consumption outlays by mobile populations that do not have residence in the same areas where they work and consume.

One particularly interesting case is the development of a specific market for aesthetics and symbolic activities as an important part of the economy of places, especially urban places (ex. Bonn Bethovenhalle). Beautiful cultural objects are the symbolic testimony of the wealth of its citizens; the “new urbanism” commends a return to compact housing, public urban assets with mixed uses, “beautiful cities”, ideal cities planned following the projects of “urban renaissance”, like “La città della salute”.

The aspiration of urban practitioners has veered just to obtain the consensus of the social community, the applause of the common consensus that is the applause of the mass.

Analysing the link between democratic practices and the “physical” empty hole, “la Piazza”, which has been taken for granted for decades, this condition is going to be denied if the relationship between democracy and participation collapses.

This complex informal urban space (obviously not only the Piazza), allows- as Saskia Sassen...
observes space for informal productions. The production of political informality is also due to the lack of a new formal political answer to the new political transformation. Informal politicians are informal actors for the execution of the project they represent in the space of the city: they produce "informal space". Informal spaces are often, in the contemporary city, spaces for symbolic projection, in other words non-places as social places.

Figure 4. "The good Volcano" Shopping Mall in Napoli, Italy, Renzo Piano

Source: © Moreno Maggi

Democracy against Architecture: Case studies in Europe

If democracy is participation, participation seems to be the answer to controlling the masses by a power that increasing invades public activities; if urban planning (which can be considered a service for the social community), becomes a political tool, where architecture becomes the promotion of social politics and forgets the real needs of the community, then we can talk about democracy versus architecture.

I will analyse two forms of debate: the first one, the legitimate participation, initiated by social actors, the citizens, a formal procedure that gives them the opportunity to express consensus or dissent during the execution phases of a project and which implies active and public participation. The second directed participation, as appeals to the popular sovereignty of promoters, to reach a common agreement which can be transformed into public opinion.

In Italy, as well as in Europe, the constitutional democracy is attacked by a slow but ongoing process of emptying out of political contents and their transformation into surrogates.

Today more than participatory design we can talk about a manipulated attendance, because the attendee does not have enough information to take an active role. Such phenomena of manipulation of the consensus, as well as the more sophisticated forms of disinformation, are manifestations of populism.

A clear example of this discrepancy can be also found in the application of the methodology of Architectural Competitions and in their realizations.

In fact, the world of architecture - as Antonio Pietro Latini observes - never misses an opportunity to praise the skills of miraculous healing attributed to the competition of ideas, thanks to which one can in short legitimately decide – with all methods to investigate but without a conscious investigation - the future destiny of entire areas which have considerable size and impact on the territory. The final result, the choice of the winner, happens without rational or transparent analysis or even without attending to the objectives and the essential morphological and functional components of the project.

The “brand design” prevails also in architecture, which becomes at the same time a great marketing tool, an instrument to win competitions and a reason get more volume to build and to fill a big budget.

Vice versa, in addition to the budget, or rather to various types of participatory budgets, the most common forms of participatory democracy regard land management.

The common characteristic of these is that they are public and follow official procedures in which “ordinary” citizens, without having requested a specific title of legally protected interest, are asked by the institutions to intervene on the decision-making activities of the institutions themselves, through a determined methodology regulated by law. Those procedures extend the decision-making beyond the competent authorities, which will nevertheless remain owners of the final decision.

We can call it therefore a “democratization of legislation or administrative activities”, without, however, that the representative democracy would be superseded. That will be empowered by more legitimate, and possibly more effective, in meeting the needs of the community.

One can hardly speak of innovations in recent years; in a political climate of populism and lack of power for the main political parties, the economic crisis has resulted in a general contraction of public intervention and put severe financial constraints on local authorities who have been forced to give up following earlier ambitioned projects and to find other solutions for cooperation, like the intervention of private investors.

Public space does not encourage public - political life; however public space has the connotation of political place, better seen as politicized space.

“Innate to the process of forming a coherent image of community is the desire to avoid actual participation.”

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8 Umberto Allegretti, *Democrazia rappresentativa e democrazia partecipativa*, 2009
In other terms the new city needs a redefinition of public participated space. Cities now are also overfull of immaterial places in which the democracy of our times has to be renegotiated.

**Populist Architecture or Populism in Architecture?**

“Populism has been considered as a complex phenomenon, a syndrome, and more recently as an ideology. This contribution gives some methodological indications in order to analyse populism as a particular kind of ideology. It is based on the morphological approach. This approach permits to find the core of populism and a cluster of central and peripheral concepts. The most important principle of the morphological approach is the de-contestation. As Michael Freeden showed, the de-contestation concerns the competition of the meaning, given to the conceptual combination of the terms of the political sphere.”

In recent years some politicians have found necessary to screen the popular decision on whether or not to fund the construction of a particular building with direct public interest. The cases of some European cities (…) confirm the emergence of a short cut between architecture and democracy, which is expressed as architecture in service of populism or as ‘democratism’ inoculated in decision-making, aimed at the realization of potentially innovative architecture.

Populism is the phenomenon through which governors can pretend to have a direct and exclusive relationship with the people - today it would be more appropriate to say with the public opinion. They patronize people tickling the more hidden and mediocre aspirations, often according to the mechanism of so called mimetic wish, well described by R Girard. (A. Spadaro)

“Contemporary populism, defined phenomenon as very heterogeneous and ephemeres, is regarded as a syndrome, which manifests itself mainly in times of crisis large economic and institutional instability”.

Similarly in the policy of architecture and in its morphology, populism assumes a weak ideology with a strong core: the concept of popular sovereignty; an ideology very close to democracy, and to other non-democratic ideologies.

The central idea, based on the morphological analysis, is the "de-contestation" of political concepts, that is a procedure that allows the association of a clear meaning with a political term, but depriving it of its effectiveness.

The configurations of such a kind of visual concept create the conditions for political theory and practice. This form of thinking allows privileged access to the understanding of the origin and the nature of political power. We can define better, as a procedure, the "de-contestation", which refers to the emulation to the legitimate meanings in political parlance, as well as to the choice of combinations of concepts, which are applicable for the understanding of the political world. Even if it is reasonable, to the concept of ideology in the singular, to outline a precise concept thus, there are used the ideologies in their various manifestations, which are ultimately of vital importance.

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10 Lorella Cedroni, Die Morphologie des Populismus, Berlin 2011
11 id.
Innovation, Elite and Popular Legitimacy

The creation of the global democracy is based on collective instances such as the environment, life quality, primary resources access and the need for funcional urban infrastructure, all of which have become global.

It is not a matter of “globalizing” the procedures and habitats or mobilizing the citizens in order to get a plebiscitary answer on the organization of buildings and urban space; justifying or legitimating decisions already made is not necessary, especially if it involves specific competences such as urban planning.

Social, political and economical needs of the citizens can be elaborated by an organization based on real competences and capable of giving the best solutions.

Figure 5. Magdeburg, requalification of public space, competition

The global democracy is at participatory democracy, asking people their preferences, giving them prior specific information, in order to produce an adequate consensus.

The global democracy is a participatory democracy based on quality - not quantity as it is -, instead the eastern democracies are interested in the populist leeway, where the concept of global democracy has been replaced by the concept of “mass democracy”.

But what are the real and effective strategies to promote the vision of a journey towards the expansion of participatory – global-democracy?

First of all it is necessary to gradually apply its practices in the social urban context and similarly to the political one.

We should start by introducing them one after the other, considering the context of the subjects and the level of requirements. Similarly, we must introduce experimentation to acknowledge the signs of change from the current experience.
To assume this method of participative practices in Italian and European political and social life, might not produce immediate effects and a solution to the crisis of democracy, but it can eventually produce significant consequences and stimuli for innovations in individual institutions; a sort of "molecular effect" that will enable a more comprehensive change. "Participatory democracy does not determine the palingenetic effects that we would presume to obtain like from any "great reform", which would be often desired and, hopefully never realized.\(^\text{12}\) That would be like the architecture of great symbolic gestures, the architect of ideas and ideal planning, valid always and everywhere.

A participatory democracy will legitimately raise ethical and political virtues which can still be considered in our societies along the path of human civilization.

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