Open spaces, Walls and Housing.
The Aesthetics and Politics of Social Order

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Abstract

Whether public spaces play a role as catalysts for change in the sake of the common good this is very much depending on the quality of governance and society. In Italy, deep changes are affecting the design and use of open spaces in new housing developments within the central core of the city. Our contribution focuses on the city of Milan. In a phase of re-urbanization and of so called “urban renaissance”, the physical and symbolic features of the new open spaces being produced under the pressure of the real estate market are expressing new conditions and forms of social and spatial re-organization which seem to correspond to the expectations of suburban dreams within the city. Field research reveals that more and more, the design of urban transformation is using open space to organize separation and our interpretation is that the spatial character of urban change in Milan is endangering some fundamentals which made the European city renown as a place of emancipation and democracy. Trends in a new aesthetic of open green spaces will be discussed as an exemplary device of separation together with the development of a new geometry of socio-spatial arrangements in which the production of walls raises as a diffuse trend in the new spirit of capitalism as a representation or choreography of a new social order. With reference to intensive research rooted in the analysis of contemporary social and urban policies and change, we jointly put under observation the spatial and architectural dimension of walls as well as the individuals and populations they define, construct and govern. Our central hypothesis is that open spaces and walls are often theatrical artifacts that transform inequalities into distance.

Introduction. Urban space as a concretion of public action

This contribution presents some hypothesis and interpretations based on the outcomes of a set of different research projects that we jointly developed along a research line which is focusing on public...
action from a sociological and urban planning perspective. On the one hand, we have been investigating change in welfare policies starting from the effects and processes involved in the territorialization processes that have been redesigning local welfare; on the other hand, we have been putting under observation urban policies and programs starting from the concrete dimension of the space and use(s) of space they produce.

Our main assumption is that the spatial organization that emerges in urban transformation processes at different scales (from single buildings to large scale urban developments) is making visible principles and characters of new re-organization processes, the aesthetics and politics of social order. In the perspective of our work, the interest of observing and analyzing the ‘concrete geometries’ of urban space relies in a central analytical key that we intend here to present and discuss, that is: to consider urban space as a ‘concretion of public action’, the concretion of the combined result of joined (and disjoined) actions and practices developed by public and private actors.

Assuming the “concrete life of places” and the physical, material elements that define the urban space as starting points and not simply as the setting for public policies, is not an obvious research move. A main criticism, which we have often been discussing, is that of being considered late determinists. The point in our perspective is definitely not that of drawing direct consequences with reference to social practices and to the relations between place and people starting from certain spatial arrangements. It is rather that of starting from observing the outcomes of policies to develop a more articulated interpretation of current relations between place and people and a critical understanding of public action in a time in which space has gained a growing relevance as a key factor of governing the people. This assumption is openly contrasting a tendency produced in the recent years by a sort of “social practice turn” that characterized research in urban planning and policies as well as in architecture, fostering a descriptive attitude in dealing with social practices which has been successful to the point of - paradoxically - under representing the normative power that the design and the organization of space display on the social (Bricocoli, 2009). In this respect, our research benefited of those contributions in the field of urban design who explore and give evidence to the extensive and relevant effects that planning tools, regulations and standards have on the production of urban space (White, 1988; Ben Joseph, 2005; Ben Joseph e Szold, 2005; Lehnerer, 2009). We do believe that putting under observation the spaces, the places produced in new housing developments, interpreting the arguments, the design references and concepts and the organizational principles allows in fact a vivid exploration and investigation of the rising forms and practices of citizenship, of the government model in use, a representation (which city? which society?) of politics and of the power devices through which it is enforced.

As we will discuss, our main thesis is that spatial separation (the active use and design of space aimed at producing separation) emerges nowadays a generalized organizational principle, or at least as an essential factor in the form of new urban human settlements. The ways in which urban space is being re-organized according to spatial separation may be very different and diverse, but some common features are recurring, signs of what scholars in organizational science would call ‘isomorphism’. A more general overview on these traces shall support an understanding of the metamorphosis of the social question, and of inequalities as its main matrix. The outcomes of our researches do confirm the

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hypothesis that of an increasing spatialization of inequalities (Sennett, 2006) which requires careful consideration and research on its aspects and implications.

In the following notes, we will (a) introduce some references for an understanding of the dynamics and features of urban development and change in Milano, (b) present some of our understanding of the relations between open spaces, urban change, social organization (photos will be displayed during the presentation) as well and the features of new geometries of separation (c) discuss some of the implications of these tendencies and, more specifically, how spatial segmentation affects the statute of inequality and how inequality is being redefined through its inscription in space.

**Exclusive spatial programs for ‘Milano Downtown’**

During a public debate in the spring of 2009, the Deputy Major for urban planning of the city of Milano openly proposed to consider the city Milano as the ‘downtown’ of the vast Milanese urban region. The clear reference to a perspective of valorization and growth of the core metropolitan area was never so evident. Population growth and the overcoming of mono-functional housing areas were indicated as clear targets. The reference to a category such as “downtown” clashes indeed with the reference to a “urban region” which has recurrently been used in the recent years in the planning and academic debate to refer to the vast urbanized area which spreads in northern Italy and in which Milano (a city of 1,3 million inhabitants in a metropolitan area of 4 millions) is definitely the center of gravity (Balducci et al, 2011). Moreover, the reference to a downtown is controversial (like many other foreign terms currently being directly transferred and used in the Milanese planning debate) as it does not take into consideration the implications and images it is carrying along, in terms of city centers which either collapsed and turned into deserts or recovered at the cost of a monotonous market-led city centre developments (White, 1988).

To contextualize the Milano planning debate, we can recognize that urban and population growth is assumed as a strategic task by several European cities; the very explicit ambition being that of regaining to the central city those who left it for a suburban location in search of happiness, quiet, safety, lower housing costs (White, 1956; Minton, 2009; Menzl, 2010). Some tendencies (an ageing population in search of better service provision, the increasing number of singles and workers whose job opportunities are strongly marked by insecurities and irregular mobility…) are in fact producing a new attractiveness of the central city as a living space (Siebel, 2010). We can therefore assume the reference to “downtown” as representative of the way in which the political culture and the involved actors have been defining new conditions for urban development and for housing practices as well as fostering orientations in planning as well as in housing cultures in Milano. While the reference to social and functional mix is extensively used in the argumentative register of public action, the explicit reference to the downtown suggests in fact a more selective profile which is aiming at drawing a different and more qualified social and economical profile for a renaissance of the core city hosting new investments of affluent inhabitants while eventually producing the relocation of people and activities which that cannot in any case bear the high real estate prices and are not considered valuable or functional to the renaissance of the central city. As the growing interest and development of a housing profile of the central city is producing significant tension in the use of space and in land use destination, it is definitely interesting to have a closer look at the processes and dynamics in the spatial organization in new development areas and to eventually focus on the role and future role of public open spaces: deep changes are affecting the design and use of public spaces and the very sense of public open space is being questioned.

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2 Some of the results of the research mentioned in the previous note have been developed and extended with limited reference to the Milano case and were recently published (Bricocoli, Savoldi, 2010). The research has been investigating processes of spatial and social transformation in five different urban areas. In this paper references will be limited to two of the case studies.
The milanese policy context, is characterized by a strong orientation to deregulation and by a neo-liberal attitude in which a weakly regulated market is orienting and guiding development and transformation processes. In the last years, frictions and tensions that raised in the use of space by different social groups have been very often dealt with in terms of emergency. Typically, a whole set of social practices being targeted by the city along an action line of ‘zero tolerance’ attitude, have been labeled ‘non desirable’. It may be the case of the so called ‘movida’ occurring in some hot spots where Italian teenagers drink and entertain themselves in the open air, but it is mainly the case of practices related to the poor and more disadvantaged social groups, the most discussed being the case of vast areas in which rom people have been finding refuge in so called ‘camps’ or the case of the temporary dwelling of new immigrants seeking asylum in vacant buildings. As remarked by Zigmunt Bauman, “what is produced in a global and somehow ‘extraterritorial’ dimension, literally lays in the midth of the street” (Bauman, 2003). It is in the streets that the poor economic conditions of large portions of the population become visible as well as the evidence of consistent migration flows while in the public space the difficulties of managing the results and local effects of processes of change that are rooted far away become extremely evident and debatable (Zukin, 1995).

While in the policy rhetoric of new neighborhood and housing developments, the reference to variety and diversity is central and is recalling those factors that can provide vibrancy in new urban spaces, our field work and set of interviews highlight that the kind of ‘urbanity’ the new inhabitants of new housing developments expect in the immediate surrounding of their homes is to be very selective. To be excluded are not only all those factors that are typically considered as negative externality of the city (traffic, disorder, undesired uses, confusion, nuisance, noise) but also, and more specifically, those concrete manifestations of social change that are very often depicted with reference to the features and meanings of the ‘dangerous classes’ (Castel, 2003): the youth, the foreigners, the homeless, the rom. In the design, project and management of new residential areas, a set of interventions are recurrently aiming at tiding, distinguishing and delimitating spaces; whenever the provision of public spaces is planned, a great effort is put to define and limit the possible and desired uses, and this is firstly achieved through the normative power that the design of spaces itself expresses. Along this tendency, the spaces in which multiple uses are possible is more and more limited and this leads to openly questioning the sense and degree of urbanity itself (Zukin, 1995; Savoldi 2006).

The design of urban redevelopment in the face of insecurities

Beside the recurrent reference to urbanity and to the need of avoiding the shortcomings of mono-functional housing areas (which is often assumed as an accusation against social housing estates) our exploration revealed that the expectations of urban qualities around the individual housing unit is very low. Somehow, many of the features which are supposed to be urban qualities in the consideration of the inhabitants have turned into negative externalities of the city. While the central city of Milano is still providing services and chances that are considered relevant, many inhabitants relocated in the new developments with the express will of avoiding traffic, disorder, undesired social practices, confusion, nuisance. Between the lines, it is evident in the interviews a desire of remarking a distance from social change in the city which is very often stigmatized as danger: the youngsters, the foreigners, the homeless. Two case studies of new housing developments will be presented and can be here discussed as main references.

So close, so far. The happiness of the suburbia in the city?

A first example we would like to introduce is the Pompeo Leoni area in Milan. The case is representative of a set of interventions which were developed in the late 1990’s for the redevelopment of vacant industrial sites (in this case, a former plant of Fiat). The area is not far from the dense pattern of the inner city and its compact blocks developed in the late 1800s. The design and the redevelopment of the area (for housing and minor office use) results from a negotiation within a public
and private partnership in which the public actor mainly accepted as compensation the development of green open areas. No other public service is available. The only provision of retail consists of a large supermarket: the agreement between the city and the developers stated that no other commercial activity was to be allowed for a minimum period of five years. Actually, the spatial organization and asset of the buildings which are separated from the street-line is in fact preventing by itself the opening of any sort of commercial activities.

The design of the open spaces is threefold: a central alley and two parks on the two external areas of the development. While all the housing developments are basically consisting of individual buildings detached from the street-line, surrounded by very small and poor yards and strong fences, the large open space on the sides of the boulevard is mainly representative (it is called “the boulevard”), the two parks are clearly remarking the separated character of this development from the surrounding existing urban pattern. In the words of many, this separation is exactly what produces an added value to the project. In the words of the inhabitants, the distance from the disorder and chaotic environment was the main drive to move out of the city core.

Most of the inhabitants are nevertheless stressing that they were not willing to move in a suburban area and that they wanted to benefit as much as possible of the resources that the city core offers. The statement of a man in his sixties giving arguments for his residential choice is very clear: “the distance from the disorder and chaotic environment was the main drive to move out of the city core. Pompeo Leoni was a perfect solution, being so close to the city centre and still offering a vision on green open spaces and large balconies or terraces for private use and gardening”.

Pompeo Leoni was a perfect solution, being so close to the city centre and still offering a vision on green open spaces and large balconies or terraces for private use and gardening. Somehow, the interviews reveal the paradox of the whole imaginary of the suburbs transported into a semi-central area of the city. Conflicts are rising in the area. Any sort of unplanned and unforeseen use of the open spaces by unknown people is producing upheaval: “Open spaces, as we often declared and shouted at the city administration are expected to be designed as flat and with less vegetation as possible in order to have high visibility on whatever occurs”, confirms an inhabitant (a woman in her forties) while discussing the quality of the park facing her apartment.

While open spaces are expected to be designed as flat and with less vegetation as possible in order to have high visibility on whatever occurs, the settlement of some groups of homeless along the borders of a railway line, the use of the area by youngsters, the noise produced by students living in the student housing block, some noise produced by the clients of a well settled and successful disco: all these are reasons and grounds on which the inhabitants activate themselves and successfully lobby for more police intervention and control. The blog of the inhabitants’ committee is largely dominated by the call for action contrasting undesired uses and people and by accounts on the lobbying that the committee provides for the defense of the neighborhood thanks to its direct connections to the city administration (the head of the committee was elected as councilor, among the lines of the leading conservative coalition, in the city council3), while the main referents of the committee are to be found in the different layers of the police and security forces.

Somehow the Pompeo Leoni case raises radical questions on whether the production of these public green areas responds to any criteria of public interest and common good. More question raise on how the expectations of these citizens (private individuals associated in condominiums of defensive homeowners) on what they assume to be “their open public space” shall be dealt with. The destiny of these open spaces which were gained from the city as a compensation of market led development seems to be more the valorization of the surrounding housing then any sort of shared use. No different degrees of publicness are existing, no mediation: everything that is built is private, everything that is

3 In late May 2011 the elections for the new mayor and city council resulted in a defeat of the leading coalition and the candidate mayor from a left and progressive coalition has been nominated in early June.
unbuilt and open is publicly owned but conceived by the inhabitants and expected to perform as an “empty green surface”. Although no gates are yet built, the main role of green open surfaces consists in a) functioning as a device providing distance and separation, a sort of ‘buffer’ that prevents functions and uses that are uncertain and undesired, or b) carefully separating paths and areas which are intended to be used exclusively by the inhabitants.

A planning disaster. The just distance: separation and its counter-effects

The Santa Giulia project is a large scale urban development which was conceived in 1998 to be a new part of the city and at the same time a new way of living in the central area. The development phase of the project started in year 2006. The advertising campaign was insisting: “the aim of the project is to create a new city within the city, autonomous but perfectly integrated in the urban context”. A sort of new urban foundation. The proposal of a eye-catching housing developed designed by sir Norman Foster was strategic to the branding of the attractiveness and high value of the new housing location. The design of the large development as a separated unity highlights a use of the open space as a buffer zone which is allowing different grades of separation. The space which is allocated to public use as a compensation for development is systematically surrounded by private housing and its design definitely discourages any use by non residents.

Also in this case, the overall master plan was aiming at providing an alternative to the disorder of the central city, allowing a higher and distinguished quality of life. The renderings in the massive marketing campaign of the project were promising a very large promenade, with traffic being restricted to a tramway, bicycles and pedestrians, a huge public park, a system of open spaces and sport facilities limited to the private use of the inhabitants. But it was not only the image of a quiet environment that the project intended to propose. Unlike the previous case of Pompeo Leoni, the concept of Santa Giulia was promising also an image of variety. The emphasis on variety mainly referred to a careful composition of a set of different functions, mainly concentrated in a specific area to be considered as the heart of the development and along an axis which was to considered as the backbone of the southern side of the residential area. The design and organization of this functional and social mix was mainly developed by disaggregating and distinguishing spaces, borders and buildings. Housing is mainly displayed considering building units as sorts of different containers which correspond to different status and typologies of housing profiles: public housing is concentrated on the southern border of the area, nearby a consistent stock of cooperative ownership housing is developed as a separate entity from the private housing developments that the master plan locates in the northern part of the area. An inhabitant is clearly depicting the set “My obsession was to end up living in a dormitory neighborhood, where during the day everybody is at work, in the evening at home watching tv and the next morning back to work again. Actually many are not to be seen around, maybe the hundred people I know here are the best ones, but my overall impression is good. When I reconsidered my choice and decided to go for an apartment in the private developer area rather than in the cooperative homeownership, I thought that in this way I could guarantee that I would deal with better off neighborhood and to avoid any tramp kind of person.”

But the Santa Giulia project has been than undergoing a major crisis. In the midst of the implementation phase, the developer was affected by the real estate and finance crisis and fell bankrupt. The only portion of the project which has meanwhile been implemented consists of cooperative housing developed for homeownership. Not a single function of collective and sovra-local use has been developed, there is currently no reason, no attractive function, that is inducing anybody to come here from other neighboring areas. The new inhabitants (currently about two thousand people) are literally trapped: trapped by the value they have invested in their flat which they can’t even dare to sell as it has dramatically lost value and trapped in a living environment in which the separation which was meant to preserve the new development turns out to be a distance to overcome to reach any kind of service and facility.
While the stress on separation and on “giving up” any connection with the surrounding urban texture was considered to be a strategic asset and a main rationale in the master plan, the inhabitants who settled are now depending on the weak connections to the public and private service provision which is existing in the area. What has been implemented in terms of public space is literally deserted and it explicitly reveals its being a simple surface organizing what was assumed by the project to be “the distance from the city”.

It is evident in the cases that we observed that the principle of spatial organization that is having a growing momentum is separation. It is the physical separation made of barriers and fences, as well as the separation which is being produced by public green areas that beyond an easy rhetoric which is depicting them as “permeable and connecting surfaces” are surfaces in the urban fabric which are expected to remain void, without any sort of social practice beyond the most simple gestures. Their role mainly seem to consist in buffering, setting a distance and separating.

Separation is moreover enforced by an organization of collective housing which is mainly driven by a limited investment in the innovation of typologies, that is avoiding any sort of risk in merging and combining uses and populations in a same building. In the sake of a real estate market which is relying on separation and functional simplification as ways to reduce risks and unexpected complications, what emerges is an opposition between public spaces which mainly consist of open green areas and private development which occurs to be built and fenced, no physical or symbolical mediation develops between the two.

**Geometries of separation**

It is along the growing momentum of fear and insecurities that ‘separation’ becomes a guiding principle for social and spatial organization. Our hypothesis is that main features in the design and organization of new housing areas are recalling a broader phenomenon in which separation is searched through that the construction of material, physical, concrete devices.

The most visible and globally recognizable phenomenon in this sense is the construction of a large variety of walls. Wendy Brown (2007) has been collecting and illustrating a large variety of these, from the ‘concrete’ frontier between California and Mexico, to that of Occupied territories in Palestine to the one separating a housing estate largely inhabited by foreign immigrants from the city in Padova, a medium-size town in Veneto. Of course, the walls which are ensuring the auto-segregation of gated communities are to be recorded as well as the walls around camps which are containing (in the perspective of expulsion) refugees, migrants, rom and other disadvantaged populations. Walls tend to provide a barrier to access and to segregate populations using a territorial and physical device and what they generally seem to express is a sort of aspiration to immunization more than of social control: the normative order they introduce is more oriented to separation rather than to exclusion, more to setting a distance from individuals considered to be source of problems rather than to organizing control on them (de Leonardsis, 2011).

In our case studies, new housing developments are in fact very much dominated by the obsessive design of fences and gates provided to every single housing unit or building, but more over the geometry of separation is enforced first of all by the overall design of the development, which is not gated in its whole, but it is designed and organized setting a distance from the surrounding city, secondly by the character of open spaces: their organized and controlled emptiness is making them resemble the empty spaces surrounding the ramparts of old city walls.

In this respect, the conditions at which open spaces - which are set as standards of urban quality by the current planning rules - are effectively functioning as public spaces are definitely to be critically considered as they question basic arguments and fundamentals not only of urban planning, but also of democracy. The image they depict is of an empty city, emptied of the fluxes of social groups and
traffics, of the etherogeneity of people and life forms and of their difficult coexistence, of overlapping and redundancy and of all those ingredients that make of a city a political society. These empty green areas are somehow witnessing how urban space may be used as a tool of government, in the direction of an indirect government of populations, as Foucault would argue.

In the yearning for flat and smooth open spaces, free of any source of criticalities, any unexpected and controversial use does not find any possibility of mediation and is immediately reduced to be an issue for public order interventions (Bricocoli et al., 2008). It is to be remarked that while these dynamics develop and grow in an everyday life dimension, urban and social policies seem at large to give up any role of guidance, responsibility and government of this terrain: that of the ordinary functioning of the city, of the everyday life uses. At the same time, it is at this level that the public actor is called to provide interventions, even in those areas which were developed along a concept and design that was aiming at separation from the influence and interaction with the city and its institutions. Where the market and the private sphere were ruling and orienting design, after its implementation, in the face of the concrete condition of reality, a call for intervention is addressed to the public actor. In the interviews to the inhabitants, it becomes very clear that the main institutions and references of the local community is the police, in its various declination (local and state). The paradox, as remarked in several research work, is that while the involvement of public institutions in the life of the local community consists in the presence and evidence of police patrolling, the demand for more civil security grows even more (Castel, 2003; Donzelot, 2008; Bricocoli, de Leonardis, Tosi, 2008; Bricocoli, Savoldi, 2008). In this respect, when issues of conflict or simply even of different uses of public spaces (or even of evidence of migrant populations making use of them) are framed in terms of "insecurities", the effectiveness of local intervention is really limited, as it limited to remedies along a reparatory attitude which is in fact then reproducing an obsession for safety which actually cannot be solved (Castel 2003).

The exploration of urban transformations in Milano highlighted how both urban and social policies have been neglecting consideration for the intensive change which is occurring in the use of space in different urban areas. Somehow, consideration for everyday practices seems to be out of sight while the design of policies and services risks to be drawn with little reference to the real life contexts of citizens.

It is within a discourse that is dominated by the frame of insecurities and in a context of overall simplification of the sense and conditions that can produce mixed environments, that ‘separation’ becomes a main principle in the spatial organization of the urban transformations we investigated. Moreover and generally, the development of a new geometry in which it is separation and segregation are organizing new socio-spatial assets is a relevant trend that is considered diffused and coherent with the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski e Chiappello, 1999; Sennett, 2006; de Leonardis, 2008a; Brown, 2009). More generally, the development of a new geometry in which new socio-spatial assets are organized by lines of separation is a main feature that is considered coherent with the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski e Chiappello 1999; Sennett 2006; de Leonardis 2008a and 2010) and is recurrent in the (more or less) concrete forms of walls, fences and spatial devices that isolate, separate, defend and – more generally – reduce the risk of interaction among non homogeneous social groups.

Separation tends to act as an organizational principle that guides the production of the city. Both with reference to concrete objects and to people, separation is recurrently discussed with reference to distance. To be ‘close to’ and to be ‘far away from’, this is the opposition which is frequently recalled in the words of the inhabitants when they discuss the arguments for their housing preferences and choices. As we already discussed, the design of spaces and physical elements do concur in preventing use and in reproducing distance. When the discussion concerns the functioning and use of open public spaces, the aspiration is actually to “keep them under control” and moreover the absence of any use is very often declared as the favorite option. The enforcement of separation between the accessible public space and the private space which is an aspiration that is guaranteed by a different sets of regulations but moreover it is the normative power of design to be exploited. It is the case of open
spaces which work as buffer devices and that are considered green areas to enjoyable to look at (in opposition to any value of use) and not to be crossed, or the case of car parking in Santa Giulia which are dislocated at the ground level and face the sidewalks in the form of a continuous stone wall which definitely recalls the image of a rampart.

The new inhabitants in Pompeo Leoni and in Santa Giulia seem to retain in the city those values of the suburban lifestyle that imply a form of intolerance against (and fear of) the proximity with whatever is unexpected and problematic (White, 1988). It is as if that private happiness (Hirschman, 1982) that was once associated to the suburban model of low density single family housing is now searched and expected in the collective housing that try to create a reassuring living environment in the central city (Sampieri 2010) either by the way of a communitarian kind of self-organization or by the equipment of wide balconies and terraces from which to measure the just distance from the city. While the offer of safe and reassuring balconies facing a large public park retains quite a success in the market and in the public opinion, the growing affirmation of separation between spaces, functions and social profiles associated to different housing projects is very relevant in redefining the conditions themselves of public life, of public culture and democracy that have been considered as granted in the European city at least since a century (Body-Gendrot et al. 2008; Beauregard 2008; Minton 2009; Power 2010).

Moreover, with reference to the main theme of the ENHR 2011 conference, significant trends towards separation seem paradoxically emerge while a growing reference to functional and social mix, has been spreading and permeating the policy discourse. Both in the policy as well as in the academic debate, social and functional mix has become more then a desirable output: a mainstream argument which is constantly used to justify planning and policy choices. Our investigation in the Milanese context and the two cases we discussed, lead to consider that “a collection of differences does not produce mix by itself” and that a major issue regarding mixité concerns the different attitudes in considering processes aimed at its production.

On the one hand, we have been remarking the poverty of the overall design which is often simply disposing contiguous but clearly separated housing units, according to their market value and profile (in any case limited to homeownership); while public spaces mainly consist of green areas, the use of which is possibly reduced to the inhabitants who directly face them, the overall design is not only strongly reducing any sense of public space intended as a place of encounters and interaction, but is also enforcing a condition in which large portion of new urban developments are factually secluded from access and use.

On the other hand, the case of special structures for institutionalized collective housing is even more relevant in our investigation to discuss the paradox of growing separation in the face of the emphasis of the discourse on mixité. The development of specialized housing for the elderly (nursery homes) and for students (Students’ dorms) has been tremendously expanding in the last years in the Milano region, out of any consideration and evaluation on the resulting effects (Bifulco, 2003). The beneficial impact and the virtuosity of a new injection of population in homogeneous housing areas is a main argument that has been supporting the development of institutionalized housing for the elderly or student housing. The virtues of mixité are constantly referred to, but if we critically observe the organization of these collective specialized housing, we can easily recognize their institutionalized character and their impermeability to any exchange and connection with the context. Their economic viability in fact is very much depending on their being fully equipped and autonomous in terms of services for the inmates that makes them fully independent from the outside. While the argument of mix is being recalled, the housing solutions that are developed represent in facts emblems of the reduction of the plurality of dimensions that compose the experience of dwelling. More specifically, the offer of housing solutions for the elderly and for students in Milano is mainly dominated by these sort of specialized and secluded structures that receive significant funding from the state (and would not otherwise be sustainable on the private market). The production of specialized and separate structures is certainly alternative to policies which would tend to support the autonomy of the elderly and facilitate ageing at home or to policies which would aim at providing housing solutions for
students that would more effectively generate interchanges in the context and connections with the surrounding neighborhood.

In this respect, the outcomes of our research do remark that if mixité is a relevant quality for producing development and cohesion in the urban context, it is relevant thus to assume it as a result, a sort of side product that may result from complex and rich projects and design, to be fostered and supported, rather than a precondition to be produced by the allocation and functional destination of land.

What is relevant to be put under observation and evaluation is not the collection and setting aside of different land uses, but rather the effective and concrete degree of connection, overlapping and blend (and even of conflict) that is eventually being produced among different populations and uses in a same urban space.

A further paradox is that of a whole set of emerging projects aiming at organizing new ways of living do not rely on defensive devices but propose in fact various ways for defining and fine-tuning intimacy and separation. Separation is actually a diffused trait also of those housing projects that are developed upon principles inspired by communitarian forms of sharing and co-housing and aim somehow at sharing the experience of housing among groups of people selected upon criteria of similarity and common belonging.

More generally, the cases of Santa Giulia and Pompeo Leoni are witnessing in emblematic ways a substantial reduction and simplification of urban environments which are providing a safe and accommodating environment for those who decide to stay or to return to the city, while creating a living environment that has no capability to generate results and effects of some interest in terms of urban complexity (not necessarily to be associated with traditional models of urbanity). Different is the case of those few mega projects in which urban complexity is assumed as a condition and as a central quality for the attractiveness and long term durability of large scale urban development projects as well as for the quality of spaces that may be open for subsequent different uses (Bruns-Berentelg 2010).

The spatialization of inequality

It is worth considering and discussing the logic of separation that is emerges as an organizing principle in the our cases studies and the resulting spatial segmentation that emerges in connection to the debate and reflections on the status of inequality and its redefinition through the reorganization of urban space.

Sociological research, in Italy and in Europe, has been producing in the last years a relevant set of researches on the empirical evidences of persistent and growing social inequalities, intended as imbalances in the distribution of different types of resources. The discourse on inequalities does not generally consider the dimension of power, and specifically the asymmetries of power that are generative of inequalities in the social ties between un-equals (Brandolini, Saraceno, Schizzerotto, 2009). It is indeed inequality expressed in terms of power relation between unequals the term of reference for investigating matters of welfare and its vocation in redistributing powers, rather than goods (Donzelot 2004 and 2006). In this perspective, it is relevant here to consider how the forms of inequality are changing with reference to processes of territorialization and spatialization. With reference to the current metamorphosis of capitalism, Pizzorno is arguing that while the idea of inequality was previously referred to the power of controlling the product of labour, in that condition the power of the subordinated consisted in the awareness of their relevance for the elites in power (the elites to be such needed the subordinated). Today, Pizzorno argues, this is no longer true. Not only polarization is much to a higher degree difficult to reduce, but those who are in power can easily do without most of those who are not (Pizzorno, 2007). It is this uselessness that we need to focus on. On
the one hand, the number of those who are defined as “surnumeraires” by Castel or “waste” by Bauman, is growing: individuals and groups who are considered superfluous (Castel, 1999 and 2009; Bauman, 2003). On the other hand, being “useful” would exactly be a status framed within inequality intended as a tie, while those human wastes are somehow a by-product of it. If we discuss inequality in terms of a tie among unequals – that is to say a quality of the structural relations and not only as a differential in terms of income, consume or sort of ‘capital’ - the uselessness is also affected by the indifference and by a severe deficit of recognition.

If we observe the evolving spatial pattern of social relations, the increasing distance of unequal situations in which limited collectivities are locally developing, the opportunities for interaction - and therefore of recognition and allocation of identity among unequals – become fewer and fewer and inequality remains hidden.

This interpretation is very suitable for understanding the above mentioned dynamics in which we have highlighted the guiding role of the logic of spatial separation, that is somehow dis-activating the relations between people that are blocked and retained within territories, defended by emphasized borders (de Leonardis 2008b). The distances between different populations separated by spatial devices not only appear as impossible to overcome, but also non measurable given the lack of metrics or criteria suitable to measure them; in these circumstances, a lack of vocabulary emerges, references for definitions and classification which can allow to recognize the other from yourself. We are no more confronted by inequality as a social tie, between top and bottom, as a tie of domination and subordination (that is to say a power relation made visible and object for conflicts). The transformation we have been observing in the spatial developments redefines inequality not as a social tie, but in terms of physical separation. Inequality is not anymore related to that which connects – inequality as a tie – but to what separates, a kind of threshold after which relations and ties between unequals disappear. Safety, sterilization, immunization (Simon 2008, Wolin 2008), from these ties are emphasized by – more or less virtual – walls as well as by flat green surfaces. In this reconfiguration of the social order produced horizontally by spatial separation and the disappearance of inequality as a tie, also the discourse on power disappears, power. Power as a tie, is not debated as an issue any more and disappears from public visibility.

References


‘Mixité’: an urban and housing issue?


