Urban morphology and temporary uses: exploring the relation between reading and designing

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Abstract

Since the financial and economic crisis of 2008, the interaction between the in- crease in urban vacancy and the crisis of financial protocols of development is offering the chance to restore the centrality of the architectural project within the issue of urban regeneration since, as never before, we find ourselves in the po- sition of having to reflect on the state of a widely distributed abandoned building heritage, de-objectified from any functional and cultural meaning, which claims to be transformed with priority over new building expectations and forecasts.

The paper investigates the practice of temporary use of vacant areas and aban- doned buildings in the region of Emilia-Romagna (Italy) that, although with different degrees of maturation, are certifying an experimental and operative level feeding, through tests and verification phases with reality and its changes, a strategic design path able to really address current challenges. The acknowledge- ment of this practice's value has been stated ex-post by Regional law n.24/2017 "Regional regulation on spatial planning, management and land-use", which con- stitutes the partial effect of one of the most advanced experiments concerning the design culture in conditions of structural crisis.

The present contribution aims at recognizing in the Italian urban morphology's legacy the features to read and intercept the on-going urban transformation, negotiating the position of the architectural project as stages of adaptation to the urban changing conditions. The methodology is summarized in two main collaborating moments: the "mapping" or rather the criteria for comparing the on-going experiences and the "governance" which refers to the set of principles and procedures concerning the management of the projects.

The paper demonstrates how the phase of reading the experimental practices converges with the one of designing the urban project, making explicit the rela- tionship on which urban morphology and building typology are based.

Intro

The research intends to rethink the relevance of urban morphology as a response to the condition of crisis we are experiencing today. As never before, we have to reflect on the abandoned building heritage that claims to be transformed with priority over new buildings' expectations and forecasts. In fact, on one hand the economic crisis, which has hit the real estate market since 2008, is increasing the number of abandoned and empty buildings, but, on the other, the sanitarian incumbency related to coronavirus is asking us to review the urban places of collective and sociality, calling for wider and flexible spaces.

In this context, the traditional form of urban planning has proved to be inadequate to deal with the exceptional conditions that the crisis has generated, incapable of responding to the continuous evolution of city needs. This becomes a new opportunity to prefigure some scenarios where the unused heritage becomes laboratories where to experiment new practices.

The urban morphology's legacy

The situation we are experiencing is marked by a crisis that pushes us to deal with the ineffectiveness of the design tools inherited from previous eras. This implies the interruption of the conventional stability existing between man and the environment and breaks the condition of unity that has been pursued to that moment.

Saverio Muratori, the father of the Italian school of urban morphology, develops the concept of permanence and cyclicality of urban settlement. The concept refers to the development of the city through subsequent grafts on the pre-existing structures that involve the urban organism every time it deals with a phase of crisis and transformation: the city (and also the territory[1]) is in fact the result of the combination of a paradigm of permanence with one of cyclicality. It is possible to define the first, or that of permanence, as a fabric of consolidated conventions, while the second, or that of cyclicality, as the set of new needs that are grafted inside this fabric, which is then modified by projecting in actuality.

According to Muratori's pupils Gianfranco Caniggia and Gianluigi Maffei, the paradigm of permanence refers to historical periods not in crisis, when man works in the environment according to a spontaneous conscience, or through "the attitude [...] to adapt, in his work, to the inherited civil substance, without the need for mandatory mediation or choices" (Caniggia and Maffei, 1979)(pp. 39-40). To this phase and to these conditions corresponds the production of the so-called 'basic building', that is spontaneous, guided "by the patrimony of correlated notions characterizing each of the cultural areas, in each historical moment, according to the specific building culture" (ibid, p.41)[2].

Otherwise, in the period of crisis, a critical step is necessary, since the collective patrimony of specific knowledge is called into question. This means that the values operating within a historical era, represented by architecture, are lost and it is necessary to build them again through an experimental approach, to gradually reach a new convention and a shared stability within the community that represents itself in those places. This means recovering the relationship between the socially built

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[1] The theme of the territory is a "late" Muratorian topic, as the result of a long path that begins with the study of the city.

[2] The studies conducted for the urban form of Venice and Rome by Saverio Muratori were decisive for this theme, through investigations concerning the construction, material, economic and cultural aspects that led to the identification of the typological and morphological characteristics of the urban environment, whose identity character is expressed through its procedural manifestations (Muratori, 1959; Muratori *et al.,* 1963).

reality and the typology. The crisis is therefore a loss, a lack, but also an attempt to "reprogram" a system of values and rules.

In order to understand and reset the processes that lead to the genesis of the project, urban morphology defines a method capable of overcoming a crisis of values. This methodology implies a disassembly and a reassembly of the urban organism in order to generate a self-sufficient disciplinary corpus. It does so by recognizing various implementations phases each of which represents an experimental scheme that is consolidated over time, avoiding any totalizing theory to which the project is subject. Urban Morphology is then able to actually intercept the on-going urban transformation, negotiating the position of the architectural project as stages of adaptation to the urban changing conditions.

In fact, at the center of their personal theoretical-design activity, the authors question the way in which the city can or should evolve in response to the cultural, productive and demographic changes of those years, having to understand and reset the processes that lead to the genesis of the project. . The authors, albeit with substantial methodological differences, starting from the analysis of the actual conditions, arrive at the return of a process, the application of which allows the constitution of the architectural project. In fact, the open character of the procedure is recognized in the various implementations of urban strategies: each project is understood as an experimental scheme that is consolidated over time.

However, it is essential to clarify one aspect: if, according to the Muratorian school, the reading of historical textiles allows us to operate according to the logic underlying them, assuming that the critical conscience must operate as the spontaneous conscience, the writer believes that this assumption is no longer effective, condemning the substratum to act as a determining and conditioning factor for the project and taking for granted that the values operating in that historical phase are still valid in the contemporary world. On the contrary, the theme of urban regeneration forces us to reflect in that "gray area" in which it is no longer possible to operate according to the values of the past and, at the same time, one is not yet in a position to say that what has been accomplished constitutes, however transformed and adapted, a new conditioning factor for the future. The critical conscience becomes therefore, in this phase, fundamental because it allows to assume the responsibility of imagining in a tentative way, or by trial and error, an unprecedented path, disconnected from the automatisms of spontaneous conscience. Faced with a building heritage that has lost its historical vocations and its operability, urban regeneration admits that the conditions that determined it are no longer "operative", that is, no longer persistent in the community. From that moment on, the discarded heritage does not simply undergo a change in use within a system of rules,

but, as it ends its life cycle, it acquires its own autonomy with respect to previous conditions. In this sense, it, generated by the loss of that implicit link between socially constructed reality and typology, dissolves in a state of indeterminacy and is today an opportunity and new material, open to an experimental phase necessary to reconstruct the value of anthropic space. This moment finds its legitimacy through its own making, avoiding any totalizing theory to which the project is subordinated in a prejudicial way.

In conclusion, the culture of recycling and regeneration, for the reasons analyzed, possesses the ability to re-establish the conditions in which the city is founded through the preventive design, construction and testing of prototypes whose verification in the field allows for a socially shared, revocable production. in its legitimacy, from new needs and wills.

Object

In Italy, as in Europe, in response to the crisis and in the absence of real estate development, cases of spontaneous reuse of abandoned spaces characterized by cultural and social innovation have multiplied. The strategic and national dimension of the reuse of underutilized or abandoned heritage is evident if only the overall consistency of the phenomenon is assessed. This phenomenon confirms that the crisis is redesigning the city beyond any planning forecasts for those areas. These temporary practices place themselves in the "time in between" of old and new use and build identifying places not only as a reference for the neighborhood scale but also for the city as a whole. These are organizations structured in the most diverse forms of aggregation (cultural and social associations, non-profit organizations, cooperatives, companies, informal groups, businesses, start-ups) that use these places to produce social cohesion and often great experiences value, in favor of urban communities. It is a broad phenomenon, which develops at different levels of formalization depending on the sustained support of the institutions. The variety of approaches and methods of intervention, however, is significant for the large number of factors that come into play when starting a process of re-activation of abandoned assets.

However these practices are asking to act through policies able to experiment out of the narrow prescriptions of current city regulations, which are still set on pre-crisis scenarios.

In Italy, the cultural value of these interventions is recognized, for the first time, by the urban regional law of Emilia Romagna that has introduced specific provisions in favor of temporary uses. However, it is believed that the text of the law is not sufficiently clear to address regenerative practices as no concrete guidelines are provided.

Analyzing in depth the various legal texts, however, it is noted that these do not offer concrete addresses or guidelines within which to orient oneself in a uniform manner. In fact, the ways in which a practice on the issue can be operationally defined appear unclear or completely absent.

Recognizing the high urban, cultural and economic value of these practices for the city transformation in conditions of structural crisis, the objective is to contribute to the definition of a procedure that rehabilitates the abandoned building heritage as a trigger for future transformation processes.

Methodology

The research methodology is built around two key moments: the first phase relates to the analysis of the phenomenon, or rather the study of concrete experiences concerning the temporary reactivation of abandoned spaces; the second phase translates the comparison of case studies into an essential operational tool for the governance of new experiences of urban regeneration.

The analysis conducted starts from the direct knowledge of reactivation experiences of abandoned places started in the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy. These are initiatives often born spontaneously, of which it is interesting to evaluate their progressive institutionalization by the public body and which confirm that the crisis is in fact redesigning the city according to logics that go beyond the forecasts of the planning instruments. The cases, selected in the Emilia Romagna region in Italy, represent the operational field of the research. With the prospect of dealing with different contexts, in order to suppose a hypothesis of applicability, this phase is accompanied by solid documentation, interviews with administrations, associations, designers, operators in the sector and specific on-site visits. The choice of a plurality of cases, in addition to a will to typify, is considered necessary to produce a more articulated snapshot of the condition of the current project action and to pursue a principle of multiscalarity from the microscopic observation of individual cases to the intersections with the local and supra-local governance plan. The number of cases does not depend on any claim to completeness. Through field visits and numerous interviews with the subjects involved, it has been possible to build a cognitive framework that highlights the main characteristics, the enabling conditions and the system of relationships that allow the realization of the diverse projects.

The interrogated sources and the extracted data are then sorted according to a common matrix - a first and general document database - with the aim of making the different experiences comparable, identifying the main characteristic components of the individual temporary transformation process. On the basis of the invariant factors, or rather recurring features identified, a mapping scheme common to the regeneration experiences is then constructed, divided into phases. The triggering element is that of the identification of the actors, where with 'actors' we must not only mean those subjectivities that claim a role in the regenerative process but also those landscapes, spaces and

buildings condemned to a condition of decay and abandonment and for this reason they are free from any form of prejudice that limits their operations. A subsequent activation phase is required to facilitate and guide the involvement of the various actors. This process is well described by the Anglo-Saxon term "engagement", which outlines the concrete willingness on the part of subjects and spaces to be involved in a common regenerative process. This means that the activation becomes the context, however dynamic it may be defined, within which the subjects previously identified and selected begin to recognize each other, establishing a sharing bond that is indispensable in the action of claiming the space. In order for the regenerative process to be completed, planning actions are therefore necessary, declined from a purely technical-building point of view, but also accompanied by a strategic cultural vision, as well as by an economic-financial feasibility, without which the project risks to not support itself. Finally, the phase of verification of the activities, or rather of the results actually obtained, has the task of commensurate the regeneration potential with the ability to fertilize, through the reverberation of the effects, the territory on which the process is triggered.

This system of relations, built on case studies, is clearly configured as an *a posteriori* analysis of the phenomenon. However it can also be defined as *a priori* synthesis of the project, constituting an operational tool applicable to new experiences. The methodological path of mapping therefore allows to govern the regenerative process, making explicit the analysis / project relationship on which the study of urban morphology has always been based.

Results and discussion

The proposed matrix constitutes the reference framework for a mapping that is defined as original with respect to that proposed by the Temporary Uses Hub, set up by the Emilia Romagna Region in order to provide operational support for the application of Articles 15 and 16 of the Regional Law. 24/2017. The regional framework on temporary uses still remains poorly defined, often based on obsolete databases, and decidedly distinct in a mapping of objects, i.e. spaces, and a mapping of subjects, i.e. practices, removing the possibility of being able to build enabling mechanisms. The phase of recording and monitoring experiences is therefore disconnected from the potential executive phase.

The writer believes, however, that the two phases should be complementary by proposing a type of mapping that guarantees the hybridization of the objects and subjects identified by building a single matrix, derived from the comparison of sample cases. Based on the experience gained, it is in fact acknowledged that the establishment of interdependencies between the subjects involved and the spaces used constitutes a common structure with respect to which the various case studies represent the specifications. This system of relations, attributable to a document, is therefore configured as an

a posteriori analysis of the phenomenon but also as a priori synthesis of the project, through which the implementation phase is made possible.

By extracting invariant factors, the methodological path of the mapping is conceptualized and translated into a governance tool in order to be applied to real phenomena to industrialize the new regenerative processes. The research therefore comes to develop a single instrument of investigation and governance of the phenomenon that allows a professional to take into account all the determining issues of the phenomenon, allowing him to implement the skills, abilities and tools in the challenges posed by contemporaneity.

Conclusions

The question that arises at the end of the work of mapping the experiences and practices of temporary reuse on the territory is what is meant by urban regeneration and, with respect to this definition, what is the work carried out by the state of the art of this research. The conclusion, which seeks to systematize the reasoning deriving from the case studies, is that by regeneration we must mean an incremental process, which has the task of redefining community relationships and their meaning. This definition, unprecedented with respect to any law text, in fact arises from the direct experience gained in the field, which is nourished by the experiments that the protagonists of regeneration have matured and are still developing in exemplary contexts.

Urban regeneration is considered an incremental process as it is internally articulated in phases, or rather in constitutive moments which fertilize each other and which, above all, have the task of guaranteeing the construction of those deep bonds between the subjects who in various ways claim a role on a disused heritage. The latter constitutes the material dimension for such action. Therefore, it is essential to clarify that when it comes to regeneration, material aspects, or rather the spatial objects, and immaterial ones, or rather the value of the subjects, are always strongly integrated and mutually fertilized. It is therefore believed that regeneration must be both urban and human, two components that cannot be distinguished except in purely conventional terms.

Only in this way the project leads back to its conceptual essence of collective project, indispensable for the reconstruction of the value of the anthropic space, as urban morphology teaches. In this sense, the abandoned heritage represents today a huge opportunity and a physic material open to an experimental phase with the aim of building a new conventional stability between man and the environment.

So, why urban morphology and urban regeneration? They both identify the ways man builds new forms of intentions on a territory and they both also confront themselves with the weakness of Modernism as a cultural project. It is no coìncidence that the study of urban form in Italy arose with

the explicit refusal of any kind of compromise with the Modernist principles, demonstrating the possibility of recovering the transformation of urban form according to a "handcraft" approach that has always preceded the planning instrument. This legacy actually legitimizes the project as a practice and affirms the primacy of architecture over the techno-bureaucratic administration of the territory. Rethinking this legacy today becomes fundamental. The legacy of urban morphology is then understood as a discipline established by the need to react to a period of crisis, embodied by the cultural fracture imposed by Modernity, when it was necessary to find the way in which the city should evolve in response to cultural, productive and demographic changes of those years.

References

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