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Keynote Speech Presented at the 2019 AESOP Congress “Planning for Transition” in Venice

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*Territory, Economy, Society and Institutions in Transition**Keynote Speech Presented at the 2019 AESOP Congress “Planning for Transition” in Venice¹*

Alessandro Balducci

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Introduction

I will try to interpret the transition that confronts planning by looking at economic, social, urban and institutional change. There are abundant studies that analyse transformations of territory, economy, society and institutions separately, but far fewer studies that allow us to consider the relationships between the profound processes of change that affect each of these systems, and their mutual influences. I will approach this issue by trying to understand the directions of causal relationships and how we can intervene to improve the policies that concern them, looking in particular at the role of the physical space. I open with an initial consideration drawn from Willem Salet's comments in an informal seminar: “The economy and society change with increasing speed, the physical space is hardly adapted to these changes, producing resistance and reconfiguring itself, the institutions adapt with even greater effort”. It is worth adding here that the same applies to our perceptions and our ability to see the profound transformations that emerge from the intersection of these dynamics. I will address the transformation processes of the European city from my point of view: from Italy and in particular from Milan.

The change in the urban economy

If we limit our gaze to the last few decades we can see a profound transformation in the economic base of cities. I remember that urban plans in Milan in the 1970s, as in London and in many other cities, tried everything to prevent the abandonment of industrial areas. It was a desperate operation and failed to stop divestment, and in the more fortunate cases, such as Milan, the closure of the factories was compensated for by the development of other expanding economic sectors.

Cities today are mainly service centres, the nodes of economic globalization processes. However, the manufacturing that has aban-

doned cities as a place of production has not abandoned them as a primary source in the development of companies, which continue to produce goods in increasing measure. In a recent book, significantly entitled *La société hyper-industrielle*, Pierre Veltz (2017) explains how the impression of the dematerialization of the economy is basically wrong, how world manufacturing production has continued to increase (in 2010 it was one and half times that of 1990) and how cities are the centres of government for world production, which has become increasingly articulated in a series of segmented processes. The manufacturing sector, thanks also to the robotization of a large part of the work once performed manually, is increasingly similar to the service sector. The Technocentre Renault in Guyancourt, Paris region, hosts 10 000 engineers and technicians, while their largest production plant in Douai employs fewer than 5 000 workers (ibid.: 17).

Veltz argues that contemporary industry develops thanks to two main systems: first, infrastructure, with harbours and airports, but also underwater optical fibres, satellites, electricity networks, computer networks, server farms, the cloud and shared software, which form a capillary and gigantic network. Compared to the infrastructure of the past, which simply connected the companies from the outside, it now envelops them and penetrates into every production or exchange operation. Second, data, ideas, information and knowledge that feed modern production and are partly crystallized in machines and infrastructure, but also circulate freely in universities, interpersonal meetings, cafes and city squares (ibid.: 61–62). It is at the intersection of these two dimensions that innovation develops.

The new infrastructure also includes the node of connection with the platform economy, which has exploded in recent decades. Nick Srnicek (2017), in his book *Platform Capitalism*, illustrates the very rapid transformation that the development of digital platforms has produced, namely the creation of new economies and new business models. This applies

not only to the transformation of commerce, with the rapid spread of e-commerce and giants such as Amazon exploding in just a few years, and not only to the manufacturing industry, with large multinational companies such as General Electric engaged in the development of automation hardware and software, but also in other spheres.

A first category is represented by the platforms that make research tools available and facilitate the development of social relations draw their profit from advertising. Google, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have these characteristics, and 90 percent of their revenues derive from advertising and selling data. The search for data leads them to make increasingly useful services available (such as Google Earth, Google Maps and all of Facebook's innovations) and their compensation for this is the acquisition of an ever-increasing amount of data on preferences, movements and products purchased, all to be used for personalized advertising purposes.

A second category consists of cloud platforms, which provide storage and calculation capabilities through a network of data centres that draw a new geography of networks. When defining their service structure, these operators look at cities as large groups of potential users. Srnicek underlines how Amazon Web Services now outperforms the original e-commerce sector of Amazon in terms of revenue. Another category of companies that have based their development on digital platforms are the so-called product platforms that have transformed products into services for rent. This is the case for Zipcar, Car2go, Enjoy and all the other transport-sharing systems, such as bike sharing. Finally, there is the category of so-called "lean platforms" which provide services to which they do not actually have access: Airbnb, Uber, Deliveroo, Booking.com, Expedia etc. These companies, too, have achieved very rapid and widespread market penetration, basing their success on the relationship between supply and demand but at the same time on the collection of data that can be used to analyse and induce behaviour. Airbnb – the world's largest home rental company – does not own a home, Srnicek observes, just as Uber – the largest taxi company in the world – does not own a car.

We know that what unites the different forms of the platform economy is their reliance on the same raw material: data, collected and exchanged in large quantities, especially in cities. But naturally we must recognise that

these new economic sectors have been able to develop rapidly, with all their disruptive innovation, based on the existence of a new system of infrastructure conceived and developed by the public sector: the Internet and the World Wide Web, as Mariana Mazzucato (2011) observes. Without the large public investments behind this extensive infrastructure none of these disruptive innovations could have developed.

The change in urban societies

Even the society of reference has changed rapidly and profoundly in recent decades. The aspects that most clearly influence the urban condition are the demographic crisis, growing inequality and the migration crisis.

Demographic decline entails a contraction of the population in many main centres, aging and reduction in the average family size. Three aspects are closely intertwined with change in the demand for services: fewer schools and services for young families, more services for an urban population of many singles and elderly people, and a growing number of basically poor immigrants. The reduction in the average family size, with over 70 percent of families consisting of only one or two people, as in Milan, has a significant influence on social fragmentation and the slackening of parental and community networks.

Changes in the economy involve a change in the social composition of cities. In the past, cities had a higher average income than their surrounding areas but also had the smallest internal income differences. But the situation has been reversed in the last twenty years, partly due to the strong income growth of certain groups, linked to the globalization and, at the same time, the impoverishment of other groups who remain in the city thanks to the protection offered by public or low-cost housing in peripheral areas, despite significant tension in the housing market. This polarization is also the result of the erosion of the middle class, which had been the most stable component of western societies in the previous period.

The explosion in the problem of migration from the countries of the Global South, also as a result of climate change, exacerbates the problems of polarization and increasing inequality, directing a poor population without resources to the main centres, because only cities can offer job and survival opportunities. The phenomenon of migration is another factor in the crisis of local services, with the system put under

pressure by new and unprecedented requests for assistance.

The change in the physical city

How does the city space react to changes in the economy and society? In their book *Seeing like a city* (2017), Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift observe that one of the most profound changes is represented by the extraordinary growth of infrastructure systems. Infrastructure includes roads, railways, undergrounds, trams, buses, aqueducts, as well as security cameras, public lighting, electric, telephone, satellite, GPS, wireless and computer networks, but also traffic and pollution detection systems, waste disposal and waste water treatment plants, and gas and oil networks. We hardly notice the way they operate unless for some reason they suddenly collapse as a result of, for example, a suicide in the subway, a bridge that fails causing a tragedy or an electrical or Internet blackout.

A first change that connects socio-economic transformations with modifications of the space is therefore the growing importance of the interconnection systems that support the behaviour of actors in the space. A second issue directly connected to the powerful development of infrastructural systems is the enlargement of the city in the territory, to the point of incorporating a dense network of centres that once led relatively autonomous lives. Milan, for example, has become the centre of a “mega-city-region”, as defined by Peter Hall, for which the very concept of the metropolis is inadequate. It is a dense network of cities from Turin to Venice and Bologna, at the heart of which there are many provinces belonging to four different regions. All of the in-between territories are densifying. We can see in this process the results of a spatial adaptation to the described changes:

- on the one hand, the fragmentation of production processes of new industrialization, which distributes research centres, various departments and directorates throughout the territory, sub-contractors and production sites held together by technological networks, no longer sharing the same physical space;
- on the other hand, the settlement strategies of ever smaller families looking for affordable housing in suburban contexts that guarantee a good quality of life.

These phenomena affect many large European cities (Hall, Pain 2006).

Land consumption, the filling of interstitial spaces and congestion of access roads to the

main centres of urban regions are all the result of a myriad of individual choices based on network systems. What links the relationships between elements dispersed throughout the territory is in fact physical and virtual infrastructure which facilitates mobility while also reducing the sense of exclusion associated with living far from the main centre. Social platforms make it possible to maintain relationships even at a distance, but at the same time they encourage movement. The images of the connections of Facebook, Twitter or Instagram resemble extraordinarily the satellite images of cities, which have expanded beyond their traditional boundaries and spread into the territory. This is a sign that distance communications support the expansion of the city and multiply the reasons for movement.

On the other hand, sharing platforms for cars, bicycles and even scooters accentuate the polarization of the dense central city, where the distribution and recovery of vehicles is easy, as opposed to external areas, which are excluded from the service. These platforms tend to reinforce the distance between central areas and peripheral or external areas, which have to rely mainly on individual and public road transport. Other changes linked to the new platforms produce reactions from and even destruction of traditional urban organization: e-commerce threatens both traditional forms of trade and modern distribution with corresponding effect on the impoverishment of urbanity, Airbnb produces profound distortions of the rental market in attractive cities, Uber puts traditional taxi companies out of business, just as Booking.com, Expedia and TripAdvisor do travel agencies, and Deliveroo traditional home delivery systems.

A third change in the physical city is the emerging obsolescence of many structures that are no longer functional in terms of developing economic needs: industrial plants, hospitals, barracks, cinemas, schools, universities, office buildings, shopping centres, artisan warehouses, stadiums, sports facilities, residential complexes, farmhouses, power plants, railway yards, secondary railway lines and historic hamlets. The rapid changes we have briefly described leave public and private artefacts on the ground struggling to find a new function and somehow resisting the full and rapid homogenization of physical space to economic and social dynamics.

Some of these spaces lend themselves to rapid reuse and involve no or only very minor physical transformations. This is the case with

residential buildings transformed into offices, as has occurred in the central areas of many cities. These transformations are comparable to what mice do in the spaces where they live. They do not change their environment, rather they settle in cellars, country houses etc. We know that this type of operation is able to profoundly change the life of entire parts of the city without involving obvious alterations of its artefacts. Slowly but surely, thanks to this molecular activity, central areas lose their neighbourhood activities, nightlife and diversity, and become similar to office districts.

Then there are more significant transformations that do not require the radical change of the structures, but do require significant internal changes. This is the case with commercial activities that replace offices, residences that settle in productive or artisan structures (lofts), and showrooms or centres of the new creative economy that reuse industrial buildings or old cinemas. These transformations are comparable to the activities of beavers: they carry out work inside, modifying – sometimes substantially – old structures, but they do not destroy them, even if they profoundly change the urban environment.

Finally, there are the transformations of large areas (large functions), which can be replaced either by other large functions or by complex operations. These are “elephants” and must be replaced by other elephants. They often entail demolition and reconstruction to achieve a change in function and consequently involve complex processes of renegotiation and urban planning that generally continue for years. These operations leave large, long-term wounds in cities and substantially change their shape. This includes universities that replace old factories, and residential complexes that replace industrial areas, barracks or railway yards. Waiting times multiply if the abandoned buildings are not in areas of interest from the point of view of the real estate market or are made up of public structures such as hospitals or schools. In poorly serviced suburbs, large office or productive complexes are also simply abandoned if the construction period and the need for reclamation require much more expensive demolition and reconstruction processes: elephants that remain abandoned without any value.

But there are other phenomena, which, although not urban, we should keep in mind when it comes to the adaptation of physical space in response to processes of change in the economy and society, i.e. what happens in the territories that “don’t matter”, to use Andrés

Rodríguez-Pose’s definition (2018). These are the internal areas, the areas in contraction, where adaptation to rapid changes in the economy and society (which continue to concentrate resources and investments in big cities) and ineffective policies have caused a dramatic loss of meaning, leaving in their wake abandoned buildings, villages, warehouses and service structures that have lost their very reason to exist, such as schools, hospitals and other institutions. These are the territories that today take their revenge by voting for Brexit, for Trump and against the governments that have forgotten their existence.

One last important topic that falls within the passive transformation of physical space when adapting to economic change, particularly in cities, is the environment. More specifically, the progressive compromising of the environment and the production of climate change that now threatens living conditions on the planet, starting with the poorest populations most exposed to the associated risks. This silent and progressive change modifies the very nature of the soil, the air we breathe, our relationship with water, and the balance of the ecosystem in general. It is perhaps the system that has passively suffered the use and abuse of natural resources the most, caused by economic development that has not taken care of waste and has accumulated dross, trash and emissions to the point of reaching the extreme situation that now endangers our very survival in some areas.

The phenomena of the pervasive extension of infrastructure systems, enlargement of the city, obsolescence of traditional structures, abandonment of marginal territories, and the environmental crisis are therefore all connected. They are all the result of ungoverned transition. These phenomena profoundly modify the character of the *urbs* and overwhelm its traditional reflection in *civitas*. They overwhelm it through destabilization, thus opening it up to the search for a new balance.

The difficult adaptation of institutions

We still have to look at institutions and how institutions deal with these processes of transformation and adaptation. First of all, one can observe the resistance to change posed by the administrative boundaries, which have failed to adapt to the changing socio-economic shape of the city. It is said that we are trying to govern the city and society of the 21st century with the governments of the 20th century and borders

of the 19th century². Borders are therefore the first element of resistance.

The inability to adapt to the city as it really is, frequently produces “walled” central municipalities, weak metropolitan authorities, regions that deal with the “outside”, so as to avoid conflict with the central cities, and a national government that implements stereotypical urban policies that deal mainly with central cities and, at most, their suburbs, ignoring the fact that many of the typical distress phenomena of urban peripheries have extended to the external areas where the city has expanded.

Meanwhile infrastructure and its systems of government have become progressively more and more autonomous with respect to traditional forms of urban government. The rapid digitalization of management systems has meant that infrastructure has become an accumulator of knowledge that makes decisions and invades the traditional decision-making processes of institutions, scaling up from the local government arena – the smart city market – to national and international politics, as is demonstrated by the controversy about the introduction of the 5G network and the choice of whether to entrust its management to a Chinese company or exclude it for geopolitical reasons.

In this situation there is another front of resistance, perhaps the most important: the great difficulty that institutions have in abandoning the idea of “central control” as their paradigm of action. And this is despite the abundant evidence that control capacity in the networks we have described progressively declines as the number of governing or acting subjects increases. Indeed, the plurality of human and non-human subjects that cause changes to the city are not only non-reducible but constitute the very essence of the urban, as suggested by Amin and Thrift (2017). And if this is so, rather than trying to exercise an impossible level of control, a desirable alternative and in fact the only concrete possibility would be to try to use the widespread intelligence of society, supporting and promoting the joint action of already mobilized actors to solve specific urban problems.

Reflecting on transition

In the last 30 years the city, the territory, the environment and institutions seem to have faced changes in the economy and society by either submitting to or weakly resisting them. The question I would like to ask is whether, in light

of the many negative effects of this passive adaptation, it is not possible to identify inverse reactions, feedback from the city and the space that can prompt innovations in society and the economy, and feedback from institutions that can help these processes.

The environmental crisis, the growing inequalities which then become spatial inequalities, the very rapid urbanization of increasingly large population masses, the abandonment of entire internal areas and the revolts of their populations, the migration crisis, the compromising of the territory in many parts of the world – these all seem to be signs of a model of development that produces injustice and suffering, inviting us to redirect our attention to the physical space, the only “platform” that we must necessarily share and from which we cannot escape.

Looking back, Richard Sennett (2018) in his book *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* reminds us that Frederick Law Olmsted’s creation of Central Park in New York in the second half of the 1800s was extraordinary, not only because he managed to convince the city administration to deprive building development of 350 hectares on which the continuous Manhattan grid had already been laid out, but because Olmsted’s intention was precisely that of creating a space for social and racial integration, having been struck by inequalities and racist incidents that he had observed during his travels in the southern States.

He saw the park and nature as a meeting place, a space capable of welcoming Christians and Jews, whites and blacks, Irish and African Americans, thus contributing to the construction of the *civitas*. And so it has been, despite the many seasons of history that Central Park has lived through.

Peter Galison, Professor of the History of Science and Physics, proposed the concept of a “trading zone” (Galison 1997): a spatial and conceptual place of exchange between different actors, whose competitive interaction generates the main innovations in science. In a personal meeting a few years ago, he told me that he had grown up near Central Park and that in his opinion it accurately represented the idea of a trading zone – a space capable of inducing or supporting transformation and social innovation, without necessarily wanting the different actors who use it to be in agreement.

Moving to the present, a phase in which the construction of the city has moved on to reuse, it is necessary to understand how the physical space could trigger processes of territorial

regeneration, capable in turn of reducing or eliminating the social and environmental costs that the current development model has generated. A suggestion would be to look at urban peripheries, inner areas, abandoned buildings, depopulated villages in the mountains or in rural areas; whatever has been marginalized and discarded has the potential to be the trigger of a new development path which could start from the axis between physical space and institutions rather than only from economy. Perhaps the clearest example in this perspective is a minor case involving Mr Mimmo Lucano, the mayor of Riace, a small town in Calabria, Italy. Faced with a town that has endured continual depopulation and contained an abundance of abandoned buildings, the mayor decided to invest in the essential renovation of buildings to welcome immigrants and asylum seekers, thus tackling two problems that are relevant to the community and the country: the progressive impoverishment of a small Calabrian town centre, with just over 2000 inhabitants, and the integration of migrants. This intervention was started by an institution (based upon the physical space) and is capable of dealing with both the deterioration of the local community and creating a new economy for the territory through the reactivation of small businesses and artisan activities that had gradually started to disappear.

Many are the examples of transforming abandoned or underused buildings into cultural centres, service centres, leisure spaces, and spaces for coworking, crafts and new forms of urban manufacturing in Italy and elsewhere. We began to call the actors of these processes of urban regeneration “city-makers”, subjects who are often active in difficult contexts, promoters of social innovation experiments in the fields of services, living, work, mobility and social cohesion (Calvaresi 2018). The effectiveness of these subjects’ actions can be multiplied through creative support from public administration, not so much in terms of financing, but support for the development of social intelligence that arises from a different relationship between public and local social networks.

In Amsterdam, one of the most planned cities in the world, against the backdrop of the financial crisis, which slowed down traditional development, a number of experimental interventions have flourished, starting with the reuse of abandoned industrial sites (Pepi 2018). The most famous is probably the NDSM operation in an area of abandoned shipyards on the other side of the main canal facing Amsterdam Central. As a result of an innovative form of agree-

ment between the municipality and the association Kinetisch Noord, the area has become an important new cultural and artistic hub for the city of Amsterdam, with more than 250 organisations self-managing spaces inside the big warehouse. Remaining on the north bank of the canal, another extremely interesting operation is that of the area called De Ceuvel. De Ceuvel became one of the first experiments, under the municipal guidance of the district planning office, with the aim of activating a place-making process that could benefit the entire neighbourhood. The area of about 5000 sq metres, a former shipyard site, is heavily polluted and the process of reusing the site goes hand in hand with an innovative experiment involving phytoremediation. The tender for a 10-year free loan launched in 2012 was won by a local association led by architects and young associations. It was inaugurated in 2014 and now hosts 25 activities in floating houses.

In Paris, the project “Réinventer Paris” was launched by the local government which made 23 publicly-owned unused or underused sites available (areas and buildings). The municipality requested the construction of partnerships between local networks, developers and managing subjects, and made a selection based upon their ability to produce urban innovation in the fields of social housing, new jobs and community development (Cottino 2017). This project, which began in 2014, is still in progress and has been relaunched by the C40 network and implemented in many other cities, including Milan and Madrid.

The Italian National Strategy of Internal Areas (SNAI) is a central government initiative. Launched in 2012 by the then Minister for Territorial Cohesion, Fabrizio Barca, the strategy seeks to curb depopulation and marginalization in the internal territories of Italy, where 23 percent of the population resides and which occupies 60 percent of the national territory. These are areas far from the main services, where the SNAI seeks to help local subjects and social networks that are open to innovation exit the vicious circle of marginality through a structured approach to enhancing territorial assets. This is a complex operation that also starts at the nexus of territory, local networks and institutions.

Across the whole of Europe, there is potentially a long list of episodes of innovation of this kind. These are small and large, current and potential initiatives that can be viewed as a set of isolated cases or as the anticipation of emerging transformative practices which could be connected in a network. Recalling Patsy Healey,

one could say that these are “episodes of innovation” that exploit different circumstances and become “new government practices”, which, if they are able to consolidate, “travel” in different environments and – as she says – can aspire to change the governance culture (Healey 2007). And nowadays the opportunity to travel is enhanced by new infrastructure.

If we observe their development, we discover that these experiences use infrastructure and platforms in the opposite direction to that of hierarchy and centralization, which are typical of the dominant forms of the platform economy. It could be said, following on from Galison (1997), that infrastructure is in this regard a trading zone: a zone of exchange where potentially adversarial interpretations of re-concentration and decentralization intersect. They are the space of flows in which public and private actors, and human and non-human subjects move, and whose competitive interaction determines the development direction for cities and territories. In the ideal process defined by Healey, today’s network infrastructure is the vehicle that will transform single episodes of innovation into more far-reaching socio-cultural and economic changes.

Moving in this direction requires making choices in terms of positioning. The first choice entails recognising the need to re-evaluate the role of the public sector and planning. Just as large public investments have been behind major disruptive technological innovations (Internet, World Wide Web, touch screen technology etc.) (Mazzucato 2011), we can also say that cities and territories are behind the major changes in the economy, such as large concentrations of public investments, spaces and infrastructure. Thus, we can contrast the negative image of the public sector with the positive image of the “Entrepreneurial State” (ibid.), and the negative image of planning as the bureaucratic tormenting of free initiatives with the positive image of planning that, starting from the physical space, rebuilds a well-organized, inclusive and welcoming city, helping to select and promote innovations.

The second positioning choice concerns orientation in the transition. We are certainly in the midst of a difficult transition and it seems to me that it helps to understand how to orient oneself if we take the standpoint of Hirschman’s “possibilism”. In his reflections on the difficulties encountered by development projects in poor countries in the 1950s and 1960s – an extreme case of transition – he pushes for abandoning standardized recipes and searching in-

stead for hidden resources to be activated, for “avenues of escape” which may be unexpected and creative: “Possibilism is based on the belief that change within any given setting is always possible, but that identifying agents of change requires a propensity to search for hidden rationalities or interpretations of local settings which at first sight might be counter-intuitive” (Hirschman 1958). A possibilist approach within this framework would have to rely on the strengthened role of the public, the renewed concept of planning, far from central control and based on a collaborative, strategic and inclusive approach able to design development opportunities with the help of many different knowledge communities, thus enhancing them, connecting them in a network and amplifying their potential to use socio-technical systems to expand opportunities and benefits for citizens (Amin, Thrift 2017).

The cases mentioned above, when considered through the lens of possibilism, also demonstrate a potential reconstruction of the connection between *urbs* and *civitas* in the extended city and in the areas in contraction, contradicting the millenarian dogma that views this link as irreparably broken. The most recent book by Bruno Latour (2018), *Down to Earth*, elaborating on the concept of “Terrestrial”, seems to open in this direction. The “Terrestrial” is a place to construct new relationships between territorial rootedness and planetary dynamics, between care for one’s own living environment and awareness of its ecosystemic links.

This relationship contrasts with the dichotomy between localism and globalism that characterized the previous phase and has led to increased inequality, fear and selfishness. It has undermined the relationship between *urbs* and *civitas*. This great scholar shows us a possible direction – but it is a navigation route, not a road map; it is up to us to understand how to navigate political winds and currents.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have tried to show that addressing issues and processes that are normally analysed separately as a whole allows us to highlight two important aspects: (i) the effects of the co-evolution of strongly interdependent phenomena; and (ii) the direction of causality assumed by relationships. This allows us to determine which spaces are open to transformative actions, changing the nature and direction of the current relationships. My intention has been

to clarify how we can interpret and understand the transition within which we operate and to indicate a growing space of action for planning, even in the difficult times in which we live.

Notes

- 1 A first draft of this paper was translated by Ashleigh Rose.
- 2 This observation was proposed at a seminar organised by the European Commission by Ivan Tosics, director of the Metropolitan Research Institute, Budapest.

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