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Peripheral centralities: an integrated approach

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Abstract

There is a profound ongoing change in urban settlements and this particular phenomenon can be observed principally in the relationships between central and peripheral areas.

The peripheral areas constitute the context in which the future of urban settlements can be properly tested, where the future quality of life of individuals and of communities can be prefigured. The criteria of safety, sustainability, and welfare, which will be covered in the context of peripheral areas, will become continually more important. The sense of identity and belonging, which is stronger in the central parts, is weak or lacking in the peripheral ones.

A sort of spreading centrality should be aimed at, by applying an integrated approach, with an adaptation to the specifics and without losing the required uniformity.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades awareness has been growing that the urban dimension, even more so than that of single buildings, is fundamental for pursuing the considerable goal of sustainability. This has brought to light the need to revamp the approach to the built environment, establishing a systemic and holistic perspective as the basis, in the consciousness that excessive specialism may be ineffective, if not outright damaging¹.

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The importance of interaction between buildings and their (natural and artificial) surroundings, and the role of open spaces, were highlighted with a particular eye to energy efficiency, and thanks to studies and experimentation based on the multi-scale analysis and solutions (i.e. those financed by Call H2020 EeB-05-2015 “Innovative design tools for refurbishing of buildings at district level”). This aspect of sustainability is fundamental for controlling the depletion of environmental resources, and cannot be shut away in a technical and specialized sphere, because it is conditioned by socio-economic aspects and, at the same time, depends on cultural behavioural factors. Therefore, there is a need to be sensitive towards the multi-scale nature of the phenomena, all of which should be borne in mind methodologically, with regard to knowledge, the project itself and its management. Furthermore, sustainable urban regeneration dictates the need for transversal contributions from various disciplines, integrated through the involvement of consumers, citizens, administrators and economic operators. In addition to this, the district-scale allows a wider overall vision, without eluding reality, and provides an opportunity to tackle the social aspects as a dimension of sustainability; this requires the local authorities to take on their responsibility.

This paper is the result of converging lines of thought shaped in diverse academic fields (Architectural Design; Architectural Technology; Urban Design), but which, in fact, refer to the same operational reality. We aim to contribute to defining a common and integrated methodology for an approach to knowledge and town-planning, and the practical application of which is ascribable to innovation in planning tools, operational procedures and management activity. Regarding the topic of peripheral areas, we singled out an element that characterises a large part of the contemporary city, using it as a testing ground for prefiguring its future, with a reference to the quality of life of the individual and the community over the coming decades.

The relationships between the peripheral and central areas (which in Europe are often linked to the connotation of heritage^{2,3}, are rather complex and often reflect a social conflict and economic forces. Processes of urban regeneration geared towards sustainability cannot ignore the continuous and growing evolution of these relationships, those are fundamental in the structuring of the city-system.

The paper draws its assumptions from the actual concept of urban periphery, as a relatively recent phenomenon in the forms those have been assumed in the contemporary world, which derive from the consequences of industrialization on social transformations and the evolutionary dynamics of urban phenomena. Subsequently, considerations extend to the evolution of the central and peripheral parts of the city and their reciprocal relationship, which today is increasingly ambiguous and conflicting. There is a discussion of trans-scalar methodology to attribute new orientations to the plan and the project, such as the *città in estensione* (lit. *city in extension*)⁴, which, by exploiting the opportunities on offer from technological innovation, might contribute to resolving the problems of peripheral areas and may improve the quality of those living there.

2. Peripheral areas: a “modern” phenomenon with a key role in urban metabolism

The sustainable regeneration of contemporary peripheral districts in the Mediterranean region could well obtain useful indications from several settlements model that survived from antiquity up to the industrial revolution. Particularly, with the conscious and avowed juxtaposition between *urbs* (city) and *rus* (country) as was the case in Roman dominions at the time of the Empire, the town and cultivated countryside constituted a distinct but they were complementary poles of a clearly identifiable symbiosis, against a background of uncontaminated nature. Several important studies view the centre-periphery relationship in the archaeological environment as an open-ended question in the construction of a unitary vision of human evolution on a global level^{5,6}, where the issue is being interwoven with economic studies associated with historical periods preceding capitalism⁷. However, it is indicative that the phrase *urban peripheral areas* only became widespread in the second half of the 20th century, mainly deriving from the construction of satellite townships around industrial cities at the end of the 19th century in the western world⁸.

The centre-peripheral area relationship has taken on new meanings with the advent of the ecological perspective. Grafting itself on to a theoretical renewal triggered by a sociological approach launched in the first part of the century, this perspective found the seeds for its development in the analogies between city and living organisms (*urban metabolism*) and the big city’s conditioning of the human mind. The distinction in social class, which had always existed, started to manifest itself in the identification of diverse parts of the urban space, to the point of suggesting a model with concentric circles, such as the one proposed by Burgess⁹, in which the centre (centre of

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