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Title: Managing urban conflict through urban design; insights from the Northern Ireland for Italy

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Atelier: 6. Inequalities, coexistence and conflicts

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(ii) thesis:

Several contemporary European and Italian cities are plagued by issues derived by social conflict, due to the presence of different groups divided by their income, culture, religion or race. These issues need to be tackled through an integrated approach, thus pushing planners to use cross-cutting and multifaceted tools.

This presentation focuses on the role of urban design, as driver of complexity, in contributing to analyse and manage contested urban spaces.

The main thesis is that, by incorporating social and cultural features in the current urban design methods, it is possible to cope with the challenges of those neighbourhoods, where the effectiveness of traditional tools is undermined by particular issues (i.e.: urban violence, crime, religious conflict...). In operational terms, this goal is pursued by recasting the Kevin Lynch approach (*The image of the city*, 1960) in a wider perspective, thus creating a new taxonomy of the urban elements showing the (hidden or not) conflict (i.e.: edge, border, barrier, door, visual control point, access node, shared space) and implementing it to read, interpret and manage the urban form. The methodology is first built and tested in some areas located in Belfast, then re-tested in Naples, in order to verify its transferability from the UK to the Italian context.

(iii) field of reference and arguments:

This presentation draws from a current research program, undertaken by a European research team based in Italy (Naples) and Northern Ireland (Belfast). The field of reference is urban planning and urban design, with a specific attention paid to the social impacts of urban design and management. In so doing, the presentation recognises a specific role to the urban form management and its interaction with the social actors of the city.

(iv) research perspectives:

The paper aims to produce useful tools for coping with contested spaces in European cities.

It pushes the existing body of knowledge forward, by introducing an innovative methodology in the urban design practice, suitable to be implemented in contested neighbourhoods. It may be further developed through research programs aimed at involving local stakeholders in pilot action plans, to demonstrate the possible effectiveness of the proposed approach.

Managing urban conflict through urban design; insights from the Northern Ireland for Italy

1. Reasons for a research

The rupture between the complexity of the multicultural demand and the inadequacy of the urban planning response could produce or exaggerate conflicts, marginality and decay. Several contemporary cities are plagued by issues of social conflict due to the presence of different groups divided by their cultures, religions or ethnic issues. An example might be the ethnic enclave created by intentionally segregating policies (such as divided cities in South Africa, Palestine and Northern Ireland), the effect of unwittingly segregating policies (as in France and the UK), or the absence of policies dedicated to integration (in most multicultural cities). (Somma, 1991) Social studies have explored in depth the effects of multiculturalism on the space-function balance of the city, i.e. the creation of scenarios characterized by advanced stages of multiculturalism (Germain, 2000; Ray, 2003; Hutchison, Krase, 2007).

Among the recurring themes, it is possible to find urban security and safety (Body-Gendrot, Martiniello, 2000), urban identity, as well as the search for new dimensions of citizenship (Allam, Martiniello, Tosolini, 2004, Castles, 2000). In addition, new scenarios of urban conflicts in multicultural saucers suggest us to review – under a different perspective – the classical urban sociology and urban planning such as that of Park, Burgess, McKenkie (1925), but also Gottmann (1960), Jacobs (1961) and McLuhan (1968).

The phenomena commonly harvested in the definition of globalization are changing the look and functions of cities around the world (Mazza, 1988; Sandercock, 1998) and, in counterpoint, the local dimension, neighbourhood scale and participatory democracy, have been enhanced. The idea of identity has been rediscovered (Sandercock, 2003): if, on the one hand, globalization tends to be disassociated from specific spaces and places (Amendola, 2001), on the other hand, we realize that identities based on places are becoming increasingly important. The place becomes a constitutive moment of both individual and collective identity (Augé, 1992). The strengthening of the instance of identity leads to the accentuation of tensions and conflicts: since the concept of identity is developed by contrast (only in the presence of a plurality can one or more identities be distinguished), it is useful to analyse the ways in which such contrasts are recognized and how such spaces and places of multicultural diversity are lived in. (Body-Gendrot, Martiniello, 2000)

The theme of the multicultural European city has renewed interest in the semantic values, collective memory and primary elements of the city (Rossi, 1966) – the *genius loci* (Norberg-Schulz, 1980) in opposition to "non-lieux" by Augé (1992) – to favour the integration of cultures and the coexistence of peoples. The tension between the trend toward cultural uniformity and the tendency to preserve local identities affects the majority of medium and large European cities that are now fragmented socially, economically and culturally. "At the same time, European cities are places where you can develop meetings between groups and where cultural production takes place. The cities are the crossroads between local and global." (Martiniello, Piquard, 2002)

Where the social complexity of the postmodern and post-global city is enriched by multiculturalism (Amendola, 2001), we can find location choices and development forms that are repetitive and could be interpreted as anchors of a new urbanization, oriented to facilitating cultural encounter and interaction through respect for different identities and exploitation of common aspects. To these philosophies correspond top-down policies and bottom-up experiences that could be translated into theoretical principles and physical transformations of the territory, particularly in the areas of urban crisis. Conflicts, risks and insecurity appear exaggerated in the perception of urban inhabitants and also have begun to have some impact on the physical city: gated communities, video surveillance and abandonment of public spaces are some of the emerging phenomena changing the face of large areas of cities. (Madanipour, 2004)

Interpretations of specific expressions of urban conflict are difficult to generalize, as the system of relationships between fluxes, places, spaces and urban functions are all complex and dynamic. The possibility of directing urban development towards solving long-standing and renewed social and cultural conflicts has been strongly influenced by the suitability of spaces and urban places for promoting primary relationships, including those of a transient and unstable dimension. The competition encourages unions which, however, translate into opposition between groups who affirm its specificity and diversity through the expression and representation of their cultural system of interest such as language, tradition and religion. The

awareness of the inherently plural character of the city suggests, preliminarily, that it would be worthwhile to investigate the convergence and concentration of cultural, religious and ethnic groups in the city that are grafted onto established phenomena of urban poverty, social exclusion and spatial segregation – which are causing the explosion of various forms of conflict today. (Mingione, 1991) The deepening of the conflicts – induced by multicultural coexistences in the city – shows that urban planning and architecture can play an important role. The answers should come from the city, its neighbourhoods, its architecture, its ability to encourage and give form to integrated and inclusive community.

A case-study research methodology has been adopted in order to capture the multifaceted issues embedded in such a complex condition (Yin, 2003). The case study approach focuses on Belfast, which has been struggling for years with problems related to inter-religious conflicts. By applying the Lynch approach, the urban pattern of some areas in Belfast (i.e. the interface areas crossed by the so-called peace-lines) is analysed, in order to demonstrate the impact of social conflict on the urban grid. The results will be applied in the context of deprived peripheries of the north area of Naples (Southern Italy) struggled by crime organizations, higher unemployment rates and social divisions.

2. Setting the context: urban design for social conflict

In a globalized society – which is increasing exchanges on one hand and increasing forms of social, cultural, ethnic segregation on the other hand – it is impossible to start design processes without considering social complexity. (Melotti, 2004) Contemporary cities have been addressing a mature dimension of multiculturalism and – in the absence of well-administered long-term strategies – yet have betrayed their potentialities, producing tensions and conflicts. (Signorelli, 2000)

In the multicultural scenario, a range of possible factors that generate conflicts has been identified. (Sassen, 1999) It is possible to find – inside the diverse components of settlements, projects and policies, whether completed or in progress – some urban public spaces and some aspects of the infrastructural tissue that either favour or impede encounters among diversities. Among the various components of the settlements – and related policies and projects implemented and/or in progress – this paper focuses on the configuration of the public city and in particular of public spaces and connective tissue. (Martiniello, Piquard, 2002).

When this process is associated to choices of spatial self-segregation in specialized areas based on social class, religion and ethnicity, the communication gap and the absence of dialogue increase: in this case, gated communities have been developed that physically separate the different social milieus more or less rigidly by means of walls and fences. Cities thus characterised – that is, delineated by fences that enclose consistent contexts for configurations of wealth, ethnicity, social class and religion – have been popular in the Americas for a long time and have also begun to appear in European cities, despite inertia linked to cross-cultural traditions in their urban histories. It is not a coincidence that the "New Charter of Athens", adopted in Lisbon on 20 November 2003 by the European Council of Town Planners adopted the vision of "the connected city" to guide the process of building the European city as an expression of a multicultural and interconnected society:

“The future welfare of humanity requires people to be considered both as individuals, with specific freedoms of choice to be maintained, but also as communities connected to society as a whole. This is an important goal for the connected city, which is responsive to the interests of society as a whole, whilst having regard to the needs, rights and duties of various cultural groups and of individual citizens.”

In multicultural areas, market trends, urban planning and poorly integrated social policies have favoured spontaneous aggregations, through emphasizing, in most cases, different forms of self-segregation. (Khakee, Somma, Thomas, 1999) Social networks established through the years have guided the organization of the built environment in multicultural cities (Madanipour, 2004) by producing aggregations due to solidarity chains, economic interests, different religions and cultural vocations. (Beguinot, 2004) We are thinking about the urban enclaves set up by Chinese communities in North American and European cities that represent a city within the city. These areas have been built with a business approach to be strategic centres of trade as well as culturally isolated settlements set apart from local communities.

Scholars in the field as such as Sassen, Beguinot and Madanipour have covered this findings: despite the multiplicity of location choices, a constant point of contact between the different scenarios can be identified: the diversity - cultural, ethnic, religious and social - creates forms of conflict that can hardly be attributed to a single matrix. The outbreak of the conflict in extreme forms leads us to consider not only the socio-anthropological implications of the problem but also the impact of spaces and places in increasing or mitigating conflicts. The school of thought led by the Aldo Della Rocca Foundation – an urban studies institution based in Rome – has identified the “architecture of dialogue and for dialogue” as the methodological approach to be pursued. (Beguinot, 2004) As this approach makes clear, with the support of findings from environmental psychology research, urban planning and architecture should face intercultural conflicts by providing places and spaces for encounter and dialogue in order to draw down the walls between communities.

3. Conflicting neighbourhoods in Belfast

This section provides the reader with an overview on the Belfast context. The roots of economic, political, social and cultural issues in Northern Ireland have been extensively investigated and have given rise to heated interdisciplinary debates during the period of violence and during the peace process. In this paper has proposed the spatial and morphological interpretation of the phenomenon, leaving the sociological and political to the copious literature available on this complex issue (Shirlow, Murtagh, 2006; Boal, Royle, 2006) We would simply point out some salient passages to help understanding the process of transformation of the physical-functional tissue of the city of Belfast.



Fig. 1 - Murals and fences in North Belfast and the Shankill (photomontages made by authors)

The complex web of economic interests, cultural vocations, religious confessions and social conditions that have characterized the two groups that could be ascribed to the loyalist or nationalist communities - have created for centuries to many events played by manipulating the laws of market and the rules of political

representation. A kind of trench warfare, which saw the Catholic community in a subordinate position and increasingly deprived of the opportunity to express their discomfort through traditional channels of democratic representatives. (Horgan, 2006) These socio-political processes that have been merged with urban transformation processes, either explicitly or implicitly, oriented to the segregation, both in terms of social class and in terms of sense of community. (Boal, 1995) Population growth in the first half of 1900, together with the disposal of industrial and economic crisis, have contributed to stress deprivation phenomena and the processes of expulsion and auto-segregation at the neighbourhood scale, paving the way for the explosion of the "troubles" of the 1969. (Branson, 2007) This season of blood has been interpreted by scholars of all and has produced visual art and literature, collected and exposed by the Linen Library of Belfast preserves and presents the documentation of these terrible years of violence, which burned in fifteen years more lives than a conventional military conflict.



Fig. 2 - Barriers and murals in the New Lodge catholic quarter (photomontages made by authors)

From the point of view of the urban organization, tensions (before), conflict (later) and the peace process (now) have produced visible traces in spite of the intense urban development produced by the beginning of the peace process. The scenario is represented by exclusively residential gated communities, fenced, with access protected by gates or other barriers, with the internal distribution provided by cul-de-sac with and homes that offer the back to the principal roads. Different typologies of clusters of housing settlements have united by the need to ensure the visual control of the territory and regulate access, allowing only those who belong to the community.

The morphological and functional transformations produced could be grouped in:

- cul-de-sac,
- fenced neighborhoods with a controlled access,
- abandoned housing in borderline areas,
- highways and infrastructural barriers,
- buffer areas created through the insertion of productive areas inside the housing tissue,

- police fortified presidia and video-surveillance in strategic crossroads,
- re-development and refurbishment of “neutral areas” for commercial and leisure.



Fig. 3 – Extreme periphery in central areas, City Centre area, militarized police station, West link motorway cutting the city fabric, interface wall separating two neighbourhoods (photomontages made by authors)

Upon every defensive typology we can find the so-called peace lines: the walls of Belfast. (Boal, Royle, 2006) These different fences have been built for years to protect communities or to increase their perception of security. The multiplicity of fences and the no-man’s-land around has been listed by the “Belfast Interface Project”.

Within the EU PEACE Project, launched in 1994, and through some initiatives of the Belfast City Council as well as of some focus groups and lobbies representing the different communities, it is being done the consultation with stakeholders to foster dialogue and to understand how the perception of insecurity affects in keeping the community divided. There has been many studies of socio-anthropological, political science, economics and law matrix to promote the destruction of physical and mental walls that have divided for years Catholic and Protestant communities. Participatory processes have been initiated to promote dialogue; at the same time have been improving experiences of community engagement and planning in the conflicting districts that have been most affected by riots. In parallel, have been completed and are in progress many redevelopment projects for public, private or mixed initiatives, involving the city center, the waterfront and some industrial areas, with the objective of promoting urban development and improve its competitiveness.

In this scenario, has been designed a case study with the objective of developing a methodology for supporting the interpretation and definition of action plans to be applied in the interface areas, to accompany a non-traumatic process of de-construction of the peace lines, using a gradual process of reconstruction of the physical and functional interconnections that took place before the conflict.

4. Appreciating social conflict in Belfast through the urban pattern

A photographic survey, interviews with key players, the comparison with the maps available as well as the visual analysis carried out on the field – walking and driving along the borders between the different conflicting neighbourhoods – have led us to focus on the connective tissue between the city center – Cathedral Quarter, home to the University of Ulster and catalyst for cultural and recreational activities – and the residential areas north of the crown which have a strong majority of Protestant or Catholic population: The Shankill, Falls and New Lodge.



Fig. 4 – Map of the city centre plus the crown of neighbourhoods)

In this context, in fact, has been found a significant number of each typology of physical transformation of the territory for reasons that have been recorded in defensive urban environment (Somma, 1991), as described in the previous paragraph. In the study area have found examples of two categories of barriers that have produced a break in the continuity of the urban grid and that have caused a phenomenon of impounding suburbanization of the districts themselves:

- the construction of fenced and monitored industrial and service areas (some now abandoned) used as buffer areas
- the creation of an highway, the Westlink, which separates the centre from the deprived neighbourhoods of the crown.

Recent studies have found that there are still feelings of fear and mistrust in the communities that are living in the conflicting neighbourhoods and more than 75% of the population reveals that the walls are strongly needed (Jarman, 2005). This deters from proposing radical measures for the destruction of the walls. In this study we introduce an approach based on the gradual reconstruction of the physical and functional relations between the divided parts of the city and the city centre. The reconstruction of secondary roads stopped or diverted as a result of the construction of barriers has been based on the identification of *lines of desire* to the city centre expressed by local communities.

In order to recognize and share the lines of desire along the borders, it was necessary to make recourse to an established methodology of interpretation that could also be a basis for dialogue with the affected communities. To do this has been taken as guide the method described by Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City* (1969) and has been identified the symbolic elements of the representation of urban perception that could be applied in the case study of Belfast. At this aim, have been listed the elements of the Lynch-style taxonomy, in order to apply them to the Belfast interface areas. In particular the elements considered can be grouped in: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. The *Lynchian* approach has been applied to the perception of the image of the city through the comparison of the symbolic interpretations of the different key actors that are individually representative of the different points of view. The design of the “Lynch style” perceptive map has become the base of the on-going discussion among decision makers, grassroots movements and end-users of urban spaces.

We will create a taxonomy of the urban element showing the (hidden or not) conflict in terms of edges, borders, barriers, doors, visual control points, access nodes, shared space. This taxonomy will be applied to two selected areas: the interface between Falls and the Shankill and the interface in New Lodge.

This mapping in progress forms the basis for discussion with community workers and stakeholders, in order to detect the *lines of desire* of the individual and collective memory of the divided communities. This methodological approach has been tested through a dialogue with representatives of universities and scientific research, with technicians and professionals working in the area, with representatives of institutions and representatives of local communities. The various parties involved have agreed in considering the use of a method Lynch-style fruitful to deal with local communities and to identify the symbolic elements from which starting to re-build the connections (physical and mental) lost. This findings could be the base to identify the physical and virtual connections to be restored or re-proposed in different ways for starting a process of retrofitting of the damaged urban grid beyond the walls. This process could be the way for accompanying the divided communities to accept a gradual removal of the existing barriers.

5. Transferable results

According to the Healey’s definition of planning as “managing our co-existence in shared space” (Healy, 1997) the research presented in this paper is a work in progress; in particular, this paper has illustrated the potential of an approach centred on urban design in order to analyse, interpret and manage conflicting neighbourhoods, whose residents show distinct cultural features. To do this, a case study research method has been adopted, in order to capture the multi-faceted issues embedded in such a complex condition. The focus on the Belfast interfaces between conflicting neighbourhoods allowed us to identify and test a possible methodology of intervention to promote dialogue between divided communities through reconnecting the interrupted urban grid.

By comparing the urban grid before and after the construction of the peace-lines, has been possible to demonstrate the impact of the conflict in terms of urban form, in particular in terms of “connectivity”. Interviews produced the evidence that the broken spatial grid mirrors the interrupted social network.

The literature review and the findings of previous research activities allow us to identify in the Lynch-approach the way to discuss and collect reactions and needs of the divided communities. This phase has been oriented to investigate parts of the interrupted grid to be primarily reconnected to start the process of retrofitting and the gradual removal of existing barriers.

Finally, the potential of retrofitting the existing damaged urban grid by gradually re-designing the urban pattern is tested, by interviewing key actors on the opportunity to mediate the conflict in these kind of “cross-border” areas.

Further development of the research will be testing of the taxonomy on selected areas of the Northern crown of Naples. In this context we can find other kinds of social division to be managed; crime activities provides a sort of trench warfare that need to be analysed and interpreted for improving action protocols for spaces and functions organizations.

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