

The image of the Latin metropolis: The role of design in tackling contemporary social needs

A imagem da metrópole latina: o papel do design como possível suporte às necessidades da sociedade

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Abstract

The development of a culture of design, perceived as a process of interactions applied to the contemporary city, finds in the socio-technical interactions with the territory a plankton fertile in opportunities. From this point of view, the practice and 'traditional scope' of the project understood as an independent, more or less autonomous variable, finds in the metaphorical image of the Latin territory certain conflicts and limitations. The conditions of spontaneous social interaction with the artificial result in a naturally participatory and interactive process, which, in this reflection, points to the need for a new disciplinary approach to the project through design; an approach that, faced with the particular DNA of Latin territories, should be based on common denominators prevalent in those regions, largely characterised by the need for a soft interaction. In this context, breaking away from the traditional project's practice model in regard to the refunctionalizing of the city becomes paramount; this is a conflict that requires new disciplinary approaches and possible new relations applied to the sustainable functioning of the contemporary city. The subject here presented intends to build a conscious and mature picture of the challenges facing design as a discipline that operates at the level of the demands arising from the "present" functioning of the 21st century city. In a transversal analysis, supported with emblematic examples collected through micro experiences in the territory, it is possible to envision the frameworks encompassing the *modus vivendi* and their forms of social expression as central and essential variables to the practice of the city's use; this is a socio-technical context that highlights the need for a new interactive and proactive balance between society, territory and project. Through the interpretation of different territorial contexts, a new territory of design intervention becomes visible; an intervention that implies the integration of soft tools and which are naturally differentiated by the continuous integration of socio-technical values that resiliently operate in the ongoing regeneration of the city.

Key words: social design, resilient city, soft interaction, social innovation.

Resumo

O desenvolvimento da cultura do design, enquanto processo de interacção aplicado à cidade contemporânea, encontra um plâncton fértil de oportunidades de acção, de interacções sócio-técnicas com o próprio território. A prática e 'domínio tradicional' do projecto enquanto variável independente, mais ou menos autónoma, causa, segundo a imagem metafórica do território latino, conflitos e certas fragilidades. As condições de interacção social e espontânea com os artefactos resultam num processo naturalmente dialogante e interactivo que, nesta reflexão, indica o caminho para uma nova abordagem disciplinar do projecto através do design; uma abordagem que, ao confrontar-se com o DNA dos territórios latinos, rege-se sobre denominadores comuns segundo a necessidade de uma interacção *soft*. Neste contexto, torna-se emblemática a ruptura com a prática do modelo actuante do projecto tradicional face à refuncionalização da cidade, um conflito que carece de novas abordagens disciplinares e novas relações possíveis aplicadas ao funcionamento da cidade sustentável. O tema abordado pretende construir um quadro consciente e avançado dos possíveis desafios do design, enquanto disciplina, que poderá interagir com as exigências do "actual" funcionamento da cidade do século XXI. Numa visão transversal, nutrida de exemplos emblemáticos, colectados por microexperiências, é possível visualizar um quadro de referência aos *modus vivendi* e a sua forma de expressão social como variável integrante e indispensável à prática do uso da cidade; um contexto sócio-técnico que coloca em grande destaque a necessidade de um novo equilíbrio interactivo, dialogante entre sociedade, território e projecto. Com a leitura de diferentes contextos territoriais, é visível um novo território de abordagens do design, abordagens que exigem a aplicação e integração de instrumentos *soft*; abordagens naturalmente diferenciadas pela integração contínua de valores sócio-técnicos que actuam de forma resiliente na contínua regeneração da cidade.

Palavras-chave: design social, cidade resiliente, interacção *soft*, inovação social.

Introduction

In this reflection, building the *image of the Latin metropolis* did not have the ambition to form or format a “parameterised” idea or meaning of a homogeneous city.

The construction of this image only serves the purpose of creating a metaphor for the fantastic space of interaction and complexity of the adaptive and permissive city; a space in which the strategic vision of the actors that monitor its function dialogue (in a formal or informal way) with the non-programmable spontaneous forces of economic, cultural and social origin that actively change the face of the city itself.

Throughout this reflection, this metaphor is used to enhance the image of all permissible cities, including non-Latin ones as well, which are in a strong crisis of function, cities where the real estate crisis represents an opportunity, confronted with the refunctioning process. In this sense, the idea of *Latin metropolis* is born, the idea of city with a resilient, elastic and flexible DNA, and which converts the problem of abandonment into a big opportunity through the integration of socially participatory phenomena, by integrating influences of a social, economic and cultural nature.

As a support for this view, the presence of spontaneity as a value is highlighted, emblematically connected with the Latin cities’ nature, during the 8th International Congress of Modern Architecture – CIAM 8 (Mumford, 2000, p. 201) In this event, Le Corbusier, referring in a tone of criticism to the fast reconstruction of post-war cities, shows the lack of this element—spontaneity—as an uncontrollable vital value for the ambition of the modern project; an element identified by the author in Italian and French cities.

Flashes of abandonment

The intention is not to build a full picture of abandonment, though, and having as a reference representative data collected in large cities, this will help us to visualize this phenomenon’s extension as a pathology of contemporary cities, visible on a global scale. In this sense, and in a first approach, the 50s are referred to a period in which it was possible to see the first forms of abandonment at societal level. This was the period in which the workforce was being replaced by integrated automation in the production chain, which later in the 70s created the electronic revolution (Gallino, 1998, p. 85). It is appropriate to emphasize the first forms of abandonment of the workforce a form of social abandonment at the first level that was created by the replacement of the human element by technological evolution, directed, ultimately, by the well-known “recursive automation” systems (Gallino, 1998, p. 85). While the reorganization of the production process began the path of independence and control, Bell (1973) announced the redirection of the social production force to the new area of services, a social transformation which the author called “the coming of post-industrial society”.

With the aim of approaching the moment of the major transformation in the use of the territory, a leap in history is proposed, now focused on the 90. According to Robertson (1996, p. 189), this was the decade which lived the “uncertainty of the globalization phase”, supported by digital highways that naturally propped up the technological advance of information itself. The planet has undergone a fast and accelerated transformation, facing a global relocation of services and productive forces. The time/space binomial dissolved itself (Friedman, 2005, p. 75) and rendered possible the repositioning of the production park at a global level because of low production costs, as well as the reorganization of services, a far reaching theme developed by prestigious authors such as Mumford (1982), Bridges (1995), De Masi (2003) and Rifkin (2000), among others. The reorganization of the service sector implied that what was once condensed in vertical buildings (Mumford, 1982, p. 577) is nowadays, with digital highways, scattered throughout a global territory. It is important to note that the Globalization Event opened the way for the “global city” concept as a network product, consequence of a new geography of centrality (Sassen, 2003, p. 7). As a further result of that, Tokyo announced the year 2002 as the “2003 problem”: in this year, the city presented a total of 2.27 million square meters¹ of abandoned buildings (in the office sector); the city of London, in the same year, also presented 4.73 million square meters of abandoned office space (Pereira, 2004, p. 90); in Italy, the scattered data in the industry and service area made it possible to quantify the area corresponding to 3 thousand hectares only in the industrial sector (Dansero, 1993, p. 40). In Portugal, in 2005 the existence of 3.3 million square meters in the industrial sector was recognized (Ribeiro and Teixeira, 2005), not to mention the well known metropolises such as New York, Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires².

Contemporary cities – between crisis and opportunity

When Anselm Kifer (2004) built “the seven heavenly palaces” inside an abandoned industrial building (a former steam engine factory) in Milan, with its *seven celestial towers* built with concrete modules from the demolition of other buildings, he built the fantastic metaphor of a city that regenerates itself within its abandoned industrial structures. This installation serves as an interpretative key to the valuing of reuse as a sustainable value for the city itself. Naturally, the rates of abandonment in these contemporary cities reflect an economy in crisis, an economy that, according to Kelly (1994), shows a state of permanent depression, is in a continuous state of survival, also extended to a new biologic machine (the city), social systems and the global economy.

As a reinforcement of the perspective of reuse, aimed at a sustainable dialogue for the city, it is appropriate to identify an economy that is fed by the very crisis, which Cunningham (2002, p. 7) called the *restoration economy*.

¹ Data collected based on an interview with Prof. Matsumura, University of Tokyo (June 2006).

² The data indicated the cities that can be observed in a dissertation the author (Roda, 2007, p. 47-63).

No less important is to mention the importance of the city's mutation, a value identified by Lynch (1988, p. 12). To the author, cities are a continuous attempt of errors and failures through which buildings become open to new meanings. In this line of thought, Mumford (1982, p. 597) also reinforces the importance of giving continuity to the built environment – a process that gives vitality to the city itself –, as well as the importance of the complexity resulting from combining different functions in urban areas (Jacobs, 1989, p. 144).

The disciplinary reasons pointed out by several authors can be observed through the analysis of selected emblematic case studies. The cases which are presented naturally contribute to support the reflection about the city that regenerates from the inside *versus* the outside, and sometimes without any control by the authorities responsible.

Bottom-up inputs that revive the urban territory

In this approach there was no intention to judge the space of informality characterized as the place of disorder and as negative, that space subject to a disciplinary discussion about the validity of its possible impact on the territory.

Instead, the intention was to highlight the positive side of informal regeneration, which entails proactive values led by society, applied to the territory and capable of creating possible paths for innovation.

It is appropriate to revisit the emblematic case studies, present throughout the history of urban regeneration, in order to build a mental journey of the cross-observation of these cases and to be able to identify the influences of informal origin, already integrated and consolidated by various disciplines that tend to give shape to these *inputs*.

No less important is the decoding of the user's nature, who is the stakeholder available for the involvement with these informal spaces. It can be observed that this user, initially, was composed of irreverent creatives (communities of artists of the 40s), who informally occupied unindustrialized areas in the cities. This reality may be seen in the history of New York City, since the 40s of the 20th century. The city's regeneration has a long history, remembered by various notable authors, among whom are Zukin (1989), Simpson (1981), Kostelanetz (2003), among others. From the city's history, it is essential to summarize that these artists' intervention in the urban area of the city symbolized a radical change in the way of inhabiting the city itself. The overlapping of everyday life functions is now concentrated in a single space. According to Sharon Zukin (1989), this step represented a radical change, which the author identifies as decisive regarding the ideas of the functionalist architecture. In this context the author says: "So loft living rejects functionalism, Le Corbusier, and the severe form idealism that modern architecture represents" (Zukin, 1989, p. 68).

Today, these groups are called creative communities, highly familiarized with information technology, and they are labeled by Longo (2001) as *homo technologicus*. It is unprecedented that groups of users naturally interact with urban refunctioning, in addition to their other already

mentioned features. Initially (in the 40s) these groups were responsible for the free forms of occupation through solutions considered provisional, without intention of creating rigid results in the space. The emergence of this new interface with the empty contributed to a new relationship with the dwelling, a 'model' that followed a completely opposite direction to the one in the first modernity. These experiences contributed to a process considered outside the norm, not shared by the spirits of that time. Using Bauman's analogy (1999, p. 42), those groups of users belonged to those whom the author called "wanderers," users who moved outside the norm, the rules imposed by society. As social innovation applied to the territory, the regeneration of the laws regarding housing becomes distinctive; initially rigid, they regenerated themselves when confronted with the illegality of these groups (*Law of Loft*, 1982) and, ultimately, led to the innovation, formalization of an illegal form of use, recognized as *loftstyle* or *loftliving* (year 1975). They were baptized by Sharon Zukin (1989), who by disseminating the awareness of this alternative living, in the 1970s, supported the great inflation of the price of informal spaces, which reached more than 700% (Zukin, 1989; Simpson, 1981, p. 234).

In terms of recovering these values, Tokyo and Osaka show the involvement of users strongly related to information technology. In both cities, and focusing on Osaka (*Funaba* district), it is possible to observe a government strategy in the reuse of these buildings, which encourages groups of users that work with information technology (Shimura, 2005, p. 93).

In fact, the Japanese government has stimulated the regeneration of abandoned areas in the city applying the SOHO typology, a model that promotes the integration of a multitude of functions together with those specific groups of users. It is also important to highlight that this typology was implemented in new buildings, such as Shinonome and City Court in Tokyo, Battersea Power Station in London, among others.

At a macro level analysis, it is important to highlight the significance of local culture, which, through participatory socioeconomic relations, emerges as a factor of valuing of the abandoned territory and as an opportunity to create value. Specific cases of this model are mentioned in the context of some major cities: Milan, a city recognized as the world's center of design, an event that has a strong connection with the use of abandoned industrial buildings; Rio de Janeiro, with the Carnival, the most popular party in the world and which until 2006 was made in abandoned buildings in the city's port; Lisbon, with its temporary refunctioning according to the 'creative cities' energy, regenerating spaces about to be demolished by the real estate lobbies that today are in crisis (LXFactory, operated by highly creative activities); and, finally, Tokyo, with the events *Tokyo Design Block* (TDB) in conjunction with the *Central East Tokyo* (CET) (Roda, 2007).

In all cases identified, the presence of design as an implicit factor in urban refunctioning can be seen. The conversion of buildings or blocks in the presented contexts produces gains that not always have a direct relationship with wealth production. But in all cases it

appears that the conversion produces a beneficial effect on the urban economy of the cities concerned.

The city as a participatory product. What is the responsibility of design?

The city viewed through the continuous reinterpretation of its spaces, led by the energy of creative social groups, produces in this reflection an idea of an evolutionary city where the transfer and integration of values with social interaction feeds the force of an engine to power the city's renewal. This may be a clear idea of a city that generates micro intensive and experimental trials; experiences of informal nature led by its users, which in this analysis develops the idea of a participatory society. Through its micro inputs, leading to possible *evolutionary habitats*, the contemporary metropolis becomes resistant to the crisis of function it faces, contributing to and ensuring in this way the concept of a city that regenerates itself throughout its history.

Naturally, this social creative energy completely abandons the *pre-established habitat models* and interacts with the empty spaces of the city. In this sense, the *project as a process* faces some fragility, considering its traditional leadership role, and tends to be replaced in that role by the participant who lives in the city and acts as integrator and manager of the validity of their own proposals. As an embryonic sign of this fragility, it becomes relevant to remind once more the speech of *Le Corbusier* in the city of Hoddesdon in the year 1952. At this last International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM 8), whose theme focused on "The heart of the city: Towards humanization of urban life", all participants speculated about ways to recover the spontaneity in the cities' core, and took as examples some *Latin cities*, amongst which Italian and French cities stood out. Summing up, the spontaneity was identified as a value in the life of these cities, a value technically uncontrollable by

the project. The formulation of the idea of the spontaneous as pre-condition of no-control or no-preconception became the subject of debate among modern architects during this last meeting. They were searching a way to "induce" the spontaneity from a highly controlling position, but also concerned with preserving the characteristics of a previous urbanity applicable to the new models emerging in modern cities. It is in this context that *Le Corbusier* refers to the fast reconstruction of cities sacrificed by post-war, in a process led by modern urban planning. The author summarizes what has been one of the questioning bases in the refusal of the modern formulation in the mid 20th century, and with this he refers to the disregard of cultures, of desires, of human habits and to the excessive belief in the transforming power of architecture and urbanism (Mumford, 2000, p. 201). In this context, the author expresses it: "This situation—the fatal evolution of mechanization—is making us robots. You are almost robots, in the streets, in your rooms, on the roads. You are victims of an era without luck. You live passively. You are out of life, outside of its wealth, outside its excitement. But there you are, and it is not your fault. And besides that: CIAM is here to help" (Mumford, 2000, p. 212).

The author's speech reports the beginning of the schism between modern architecture and urbanism. The modern project as an approach looking for solutions oriented towards society finds a major weakness when it thinks to be holding the ability to determine men's needs and to rebuild the urban culture through the city's materiality. In this context, and by the disregard of spontaneity as an essential value, the creators of modern thought began a path towards the crisis of their own ideology.

We present Figure 1 as an illustration of the citizen's positioning as a neutral figure (in the modern era), and co-participative figure in the project's solutions (postmodern era). These two axes can be a possible interpretation in which the vertical axis represents the *end user's* space of

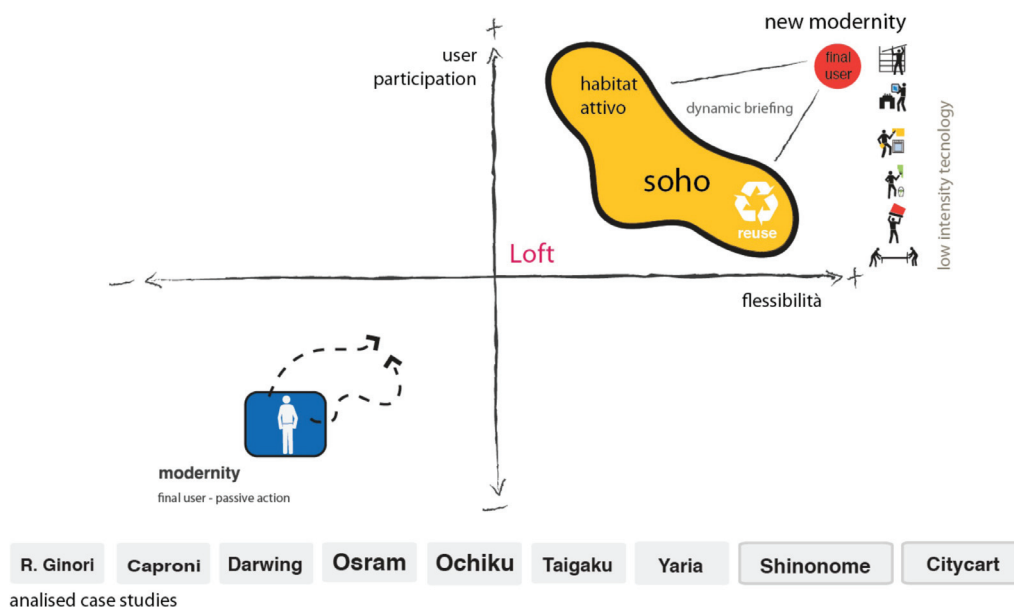


Figure 1. New design project concept on reuse process (Roda, 2007, p. 198).

participation, and the horizontal axis represents the area of flexibility.

Thus, the disciplinary relationship between project and science through the lens of methodology is dissolved as an independent leader in the search for a user-oriented result; to the contrary, in the post modern era the end user increasingly assumes the spotlight, as the main actor who follows an intuitive and improvised script, feeding into their own model of socio-economic and cultural interaction, looking to reach instant needs.

This transfer of values related to the user's co-participation versus the search for spontaneous solutions is represented on the horizontal axis and in the positive way of flexibility, a quality driven and managed by the user themselves. In this scenario of change, it is possible to identify the area in which the design action becomes necessary, not in the way of acting directly in the search for solutions, but in order to enhance and provide innovative *desingineeristic* solutions based on an approach of analysis of *bottom-up* values stimulated by social *inputs* triggered by certain creative classes, as identified by renowned authors (Landry, 2000; Florida, 2002; Howkins, 2002).

As a result of this reflection, it becomes fundamental to put in perspective the reuse process in the contemporary city's social context; a way to use the city which expresses the emerging values intertwined with the idea of sustainable city. In this sense, the following question is relevant: *Given this context, what is the importance and significance of an approach through the discipline of design?*

Having as a goal to stimulate a disciplinary discussion, the change of thought of the project as process should be highlighted. There is a shift in paradigm, from a vision in which human beings leave their adaptability power on behalf of a pre-established model to a new moment in which their involvement in the search for solutions that feed a continuous adaptation to their own needs is required. It is necessary to build a new project approach in which the discipline of design can certainly interact as a key player and support the ethical values needed for the construction of a coherent world, stressing the change of attitude required in seeking the best solution. This change is included in the big challenge already recognized by leading authors, such as Sanders (2004), who emphasizes: "How to help everyday people to express their own creativity?"

Following this idea, the contact points with the possible design research area illustrating the opening of a vast research area for and through design should be highlighted. This may certainly contribute to a sustainable architectural continuity, as a progressive refunctioning of the city's interior. The present proposal, put forward as a reflection in the context of this meeting, suggests a small contribution to the daily view of the dynamics and changes in the city, putting in evidence the major silent transformations of its interior: the idea of the "Picture City" produced by Kevin Lynch (1988), as a complex system of large divisions and discontinuities to which architecture resists, giving itself a continuous meaning. Referring to that idea of city, the author wrote: "There is no final result, but only a continuous succession of stages in its construction" (Lynch, 1988, p. 35).

This concept of city is reinforced by other authors, such as Beguinot and Adolf Loss, to name a few. According to Beguinot (1998), the city should be built by an architecture that is intelligent in regard to its ability to reconnect; a quality also historically recognized by Adolf Loss, and which the author referred to as an experiential empty.

Again, the importance of design's role in shaping these 'experimental' containers, based upon *bottom-up* social actions, must be highlighted; spaces that result in ephemeral and mediatic uses, in which the importance of the physical space ceases to be predominant, with the exception of the architectural space as a producer of generators of empties. In this sense, there is a contribution by Montaner (1997), who emphasizes the loss of architecture's main role in cities and the growing importance of the products inside them. He summarizes: "[...] architecture that has become a neutral container of systems with objects, machines, images and equipment that make up changeable and dynamic inner spaces" (Montaner, 1997, p. 44).

The picture that emerges from this discussion proposes the identification of new horizons and new frontiers for interaction with design, with society, products and the city itself. In order to bring to light those interactions, it is suggested to imagine an empty of the buildings in the city, a platform of unlimited relationships, in a game between *end user*, systems and artifacts; a space that receives and enhances spontaneity and creativity in the end user. Obviously we anticipate a new project paradigm facing the emerging needs expressed in the 'contemporary habitat,' visible in conversion experiences, and also in initiatives emerging from the contemporary architecture. As an example, the city's transformation can be referred to as a sort of *loftization*, a process in which rigid architectural barriers are overridden and replaced by micro interventions.

This finding highlights the emergence of a space for a new approach to the project, not only through the practice oriented to the reuse of *light industrial buildings and office buildings*, but also to the reinterpretation of the meaning of the 21st century dwelling, completely different from the model imposed by modernity. It is the space of big transformation of dwelling, a reality in which the space integrates multiple functions—'the space for an uncertain future'—, which includes the man of knowledge, of great mobility linkable with information technologies (Sassen, 2003), strongly related with a network economy through his micro entrepreneurialism. And which requires, above all, an interface of neutrality with the empty – one of potentialities, of unimaginable different solutions that always make sense in the moment. If the discipline of design can maintain a reliable relationship in the making of this idea of city, it is also crucial to regenerate the traditional models of learning, those that are traditionally applied in school and in the way of thinking about the project in process. It is, in this sense, the conscious and advanced revisitation of theoretical and historical approaches, already formalized by prominent authors, among whom are Bayazit (2004, p. 16-29), to a historical and disciplinary route between project and science through the lens of methodology; and Broadbent (2002), by formalizing different

"methodological generations" applicable to the project, with special focus on the fourth generation emerging in the 90s, which the author called *Soft Systems Methods* (SSMs).

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