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A Cohesion Policy and Local Development Studio in a Multicultural Planning Course

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1. Introduction:

studying urban planning in an architecture school

This article will critically discuss a studio experience on *Cohesion Policy and Local Development* in a graduate course of *Urban Planning and Policy Design* at Politecnico di Milano, Italy.

The studio experience takes place within a specific cultural context, which may be interesting to describe and discuss, as far as two elements are concerned in particular: a MSc in Planning which takes place in a School of Architecture and the fact that the graduate course is an international one. Both elements contribute to defining the context for the studio experience.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, the Italian urban planning tradition has its roots in architecture and the design of the built environment, thus influencing the way urban planning is conceived, practiced and above all, taught (Granata, Pacchi, 2009). Apart from two pioneering experiences of both undergraduate and graduate courses in Urban Planning at the Universities of Venice and Reggio Calabria, the urban planning studies remained firmly rooted within architectural degrees in Italy until the mid 1990s, when a number of schools decided to open up separate degrees in Urban Planning.

The School of Architecture in Politecnico di Milano launched this degree in 1995, both at the undergraduate and graduate level. Even if the courses take place within the same School, the curricula have been in fact separated from the ones in Architecture, and common exams, courses or other training experiences have been introduced quite recently. This is due to the idea underlying the urban planning course, which aimed at preparing a professional profile quite different from the multi-faceted architecture one. In particular, from the very beginning the course has been based on the interaction between two different perspectives: the (mainly) regulatory approach of the Italian urban planning tradition (*urbanistica*) and the more social sciences oriented public policy analysis perspective, much linked to similar approaches developing in the Anglo-Saxon world and elsewhere in Europe.

Nevertheless, deriving the approach from the School of Architecture at its origins, every year of the new course is based on one or more studio experiences, as a rule one for each semester, which were meant as the basic training opportunity and experience, around which the rest of the learning activities (monographic courses, external workshops, internships) would revolve.

The tradition of studio work has long roots in the Milan School of Architecture: the basic design and architectural composition studios have provided the backbone of architectural training for decades.

Differently from what happens in other contexts, in which around the mid 1900s planning education was moved “away from a ‘studio’ model based upon learning by doing, the utilization of paradigmatic examples, and postgraduate apprenticeship under a ‘master planner’”, (Beauregard, 1989, 111), urban planning studies in Italy maintain the centrality of studio work, as derived from architecture.

In the Milan case, there is a sequence of studio work from the BSc: at the undergraduate level starting with the basic elements of urban analysis and representation, and moving to the urban planning techniques (three studios); at the graduate level, through a mix of more tool-oriented spatial planning studios at the different scales and a series of thematic studios, which have been firstly in sequence (policy design, social cohesion, local development), and are now in parallel (energy and envi-



ronment, housing and neighbourhood, transportation, city design).

In more detail, the MSc course proposes different orientations, depending on the student's interests: one in plan making, according to the local and national regulatory framework, the other one with a more pronounced public policy dimension (decision making processes, actors' networks, policy design), and it is within this second orientation that the studio in *Cohesion Policy and Local Development* took place in 2010.

The second element is an innovation in the Italian architecture and planning teaching context: the MSc in Urban Planning and Policy Design, launched in 2005 and fully taught in English, is aimed at both Italian and international students and offers graduate training on urban questions with a public policy perspective, deeply rooted in the Italian planning tradition (*urbanistica*) while at the same time trying to build dialogue and exchange with the most relevant public policy perspectives at the international level. While the presence of a diverse international audience is an acquired tradition in many planning schools in the US or in the UK, in Italy the phenomenon is fairly new, and this course in particular has been the first one in its field. Every year the Master has a class of about seventy/eighty people, roughly half of whom are Italian and half are international students from all over the world, thus enriching the program with a diversity of personal and cultural backgrounds, training and professional experiences and perspectives on the city and the urban questions. There is a specific enrichment which can be brought to urban studies by such diversity: speaking about the US context, Goldstein observes that there is

“... increasing recognition that international urban policy and planning experiences are relevant to understanding the potential impacts and effectiveness of domestic planning interventions. These trends, coupled with a marked increase in the international flow and mobility of students seeking graduate training in planning and related fields, have led many graduate planning programs in the United States and abroad to introduce additional comparative planning courses, establish new areas of specialization with comparative elements, hire faculty with research or professional experience in other countries, and utilize new technologies such as distance learning to increase international connections. In short, planning education is becoming increasingly internationalized” (Goldstein, 2006, 349).

Throughout the years the international dimension has influenced not just the teaching methodologies, but also the thematic focus of both courses and studios: as a rule studios in the Urban Planning course choose an urban context within the Milan urban region as an empirical basis, but the underlying interpretative framework lies within the international debate, connecting for instance the interpretation of the emerging features of specific urban regions to the trends of the discourse on metropolitan transformation at the global scale. As Neema (2008, 369) points out, “it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand practice in a location- and context-free manner (with context encompassing the work community, as opposed to only the politics and political economy of the place)”: we will see in the next paragraph how the approach to social cohesion and local development has thus been framed in this studio experience, in order to link theory and practice in the studio work.

2. Teaching urban disconnections

Contemporary big cities are under strong transformations affecting both their spatial and social configuration. The high concentration of advanced tertiary services, high-skilled jobs and knowledge workers in these cities has paved the way for the growth of a new urban élite, which is strongly interested in urban life and creates a new demand for a high-quality urban environment. On the other hand, the availability of relatively central urban areas due to the dismissal of industrial activity has created good market conditions for new real estate investments aimed at providing the new urban élite with good accommodation and facilities. However, this movement toward the city has gone with the displacement of the poorest population and, more generally, with a worsening of its social conditions (Smith, 1996). Aspects such as growing inequalities, polarization (Sassen, 1991, 2000), segregation of the upper class and stronger class division are peculiar to such cities (Hamnett, 2003; Gordon and Turok, 2004).

Big cities, especially in Europe, were historically grounded on social mix and high levels of social cohesion (Le Galès, 2002).

Contemporary cities, however, seem to be characterized by a split between competitiveness and social cohesion. While for many decades social cohesion has been considered as a crucial ingredient of city's competitiveness (Begg, 1999; Cheshire, 1999; Buck *et al.*, 2005), in the last two decades this synergetic relationship has been weakening (Ranci, 2011). The new economic interests in the city have been progressively disjointed from the interests of most of the population living in the city itself. The capacity of the city to compete in the global arena does not depend so closely on the quality of life that is guaranteed to its common citizens. New trade-offs and tensions emerge: heavy traffic due to the concentration of local and global flows on the same transport infrastructures; good economic opportunities offered to the business community with no attention paid to their impact on the level and quality of local employment; attractiveness strongly pursued through large real estate investments and new spaces open for cultural and entertainment activities with no concern for the cultural interests and leisure activities of the ordinary population. At the same time, the contemporary city sees a massive flow of new immigrants coming from poor countries, bringing not only a new multicultural environment but also social conflicts and new forms of urban segregation (Arbaci, 2007; Musterd, 2005). What is peculiar to such tensions is that they take place almost everywhere in the city. With the relevant exception of some specific areas where tensions and problems are highly concentrated, urban transformations take place in many different areas of the city, with no spectacular impact, but profoundly and progressively affecting the social and urban context of the city. While some immigrant groups settle down in specific ethnic neighborhoods, many others have a highly dispersed distribution in the city, creating molecular and invisible micro-tensions. Urban renewal occurs in many ways, through big real estate investments but also by way of a dispersed, individual, fragmented process. Self-segregation of the upper class has spread thanks to the generalized adoption of control tools (video-cameras, CCTVs etc.) in many buildings that are located in areas considered potentially dangerous. The overall effect of such trends is the increase of a sense of fear and tension, even though there are no explicit conflicts and tradeoffs in the city. Overlapping of contrasting processes, rather than replacement or opposition, is therefore the peculiarity of such situations. All these aspects profoundly challenge the theory and practice of urban planning,



as well as the way urban planning can be taught. Traditional urban theory has seen urban planning as a way to control market mechanisms in order to preserve the collective interests of the urban population. Contrasting private interests should be mediated and reciprocally compensated in the process, promoting (at the best) new collective goals that can be recognized by most of the stakeholders involved in the urban policy process. Therefore, urban planners have been taught about how to deal with potentially conflictual situations, how to reduce complex problems in terms that can be managed through mutual adjustment processes, or new forms of public dialogue. The argumentative turn in this process has brought about much emphasis on the ability of urban planning to set up a common framework within which actors, which are potentially or actually in conflict, can converge.

This attention paid to the communicative or negotiation process of intermediation seems to be weakened in a situation in which the space for conflict management is strongly reduced by the high fragmentation of the ongoing transformation processes. What is peculiar to these processes is that they are characterized by complexity, fuzziness, divergence, disconnection, rather than conflict and opposition. Urban planners are seeing processes that are very hard to be distinguished and recognized. The actors that are driving them follow individual and partial logics, with no attention paid to the overall urban impact of their activity. The city is narrowly considered as the spatial ground for economic and social activities. Only aspects such as the urban land value and accessibility are considered, while integration, cohesion, social quality of urban life are considered as possible, and more and more improbable, positive externalities. Negative externalities, such as traffic congestion, social contrasts and divergences, polarization and segregation, are not considered at all, or at least considered as minor and temporary effects, that are destined to be reduced or to be eliminated by an increase in the city competitiveness. Worries about these effects are considered as a form of resistance of traditional, old-fashioned, rhetorical ideas about the city.

What about urban planning in such situations? In a fragmented and disconnected city, the urban planner is probably the only actor able to understand the current trends and locate them in a common, more general framework. But this requires a good capacity to build a general framework whereas social and economic actors do not consider it. A situation that calls for a new capacity to read the urban context. A context where divergent processes take place and must be analyzed and understood in a more general and comprehensive framework. The attention previously paid by urban planning to decision making and promotion of urban initiatives is now inadequate. Urban planners must go back to the territory and understand the forms of change taking place there. Re-connecting aspects and processes that only apparently happen in a casual way, and looking for possible forms of connection and combination.

In this process the capacity to connect social and urban facts becomes crucial. The tensions emerging between competitiveness and social cohesion have to be detected and recognized in specific areas under transformation. Changes such as gentrification, segregation, class polarization and separation must be reconstructed by merging the observation of social trends with the analysis of the physical configuration of the areas that are invested by this transformation. Social relationships are shaped by this physical configuration, but at the same time contribute to the changes taking place in the physical aspects of the city. Specific local areas and particular local com-

munities are invested by changes driven by extra-local logics and actors (such as the creation of a new shopping mall), and at the same time contribute to this change through their activities and reactions (closing of traditional shops and opening of new commercial activities). While in the modern, industrial city a clear coherence between space and society was supposed to be in action, in contemporary cities there is no such consistency, and different uses of the same space can occur. Local communities disappear, but new localities emerge and new meanings are attached to traditional local areas. No existing vocabularies are available in order to understand this overlapping of different logics (and populations bringing different uses and meanings) in the same place. Only a new form of urban inquiry can try to detect these different uses and meanings, and re-compose the mosaic. Complexity cannot be easily reduced in this process of understanding. But mapping an area, investigating the social and economical practices that are in action, looking at changes and not only at problems and tensions, is the way by which new interpretations of the situation can emerge, and new actions can be imagined and pursued.

Students in urban planning are very often required to spend their time walking in the city's streets. But most of the times they look at buildings, infrastructures, open and close spaces, private and public spaces as they are specialized in space-detection. This specialization is very useful in order to identify specific processes and problems, and in order to start up an effective planning activity. But this professional practice is not so useful if the goal now is to read the change taking place in specific contexts. Because this change is the complex result of physical and socio-economic complex transformations. Because the meaning of specific physical changes (such as a renewal activity) can be understood only by considering the economic logic and its relationship with social logics. And also because social and economic actions very often go together with physical changes. The complexity of such trends has to be retained in the analysis, and in the planning activity. This is the most crucial challenge for urban planning today, but also, and consequently, for teaching it to students.

3. Description of work themes and studio organization

The *Cohesion Policy and Local Development* Studio was aimed at strengthening two fundamental abilities. First, the ability to analyze and understand complex urban problems characterized by a strict interdependency of spatial and socio-economic dimensions. Second, the one to translate knowledge into strategies and design priorities for urban policies oriented to social cohesion.

The studio theme “urban disconnections”, as described in the first part, has been interpreted as a chance to observe in an integrated perspective the multiple determinants of urban transformations, paying particular attention to the emerging tensions or disconnections between them. Students were indeed invited to observe this complexity in a specific urban area, providing empirical consistence to the issue of the multiple dimensions of urban transformations and their interaction.

Detecting urban disconnection within a specific area of the city is therefore the core of the studio activity.

According to this approach, the teaching staff has selected a part of the city of Milan characterized during the last decades by significant transformations in the social, physical and economic dimensions. As Forester underlines, the choice of the studio area is a critical one:



“So I have found that the more I can ask students to begin with situations of spatial, ecological, and political interdependence, the more easily I can show how questions of planning theory can be practically relevant as well as conceptually enriching. No doubt, too much messiness can confuse students while too little reduces and oversimplifies problems. I do not know what the optimum level might be, but I believe that in a middle range, the realistic messiness of planning situations can allow students to be less literal, to seize less upon any one tried and true answer, to realize that what they first see might not be what they come to appreciate upon further examination”. (Forester, 2004, 246-47)

In the following, we'll briefly describe the study area in order to provide a general idea of the transformations occurring in a city like Milan. It is located in a strategic position along one of the main axis of development of the city, easily accessible from the more recent extension of the metro line system and provided of a good network of transportation infrastructures.

The area is situated in a strategic position with regard to some of the main attractive points of the global platform of the city (trade fair, airports, key areas for future developments as Expo 2015...).

At the same time, the area shows a peculiar urban atmosphere, with an articulate system of building types, neighborhood shops, office buildings, schools, services and green spaces different in size and character.

The area is embedded within a broader context, marked in the past by the presence of some historical working class neighborhoods, with significant presence of blue-collar households migrated from Southern Italy after the Second World War thanks to the wide availability of jobs in the emerging industrial sector.

Due to the general dynamics of dismantlement of the heavy industry through the demolition of many buildings and relocation with new tertiary functions and housing, the morphology of the area has fast changed in the past decades under both the physical and the economic and social profiles. The main driving forces of transformation were the extension of the metro line with new stops on the North West axis leading to periphery, new roadways, new cooperative housing neighborhoods, new or rehabilitated tertiary buildings.

As a result of these transformations, the social composition of the area has deeply changed towards a more mixed profile, with diverse segments of middle class, a recent injection of newcomers from non EU countries, and new flows of working commuters from other parts of the city and the region. Therefore, in recent decades we can observe a significant inflow of new immigrant populations hosted in a restricted sector of the area and representing different ethnic groups. Part of this population has settled in a residual segment of the area's private rented market: few buildings characterized by strong physical decay, located on the major road front.

Nevertheless, according to a trend that is common of the rest of the city of Milan, the social morphology of the area shows a certain level of social mix, with a low degree of segregation also due to the marginal presence of social housing. Indeed, as a consequence of the specific evolution of Italian public housing policies, the public property stock of rented housing currently represents a residual part of the housing stock, with considerable concentrations of the most vulnerable groups.

How to Analyze Urban Disconnection

We describe here some conceptual tools that we provided to students, recognizing their heuristic potential. They also correspond to the actual steps of the teaching process. In the final conclusions we'll discuss some of the outcomes of the learning process paying particular attention to the critical points faced during the workshop.

a. Identify key-factors underlying the ongoing transformations

One of the challenges of the studio refers to the ability to connect the interpretative issues with possible scenarios and the anticipation of solutions, foreseeing a planning process based on the circularity and the ties between problem analysis and design of solutions, normally considered consequent steps or separate tasks.

The complex interaction among different factors that contribute to modify an urban area makes the task of selecting the main driving forces underlying the observed processes particularly difficult. We therefore found the notion of *key factors* particularly helpful as a selective and interpretative tool, to avoid the risk of describing phenomena without grasping their internal relationships and their multi-scale character. For example, the concentration of new immigrant populations in a block, with the connected problems in terms of coexistence and mutual recognition with the Italian inhabitants have to do with the ability of the city as a whole to integrate new populations without creating ghettos, not only with the specific characters of that part of city. A multi-scale approach is not only needed to interpret the observed phenomena (with their local and supra local determinants), but it is also useful to identify the different levels of policies involved.

The accurate identification of the key factors that underpin the described transformations connects directly to scenarios of changes. Key factors implicitly contain elements of solutions, which can be effective, if the interpretation is accurate, and they represent the starting point to build step by step the project phase.

As a good set of key factors is the strategic focus for the following steps, we asked the students to develop a research plan by identifying the most appropriate indicators to capture the different dimensions of the problem. The research plan was carried out by each group of student and reviewed by the teaching staff in order to identify the questions to investigate and the appropriate methods to do it. Of course, the challenge of a multidisciplinary approach is also reflected in the use of several integrated methods and techniques for collecting and processing information. Students had to learn to draw up a personalized research plan with the most suitable research tools for each question. The result of this plan has been a peculiar combination of methods, with the integration of quantitative and qualitative techniques, analysis of secondary data and production of original data.

b. Scenario building

During the studio we tested the potential of this tool, since scenario building can strengthen the interpretation of the issues, put the results of the analysis into a dynamic perspective and connect observations with future transformations.

Scenario building is a strategic tool to cope with uncertainty and complexity in urban and environmental planning, frequently linked to the concept of visioning in strategic spatial planning. As it is well known, scenarios can be used in different areas: originally introduced in the management debate, and subsequently extensively used in environmental planning, in the Italian debate they have been used in particular in



urban planning (Secchi, 2003).

Starting from the identification of a list of key factors and driving forces and their interaction in a context of uncertainty about future impacts, students were requested to propose two alternative scenarios (positive versus negative) and to flesh out these two visions as narratives.

We mention below some segments from the description of the positive scenario, drawn from the elaboration of one of four groups of students:

“We are in the year 2030. Shakib Amir, who works in an office downtown, wakes up in the morning and looks out the window of his mixed-income, mixed-use building and down to the “piazza” below where area residents are already walking into the Dergano metro station located below them. Even at this early hour he sees other neighbors on their balconies, greeting each other. [...] Shakib rents his apartment at an affordable rate from the cooperative DAR Casa, which has 15% of all residential units in the building. At different events hosted by DAR and the property management company, he has come to know his wide range of neighbors, from the young Italian couple who live next door to the businesswoman from Geneva to the retiree from Peru.”

“He and his daughter set off to walk to her school in Piazzale Maciachini. As they walk out onto the Dergano metro stop piazza, he stops to have coffee at the coffee shop in one of the ground floor retail units that is part of their building. Run by members of the Dergano Officina Creativa (DOC), it is also used as exhibition and performing space. It was here that Shakib learned of the DOC’s Open Studios on Sundays, where one can wander from studio to studio throughout the neighborhood and enjoy art, music, and a market of creative wares. No matter how many times he goes, Shakib is amazed by the diversity of people who are drawn to Dergano’s creative economy: people of all ages, ethnic background, and social classes. He even met some Bovisa students there who live in an EXPO 2015 building that was converted into a student residence.”

...and the negative one:

“We are in the year 2030. Mario Rossi, an engineer, wakes up in the morning and looks out the window at his gated community on the site of an ex-factory in Affori. The gates are still closed, and the first businesspeople are heading out to start their day. He notices that no more than a nod passes between them by way of greeting; this is fine by Mario who thinks, after all, we’re not here because we need new friends. We’re all here because we got more house here than we could in centre, we like the security of the gates, and we all get home from work too late to socialize anyway. Mario puts on his own suit and tie, wakes his daughter and prepares to drive her in his SUV to a prestigious private school in the center of Milan. Given that the area is full of businesspeople like him who prefer not to use the metro, he is caught immediately in traffic. This gives him the opportunity to look around a bit at his “bedroom community.”

“He pulls out onto via Pellegrino Rossi, and is immediately met with the sight of a large building constructed for EXPO 2015. It towers over the street, even more so because it is vacant and has been ever since the EXPO ended and no adapted reuse was implemented. With broken windows and covered in graffiti, Mario worries that it will become a haven for the homeless and drug users. He thinks of EXPO with some bitterness; he bought his home, after all, shortly before the EXPO when all the marketing said this area would become its own destination point, being located halfway in the trajectory between the centre and the EXPO site. Instead, all of his friends still see it as a peripheral, blue-collar area that is best to be passed through on the way to somewhere more interesting.” (Novara et al., 2010)



What are the main dimensions of change that need policy intervention? How to reconcile elements of growth and development with the needs of local people? Which tools do exist and how to use them in response to new challenges? Which new tools should be introduced on the basis of examples from different contexts? With these questions we introduce to the following step of the workshop.

c. Select best practices suggesting possible tools and sustainable mechanisms for policy action

Students were asked to find examples of promising contributions to improve urban and social quality within local areas, drawn from international case studies. Examples were selected by students on the base of comparability with the study area, especially from the perspective of the dynamics of changes affecting the areas and the issues developed in the previous steps. Additional selection criteria were the availability of information about the impacts of the actions and about the process of partnership building between public, private and community actors and, finally, the social, cultural, economic and environmental sustainability of the chosen best practices.

d. Develop policy proposals, coming back to the study area

This step has been articulated in three main elements: concept, feasibility, outcomes. We have interpreted the *concept* as the definition of some strategic lines of policy and their articulation in actual actions and projects. This step was strictly based on the previous interpretation and the *positive scenarios* sketched by students.

With *feasibility* analysis we mean the task of clarifying the constraints and the opportunities associated with the lines of action. In particular, students mapped policy networks, emphasizing the different actor typologies, their roles in current transformations and the interests that they represent. Students also presented a scheme of the available resources and competences, and finally some general criteria of funding for the foreseen actions.

Area interpretation: four sub-themes

“Urban disconnection”, as described in the first part of the paper, is a term that emphasizes the tensions emerging between economic and social determinants of urban transformations. In order to detect and recognize these dynamics within specific areas under transformation, the capacity to connect social and urban facts becomes crucial.

Given a sufficiently wide context as a starting point, students were given the task to more precisely define the boundaries of their study area, according to their specific research questions. Each group developed specific research questions and defined the spatial scale most appropriate to situate them.

Students were divided in four teams and each of them developed a different aspect of the proposed theme, on the basis of the first results deriving from direct observation and preliminary collection of information. The studio started with a study-tour organized by the student teams in the selected area, aimed at sharing with the teaching staff a first map of the issues and their spatial base.

In order to better understand the different type of issues that have been studied, we give a brief resume of the four sub-themes developed by the groups.



1. The first group focused on the “scenarios of urban transformation” from the peculiar point of view of the real estate market dynamics, considering a wide area of influence and trying to evaluate the impacts of alternatives scenarios in terms of social polarization of the urban sector, within a broad time horizon.
2. At the opposite position, in terms of territorial scale of observation, a second group focused on a delimited area characterized in the past by a strong working-class identity, marked by the presence of left party local basis and of several associations, that have strengthened the sense of belonging and inclusion within the *community*. Students analyzed the dialectic of resistance/dilution of this territorial identity versus dynamics of transformation with metropolitan character.
3. The third group analyzed public spaces and functions as opportunities for social cohesion among different population groups. Therefore they focused on the daily interactions between different populations (Italian inhabitants, migrants, commuters) within the neighborhood green areas, schools and other typologies of public space.
4. The last group studied the peculiarity of the area starting from the theoretical category of social mix, split into several dimensions (social, physical and functional). They worked on three sub-areas of the assigned area trying to compare different patterns of social, physical and functional mix and their evolution as results of the general dynamics of urban transformation.

4. Summary and discussion about the outcomes

This experience has shown what are the main challenges that teaching urban planning in studios has to address in the contemporary context of urban change. We can basically distinguish two problematic areas. The first one concerns the analytical tools that students can use in order to understand the ongoing transformations taking place in contemporary cities. The second aspect is related to the methods of planning in such complex situations.

As far as the analysis of urban change is concerned, we observed that bringing students to work on a specific urban area had a twofold impact. First, they learned how to gather empirical evidence of urban transformation by using a wide range of analytical tools (ranging from statistical data to qualitative observation or individual interviews to key informants), therefore keeping complexity and dynamism in their final representations. The final outputs of this work were hypertexts where students combined written texts, videos, photos and maps with the aim to give a general and multidimensional description of situations, problems and tensions that appeared to be relevant. The reference to a specific context made it possible for students to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis, and to give final interpretations that took in account all these materials.

However, this multidimensionality came with a propensity of some students to focus on small scale changes and situation, without considering general trends and phenomena exogenously affecting the area. Most of current urban transformations can be considered as the effect of global dynamics taking place in specific places. Students were more disposed to observe the local impacts than the global, or more generalized, factors. But this propensity contributed to reduce, or distort in the worst cases, their final understanding of the urban facts. For example, students noted that cohabitation tensions developed in the area as a consequence of the contiguous presence of recently arrived very poor immigrant groups and affluent

social groups attracted by new real estate developments in the area. They observed segregations trends and social conflicts emerging in the use of the public space of the area. However, they were not fully aware that the mixed composition of the local population was the result of more general trends, pushing immigrants to concentrate in “interstitial empties” of the city where they could find affordable housing conditions, and attracting a new affluent urban élite in the central areas of the city. Therefore the high concentration of immigrants and affluent groups in a specific local neighborhood was not considered as a local impact that could be eventually avoided by developing specific urban policies, but as an exogenous “social fact” that was due to cultural or economic factors that are not changeable. Another example was shown by considering the localization of a big trade center in the area, which changed the physical shape of the area and brought about a new social and economic mix. Again this fact was considered as a non-problematic fact, almost not changeable, without considering the economic and political logics driving this urban artifact to be placed in the area.

On a more general level, the analysis of current urban transformations requires the adoption of a multi-scalar approach, that is able to connect micro-changes with macro-transformations. Students should learn that most of the situations they can observe in specific localities are the effects of large-scale phenomena, very often driven by economic or political interests that are not locally-based. In order to understand this scalar complexity, students should develop a multi-level analysis, which includes: a) the identification of local impacts that seem to be problematic; b) the analysis of extra-local factors contributing to these facts; c) the exploration of specific reactions and adaptations that are taken at a local level. It is a hard task for master students, requiring a very high capacity to frame local problems in the interconnection between local peculiarities and global trends. The good capacity of students to reconstruct local situations should not be detrimental of their capacity of understanding the economical and political processes that cannot be controlled, and changed, at the local level.

A second crucial aspect is related to the students’ capacity to interpret urban complexity. Most of the empirical results of their analysis reflected this complexity: the coexistence of different populations with diverging interests and lifestyles in the same area; the overlapping of new real estate developments and previous buildings, including popular ones; the resilience of local economic activities (small shops, local services, etc...) to changes that are brought about by higher land values. These dynamics were adequately captured by students thanks to their use of a multiplicity of research instruments: walking in the streets, participating to local events, interviewing people, looking at physical tracks, traditional urban analysis, etc.. The interconnections between physical and social changes were satisfactorily reported and considered. However, the richness of such description was counterbalanced by the poor capacity of students to interpret such complex transformations and tensions. When students were called to provide a general, dynamic account of what they observed and so accurately described, they became uncertain and reticent. They looked at the repertoire of analytical tools provided by urban studies and tried to use some of the concepts more frequently adopted in explaining urban transformations. For example, they adopted the concept of gentrification, based on the analysis of Hamnett, Butler (Hamnett, 2009; Hamnett, Butler, Ramsden, 2008) about London, or Preteceille (Preteceille, 2007; Preteceille, Cousin, 2008) about Paris. Or, when



studying the local impacts of new large-scale infrastructures (a new metro stop) on a small neighborhood poorly linked to the rest of the city, they tried to interpret such changes by adopting the traditional notion of the “end of the community”. Concepts that are strongly nested in the urban literature, but that are not fully satisfactory to catch the new trends. The concept of gentrification implies a sort of social conflict between new (affluent) comers and low income groups that are pushed out of the area due to economical processes. Nevertheless students reported no conflicts and replacement, but overlapping of new comers and preexisting population, and tensions that were due to cohabitation, complexity and intersection of uses and living styles, first symptoms of micro-segregations between socially differentiated populations. Therefore the concepts found in literature were not only partially wrong, but tricky to be used as they led students to wrong interpretations: students were not able to propose a correct interpretation of what they observed because they could not find the appropriate concepts to use in this process. And consequently, through of a process of cognitive dissonance, they forced the existing reality into an old cognitive scheme, even though this did not seem to be adequate. As a good theoretical interpretation of results was not available, then reality was neglected in order to preserve theory.

This problematic aspect was addressed by inverting the traditional approach to urban analysis. Students were asked to enter the field with no clear ideas about what was the ‘right’ analytical approach. The identification of the most crucial problems that were considered as peculiar of the local area was left to students, while the teaching staff only helped to clarify the students’ preliminary ideas. The problem-setting step of the analysis was left completely free, with no constraints and indications. Therefore students had to explore the area, and identify problems and changes according to their own sensibility. Only in a second step they were asked to use the existing literature to give accounts. The aim was therefore to bring students to practice the circularity between empirical work and theoretical explanation. Theoretical stereotypes are deeply rooted in students as they always look for simple solutions to their questions. A sound concept seems to be the perfect solution to the problem of dealing with complex, and complicated, problems. But this propensity can bring students to reduce complexity to the point that their own empirical observations become useless. In order to avoid this fact, we invited students to dedicate large time, with no preliminary conceptual work, to practical observation of the field. This forced students to select the relevant facts, and to contrast these facts with the available theory. Complexity was therefore preserved, even though the final interpretations resulted quite poor and deviating in respect of mainstreaming theories of urban change.

As far as the second aspect (policy proposal) is concerned, the students faced similar problems. The question of scale has been critical also in the policy design phase: only some of the students’ groups showed the ability to think in a multi-scale perspective, correctly acknowledging the fact that some questions could be tentatively tackled at a very local, neighborhood scale, while others had to be tackled at a supra local, city level (both as far as public led intervention and the involvement of private, market-oriented actors is concerned). Others on the contrary just concentrated on very local intervention proposals, thus mixing up level and types of policy proposals, and compromising the effectiveness of their work.

At the same time, even if the analytical path had been carefully built in order to link

the social and the physical aspects in a multi-dimensional perspective, in the final proposal at least one group showed some elements of environmental determinism, proposing physical solutions (based on a specific meaning of urban renewal, using vernacular typologies in order to recreate a sense of *community*) to what could be seen and framed as mainly social problems.

Finally, the weight of analytical tools and categories taken from urban and social literature and not perfectly matching the complexity and the evolving nature of the situated problems, influenced also the quality of policy proposals: at least in one case, a rather ideological conception of *social mix* led students to insist on the openness and accessibility of public spaces and services for different ethnic and age groups, without really taking into account the articulation of needs and the fact that in such situations a non defined offer is not enough in order to involve people in new and mixed uses.



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