

# Cities of the future need conflicts

## *Abstract*

*Diversity, or variety, is what drives our cities, writes Serena Olcuire. She believes that conflict is essential in order to recognise and face up to variety, and that although conflict can cause stress, it also enables us to experience some of the most satisfying moments in life. Despite what she sees as many cities' efforts to conceal or remove what they consider to be inconvenient or negative varieties from citizens' sight, conflicts persist – and this, she argues, benefits us all.*

As a student of architecture first and a researcher in urban studies now, using the walk as an esthetical practise and the performance as a tool to read territory, I have had the possibility to run into many diverse situations: Roma settlements, homeless shelters, squats, temporary neighbourhoods, prostitution roads, migrants' hangouts and informal religious temples, among others. Different people with different backgrounds and different ways to live in the urban space. All of them had something in common: they were carriers of some kind of conflict.

I'll try to hold some thoughts together about this point.

## > Diversity is energy

In 1961, 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities'<sup>1</sup> was published. Jane Jacobs' attack on modernist city planning spread in the world not only because of her harsh criticism of the top-down design approach from Howard's Garden city on, but also because of her lucid analysis of the advantages of diversity. Diversity - of inhabitants, dwellers, cultures, habits, aesthetics - is one of the fundamental causes of the energy and dynamism of a city. The unexpected is the spice of life, we could say. It leads to unforeseeable encounters, spontaneous interactions and creative generators that are difficult to predict and reproduce by conventional urban design.

### > Diverse from who? Variety vs diversity

What Jacobs called diversity represented to her a generally positive value, but maybe the use of this term implies a legitimisation of what she was writing against: the existence of a standard, which generally corresponds to the Establishment (white, bourgeois, working, with a passport issued by one of the G8 countries), and the diverse, any Other who is not part of that. Diverse from who? Diverse from what? Moreover, how diverse? If I am a white gay, or a rich Roma, or a female football player, to which category of diverse do I belong? It is possible -and rather common - to share certain features with some groups, and others with different groups.

What we call diverse is most of the time a person whose rights and wills are not represented and respected as much as the standard's ones. Diverse is thus a useful term to describe a juridical status, rather than a complexity of physical, cultural or economic features.

And if the best way to call a person with a different nationality, skin, gender, sexual preference, age or religion is by his or her name, to define the infinite range of possible humanities on this Earth we can use the term variety.

To come back to Jane Jacobs, variety is energy.

### > Happiness needs energy

Lack of variety may be responsible for the fact that, as noticed by John Kay<sup>2</sup>, the happiest cities<sup>3</sup> in the world are also the most boring ones. The survey, based on countable parameters such as GDP per capita, social support, healthy life, freedom to make life choices, etc, shows that the happiest countries in the world are: Switzerland, followed by Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Canada, and Finland. None of them can boast of extremely attractive cities, while all of them are targets of migrants because they offer better working conditions (but surely not because of their

charm).

“There is more to the good life than clean water and trains that arrive on time“, as John Kay reminds us. Or, to quote psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi, we live our happiest moments while we're in flow, when we are engaged in a daily challenge and we're doing it well. Dares, challenges, and by extension small conflicts and provocations are stressing, but they also give us the possibility to experience really satisfying moments in life.

### > Variety is fundamental to happiness

Social and economic homogeneity, peaceful coexistence, transparency and trust in institutions are obviously desirable values for a city, but as Jay supposes, they are maybe just not enough to define a “great” city. And as variety is fundamental to gaining in excitement and creativity, we deduce that variety must be one of the parameters to be used to record happiness in the urban space.

### > But variety is removed

The acceptance of urban security that has emerged in the contemporary era has shifted the focus from the protection of the citizen to the criminalisation of social marginalities<sup>4</sup>, reducing the complexity of urban cohabitation to an issue of public order<sup>5</sup>. As the only solution still appears to be the removal of the problem, diversity is still often banished on the outskirts of the city in many different ways. Classic strategies such as eviction, rent increases or gentrification are nowadays archived in administrators', planners' and real estate investors' playbooks, and recent strategies, which have yet to settle in a more culturally aware and politically correct environment, need a new umbrella to gather under.

## &gt; In the name of New Jerusalem

Since the fall of the Roman Empire, New Jerusalem, carefully described in the Book of Revelation, has been the ideal of the holy city. The dwelling place of saints, the plan is a perfect square made of “pure gold, like clear glass”. It is surrounded by great, high walls with twelve gates, each one guarded by an angel. New Jerusalem is supposed to be the inclusive place, accepting and gathering the 12 tribes of Israel.

*On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.*<sup>6</sup>

So who are the angels guarding the gates from?

As often, we can find a possible answer to this question in the figurative representation of the city. New Jerusalem is generally represented as having a square plan, with the four fronts overturned on the representation surface. The point of view is from above, as it was the plan for a project to be built.

In the 15th century frescos kept in the Church of San Fiorenzo (Bastia Mondovì, Piemonte), New Jerusalem is shown through a frontal representation. In the background, saints, angels, prelates and pious Christians assist to the scene of a sacred coronation. The fresco is then split by the high walls, complete with towers and gates. This change of point of view allows us to see what remains outside the walls, and maybe answers our question: the poor, the sick, the prisoner, the hungry, the orphan and even the sinner - on the right hand side, there seems to be the cage of a purgatory or a limbo - crowd the outskirts of the city, just beyond the boundary wall. These people are not alone, as long as nouns and priests take care of their pains. Welfare dependency instead of citizenship rights, and kind but definite exclusion from the view instead of right to land.

## &gt; The new concept of decorum

In recent years, we have witnessed a funnel of awkwardnesses and uncertainties through a series of measures aiming to the chimeric concept of decorum. This extremely personal and uncertain idea is normally linked to behaviours or appearances supposed to be correct, properly serious in manner according to the custom of society, “within the limits”. In this new, collective perception, decorum is pursuing an idea of a city where misery and marginality, social dirt and bacteria are not seen<sup>7</sup>.

Under this umbrella, we can find two kinds of crusades:

1. Against the view of physical degradation: tags on the walls, overwhelming or smelling dumpsters, garbage on the streets, damaged urban furniture, even obsolete residues of past public services, such as phone boxes or urinals.
2. Against the view of moral degradation: beggars, homeless, (poor) migrants, Roma, sex workers, drug users, but also hooligans and young generations animating local nightlife. Most of the times, these groups could be read as the previously mentioned variety.

Implies that visions of degradation are constantly removed

In both cases, physical and human signs of degradation are removed. Please note: removed, not eliminated, nor deleted. The city cannot erase the presence of inconvenient varieties, so it tries to remove them from the citizens' sight. We would need a new discipline, a kind of urban psychoanalysis, to deeply investigate the reasons behind this visual incompatibility and the consequent Freudian removal<sup>8</sup>.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), a clean house is not the one where dust is swept under the carpet. This operation just pushes varieties to move, and not only toward the outskirts, beyond the walls, but into every dark interstice of the urban. The removal attempts trigger

constantly changing geographies, nomadic phenomena trying not even to escape, but just to re-settle and re-adapt to each ousting.

I like to see nomadic geographies as practices of positive resistance to forced removal policies, but I also know that instability is a strong disincentive to settlement, to the improvement of living conditions and to environment taking charge.

#### > Through decrees and orders

On the whole Italian peninsula, administrative power is getting more and more split and articulated, from the regional layer to the municipal, in the most populated cities. Among the consequences of this process, the lack of an overall view is flowing into a new feudal system: the land still belongs to the king (the central power), but the vassal (the local administrator) has the entire jurisdiction over it. Decrees and orders are the nowadays seals and warrants, and patrols are one of the vassals' favourite tools. And while laws (should) recall general, shared and constant values and needs, decrees and orders are instruments suitable to emergencies of any sort, temporary situations, opinion waves. They do not necessarily depend on long-term, shared political views but more on a temporary, highly manipulable perception of the city.

#### > Some citizens are deprived of their rights

In terms of rights, if the international human rights laws and the Italian Constitution remind us that we are all equal, this government system, much more dependent on direct and immediate consensus, divides the citizenry into two strict categories: the good citizens and the bad citizens. The latter, generally belonging against their will to the category of diverse in a cultural, economic or even moral sense, are often deprived of their basic rights to the city in the name of the already mentioned concept of decorum.

#### > We need to see

These double standard positions - against any urban annoyance embodied in a person - are ways to govern and organise territory, not focusing on the solution of the problem, but of the conflict.

If the problem is the coexistence of different habits and values, the conflict concerns the vision of the Other.

If the problem is poverty, the conflict concerns the vision of the squalor due to poverty.

If the problem is the housing need, the conflict concerns the vision of the possible housing alternatives out of the framework of legality.

If the problem is the lack of freedom of choice, the conflict concerns the vision of the lack of "decency".

#### > And to see, we need conflicts

This is why we need conflicts. Conflicts force us to see, to know and to face variety, difference and problems.

Cities won't ever be like New Jerusalem, that's a fact. They'll keep having problems, undesirable citizens, shadows and twilight zones, because they are kingdoms of variety, and they need all this to be great cities. So, great cities of the future will have variety and will have all the conflicts it carries with itself, and they won't try to move them just a little bit farther.

## End notes

1. JACOBS, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House
2. KAY, J. (2015) Why the happiest cities are boring. *Financial Times*. [Online] Available from <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/1b915f0e-517b-11e5-b029-b9d50a74fd14.html#axzz3wabyplqW>
3. According to the 2015 World Happiness Report, <http://worldhappiness.report/>
4. WACQUANT L. (2006) *Punire i poveri. Il nuovo governo dell'insicurezza sociale*. Roma: Derive e Approdi
5. PAONE S. (2008) *Città in frantumi, sicurezza, emergenza e produzione dello spazio*. Milano: FrancoAngeli
6. Book of Revelation, 21:25, New Testament - New International Version
7. PITCH T. (2013) *Contro il decoro, l'uso politico della pubblica decenza*. Bari: Laterza
8. Freud S. (1991) 'Il perturbante', in 'Saggi sull'arte, la letteratura e il linguaggio'. Torino, Bollati Boringhieri