THE RULES OF THE HISTORICAL TOWN FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Elvira Petroncelli∗

Abstract

Historical towns are often expression of spontaneous growth and self-regulation forms. Reading them should help us to define choices and actions to be pursued today in a view of sustainability. Understanding the lesson given to us by history could mean to capture principles and logics to stop the processes of resources impoverishment and to increase the accumulated values. Reconsideration of communities and forms of stimulation may allow us to support the indefeasibility, for future generation, to lever on socio-cultural resources also and to put historical heritage in a privileged perspective. It is very important to start again from the human component, from its way of being, seeking answers to its needs and the way it acts. It means to recognize local identity as an organization form capable of further enhancement.

Key words: historical town, sustainability, identity, community

Currently we are more and more constrained by a short-term perspective and committed to finding ways to do everything in real time, engulfed by the "present". Indeed, we are also increasingly fascinated by what is the result of a very different logic and rhythm of life. When we seem to be able to control all time and the unravelling of the processes we live in, we glance to the past, almost fascinated by the long term visions.

In this kind of conflict in which we live, attracted in some moments by the different time dimensions, a correct reading of the historical heritage could help to guide us to a correct and consistent use of the resources we make use of.

The potential that arises from a combination of scientific and technological advances often brings us to snub almost certain economic and practical aspects. Even if in the past these represented the critical elements and guided choices and actions.

We are often used to treating and remembering historical towns in relation to their monumental heritage, forgetting that in them there is also a large amount of so-called minor architecture which contributes significantly to configure its value. Historical towns, although characterized by the presence of material elements, are the expression of a rich intangible heritage which gives evidence to the life of the community that has shaped and transformed them in relation to their "cultural" needs.

If we try to break away from stereotypical views, it will be easier to understand the lessons that can be offered by the historical heritage, not so much for its artistic value that we are always ready to appreciate, but for the adopted solutions to answer the community's

---

∗ Professor architect. Planning and Territorial Science Department –University of Naples "Federico II" (Italy).

needs. They are almost always the result of combining both social and economic needs with logic, not far away from those underlying the concept of sustainability.

The historic heritage we appreciate so much, shows us that -beside contexts which are the outcome of a precise expression of formal research and design- there are urban areas that represent spontaneous growth and self-regulation and self-organization forms. Reading them could help us to define choices and actions to be pursued today.

The individual, and in a sense the community, have moved in search of safe and adequately stable shelter, in relation to site conditions and requirements dictated by the styles of life, aiming to build homes large enough to accommodate what was deemed necessary to respond to the events.

Suitable spaces and solutions through a rational use of resources over the medium-long term have been found to satisfy deemed primary needs. This has been done unless power logics -for example designed for expression of such forms of domination and control- have had the upper hand.

Local communities have always played an important role and their "culture" has been defined by forms that have created what we now call "identity." For a long time the territory has been the product of uses which were respectful of both the interests of individuals and the community. The sense of community has been the binder that made the harmonization of the elements possible.

We often consider identities as emblems of a particular historical time (and in that sense WHC wants to exalt its value). In reality we should think the historical town as an expression of a "system" produced by the evolution of life styles and ways to organize the community in response to specific needs. It's in this direction that the historical heritage could provide an example of how the form it assumes is in relation to logics that answer eco-friendly and eco-efficient principles.

The vernacular architecture, often considered poor, is in fact an expression of economic logics where the transport cost, for example, was combined with that of supply, rather than the intrinsic value of the property. This has helped develop peculiar characters of each context which in the current globalizing processes can greatly help us to reflect. Sustainability -which consists of an optimal use of resources in an eco-logical and comprehensive logic- can't consider what flows from economically advantageous factors limited to the financial perspective. The real problem is therefore not linked to the type of components that are taken into account, but to the adopted logic by the subjects which the project is related to.

A clear example of that is the widespread practice to use local materials (Lucca, Lecce, brick, wood ...) in most of the constructions, committing to not readily available materials the need to express a particular role (social, structural, …), which means to utilize them only for some relevant elements or in most exceptional circumstances.

I would like to observe how different the logic was that led the Conquistadors to use the stolen gold from the natives in South America -in order to enrich the churches of Peru and Ecuador- in relation to how it is now implemented in financial operations, using underpaid work which produces similar products at competitive prices. The large scale production and the destruction of local markets, for many types of goods and services, are only leading to the failure of the professions and of many products, making it slowly impossible to answer certain types of requests, sometimes also of vital importance to the survival of historical and cultural heritage. The result is often given by excessive homologations that end up by destroying the identities that we want to preserve.

The experience, gained through the interventions made in historical towns in the past, teaches us that it isn't necessary to intervene by encouraging static museification and starting crystallization processes. Indeed, we need to recover elements which allow us to bring new vitalities, while respecting characters of existing structures. This means allowing transformations if borrowing, from the past, the spirit with which facing problems, without lacerating or overloading these contexts with what they can't bear.

"Think global and act local" is a motto which for some years has inspired some economic policies at the international level, which conceals an important message in the light of reading the lesson that can be provided by the historical towns. Usually we were acting to remain strong at an environmental, economic and cultural context. There was a sense of belonging and respect for other people and things, prescinding from the role played in the system. This has allowed more harmonious and, to some extent, sustainable development. Before promising and allowing every thing to every body and to create dependencies and needs, today it is essential to work for restoring forms of relations between communities and urban developments.
To recognize local identity -not only as a common tradition, but also as an organization form capable of further enhancement- means to consider as receivers of the interventions not directly the "things" (monuments, artefacts, infrastructures, ...), but the subjects, actors or potential actors, their cognitive field, their organizational skills, their local rationality. The historical towns should not be revised in a manner separated from issues related to economic and social development of their inhabitants and from all that concerns the territory in which they live and to which they are related.

Historical towns, beyond the documentary and symbolic value, are characterized by a rich functionality, a result of the interaction of various factors and components, and expression of the collective memory of the town, their specificity and identity. These configure them as a huge reservoir of potential resources, where we can benefit in relation to the circumstances and context conditions. The values that each factor can assume will be different in relation to the size of the historical towns or to their being incorporated into larger urban structures, their belonging to a local area characterized by a dynamic or stagnant economy, their fall in a central or marginal region and the socio-economic features of the national ambit.

Over time, historical towns were the peculiar place for civil and religious facilities. The context shows significant heritage buildings and religious complexes, almost always a result of initiatives conceived in close relation to the evolution of social life and the whole urban structure. The religious complexes in particular, beyond their functions for worship, have always played an important role in society. Since they have emerged and have always been used for the assistance, education and training, to free choice of who owned them.

Why not look at this heritage trying to understand them as an expression of often irreplaceable needs without betraying the instances that have led to the realization?

We must seek to understand elements and logics at the basis of the relationship among social components and ways to respond to its needs leveraging on the richness of features that has characterized the historic towns, and in general urban areas.

Understanding the lesson given to us by history, the capture of principles and logics could lead to stop the processes of impoverished resources and to increase the accumulated values. Reconsideration of communities and forms of stimulation may allow us to pursue urban sustainable development.
A natural extension of the sustainable development concepts leads us to support the indefeasibility, for future generations, to be able to lever also on socio-cultural resources and

puts historical heritage in a privileged perspective. Many of the existing urban contexts still have areas that show clear traces of earlier periods. To think about urban development in a perspective of sustainability means finding ways for harmonious developments, or rather implies knowledge of rules that can allow for a broad spectrum sustainable development.

From the lesson given to us from the past, we could easily infer that, just in the steps that today we are inclined to appreciate, people have operated:

- In respect of human needs,

- In respect of social and cultural values,

- In respect of economic logics, taking into account the supply on local level,

- For sustainability of development,

- Checking the compatibility of the services required in relation to carrying capacity,

- According to an environmental, social and cultural balance,

- To encourage forms of social and cultural sharing,

- To enhance the specificity for the benefit of identity and spirit of the place.

That is the reason why we can support the importance of:

- Giving space to social, cultural and economic integration forms;

- Improving quality of life;

- Respecting identity;

- Ensuring compatibility between the carrying capacity of the system and the flows generated in terms of number of people attracted and induced traffic and congestion;

- Stimulating community to promote governance;

- Promoting consistency between social and economic development policies, in relation to the areas on an upper scale.

Today, the increasing availability of "free time" to all social classes and the attention paid in the last few decades to the historical heritage have led to boost the so-called cultural tourism, which appears as an important development factor on which to lever **in** historical towns and **for** historical towns. Indeed, we should avoid to introduce too many new activities, often with building replacements, and to increase problems with traffic flow, security and changes in social structure. On the one hand, large and small towns can become the natural destination of thematic and historical-cultural trips and give answer to the demand generated just by free time -both for the daily, infra-week, annual and life type of cycle. On the other hand, there is often a strong risk that the phenomenon can cause exogenous changes that tend to destroy or suffocate such contexts, under the pressure of the masses that are not theirs. Yet, if we consider the functional crossover which characterizes free time and urban areas, we may be able to combine the demand of one, with what the others are able to offer. Thus the idea of extrapolating the criteria and logics from historical transformations, capturing information for new regulatory tools that should guide future interventions.

The introduction of such new roles should be seen, for example, as a natural need induced by the evolution of the contexts and their ways of life. It should induce us to look for ways that allows transformations and harmonious developments, respecting the context

specificity and the needs of settled communities. Too often the result of many interventions has implied, for example, the removal of traditional social structure, while it is vital to allow diversity and plurality of population. Paying attention to the safeguard of local culture and social and economic structure, in addition to preserve the fundamental and irreproducible resources, we can avoid the risk of releasing or replacing activities that could lead to mono-functional developments. How can we forget the many historical towns that have become the exclusive domain of activities that take place only within certain hours and which encourage under-utilizations and the creation of structures with no life at certain times?

Often the introduction of new functions is accompanied by housing replacements or adaptations that could not be consistent with the existing spatial configuration. The danger is not only generated by the rupture of perspectives, outlines or visual corridors that alter the aesthetic profile, but from the same activities that should be accommodated in new buildings. We must be worried about who the users will be, the time of use and the compatibility with existing functions, such as the impacts on ordinary users. Actually, there are several risks of newly realised buildings from their being out of scale –involving an excessive increase of use-intensity, congestion and overloaded risk- to their being out of context -or rather their being unrelated buildings to the local characters such as under the material or volumetric profile, for example- to their representing some kind of visual obstruction.

The introduction of new activities, as well as buildings, is often accompanied by the need to build new infrastructure for mobility. If not properly conceived and planned, they risk altering urban features and environmental context. Congestion, pollution and degradation are the result of an excessive overloading of the infrastructure and have devastating effects on the town, because it is burdened with loads that it is often not able to withstand.

Congestion could be resolved if we reshape the demand for space for some categories of rhythmic activities, which contribute to the concentrated traffic flows. Such an initiative would have the positive effect of curbing the spread of such activities, which take up more and more spaces in central areas, and allow the recovery of spaces for functions that take advantage of physical proximity.

If the creation of pedestrian zones and bicycle lanes may also offer good solutions, it is not always completely adequate for all contexts and proportionate to the type of request. Anyway it asks for the introduction of new types of infrastructures capable of preserving the quality of life.
Improving the quality of life also means to promote security by strengthening the resilience to disasters as well as promoting an environmental management guided by the principles of sustainable development. In relation to what technological evolution makes available today, it is hard to accept insecurity and we feel even more uncomfortable than before, and in strong contrast to the targeted levels of the quality of life.

The remaining issues are the referential elements to the proposed best practices in urban ambit, but not sufficient to ensure positive outcomes of policy interventions, if addressed without taking into account joint action of the community. Social behaviour, we have just said, is reflected on the town, on its structure and its aspect, and therefore the behaviour that communities take in relation to government policies is essential. In that sense it is very important to start again from the human component, from its way of being, seeking answers to its needs and how it acts.

Sustainable development requires harmonic behaviour of the whole social component. That is way the accomplishment of the desired effects needs a strong

participation in the intervention/transformation processes, which will not leave out of consideration from actions aimed at good information given to the social framework. Participation can pursue a dual objective: favouring the implementation of plans and projects, constantly giving new impetus to the creation of resources. We have a positive example of how to conjugate information/social involvement with tourism by the project provided since 1992 in Naples, carried out continuously over the years and which has involved the younger generations. The project "The school adopts a monument" is certainly an initiative of great social and cultural content that has been extended during the years to 240 Italian Town Councils, from North to South of the country and in other parts of the world. Its primary goal is the awareness of younger generations to respect and protect historical and artistic heritage, and more generally the environment, through a permanent education program that will herald appropriate behaviours towards the territory. The program -which aims *in primis* at promoting awareness of the younger generations to value the importance of the cultural goods such as emerging monument emergencies and together with artefacts rooted in cultural and social fabric of the community which are signs of its identity-, has undoubtedly a strong educational role, also in social terms.

Cultural needs, social identity, experiment of the surrounding reality and human relations require spaces and environments that might facilitate harmonious developments, non-conflictual relationships. In this sense historical towns, such concrete testimony of our history, seem to be for us the natural and privileged references.