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Editorial

Against the semantic drifts

Alberto Clementi

One of the issues we often treat in EcoWebTown is how to define some of basic concepts of the magazine's exploratory research programs: in particular the notions of sustainability and of smartness, which entwined should generate the conditions for a new way of thinking, planning and living contemporary cities.

Faced with the disturbing heterogeneity of the experiences that respond to these values, the strong position taken by Robert Engelman, the President of Worldwatch Institute is not surprising. In his introduction to "The State of the World 2013", Engelman denounces the spread of a sort *sustainiblablabla*, in other words a deplorable proliferation of the ways in which to understand and use improperly the appellation sustainability, that at times reaches the point where it falsifies its content, manipulating it for marketing strategies or to garner consensus in environmentalist circles.

Perhaps it is true, as Giovanni Valentini maintains (Repubblica, 22/10/2013), that sustainability's excess of popularity which risks compromising its content can be interpreted as a success for environmentalism, at least from the point of view of mass communication where it has raised the awareness in society's collective consciousness. The fact remains however that an excessive or too fashionable use can have the effect of draining this word of meaning and reduce its potential to create a new culture to manage our planet's resources in a less wasteful and more responsible way in the interests of the wellbeing of future generations. This responsibility hits particularly close to home in the world of architecture and urban planning. Today a new ethic is required, more sensitive to a respect for the physical and biological limits on which the survival of both a local and the global environmental equilibria depend. In the conviction that – as was stated during the recent Biennial of Architecture in Pordenone – the quality of the environment in settled areas in the future will increasingly depend on the degree of awareness of the architectonic and urban interventions, interiorizing sustainability as a totalizing value, and not simply an expression of the high-tech and network engineering world. Such a value must necessarily refer to a profound understanding of specific local contexts, their historical stratifications and the way in which local cultures have in the past interpreted their need for a balanced and ingenious use of available resources. This cannot occur until the entire deposit of settlement stratifications accumulated in the territory, with its selectively entwined life cycles, is considered as a key resource to be brought back into play, recycling and renewing potential that lingers even within a modern rationalized strategy of the processes to produce and consume resources.

In this perspective, the way toward sustainability – at least as concerns the ability to have an influence on the deterioration of the large natural systems – tends to be articulated differently when using different contexts of reference. For example, in southern Europe we can count on an extraordinary abundance of sunshine as a

resource to produce large amounts of renewable energy. At the same time, a correct management of water will represent a decisive issue in the future, as we move toward a forecast worsening of the climate and in particular the spreading of drought conditions in the Mediterranean area. In Nordic countries, on the other hand, green energy can utilise above all a pervasive presence of wind and on the virtuous combination of wind, biomass and solar, they are able to also count on the maturity reached by their waste treatment culture, which allows the production of a large amount of energy from “carbon-neutral” co-generation.

Comparing the several experiences that characterizes sustainability research, might be perhaps unexpected the case of Brazil, to which the current issue of EcoWebTown is dedicated. The angle proposed by this issue's editors points to a sustainability profile that appears significantly different from any of the traditional European models, in which the environment is generally assigned a determinant role together with the issue of sustainable consumption of non-renewable resources. The several contributions hosted here address a question that in different ways has become central in today's Brazil: that of the *inequality* in the way the city is used and in its growing spatial injustices, emblematic representations of the all too obvious differences in the income, education, health and perspectives of social mobility levels in the haves and have-nots of the population. Fundamentally the question is social cohesion, widely recognised also in the European Community, but this time elaborated in an original way, as any Brazilian solution had to include the reality of the favelas, which have for many years represented acute manifestations of the phenomena of marginality and social problems found in Brazil's cities.

In Brazil, and in Rio de Janeiro in particular as we approach the upcoming World Cup and Olympics, the game to pacify the thousands of existing favelas has reached a decisive stage with programs targeted to regenerate these neighbourhoods and reduce the gap that separates them from the legal city. Never in the past has the government made so intense an effort to give back the territory to those who inhabit it, to guarantee free circulation and, as far as possible, strengthen personal safety. It is precisely this strategy which has brought them to prioritise an improvement in local living conditions, enhancing infrastructure for accessibility and collective services, re-establishing at the same time property rights and ensuring a local presence of the forces of law and order, keystones of the notable success which they have already had in the makeover of the favelas.

This is further testimony to the validity of this approach “ Integrated Urban Regeneration”, which, as has already been amply demonstrated in Europe by the Urban Programs for disadvantaged neighbourhoods, appears particularly effective also in guaranteeing security in areas which were previously risky. In order that pacification can really become sustainable and not depend only on the installation of repressive and surveillance structures of the State, there must be a real improvement in the social and economic conditions of the population and a requalification of the local settlement conditions. With a warning: that the improvements should be entrusted above all to self-managed projects, that gives back to the inhabitants the role of protagonists of their own destiny instead of transforming them into passive spectators of institutional initiatives.

Within these policies, architecture seems to have rediscovered an ethic and social role which is rather more prominent than elsewhere. It is access to the quality to a settled environment, not only in its functional and morphological values, but also in its symbolic and esthetic ones and, critically, it is commensurate with feelings of the local inhabitants. This is an ambitious offer of a possibility which had up to now been denied the inhabitants of the favelas: to experience beauty in its deepest sense of tending toward the intentional representation of a new identity, rooted in the past, but at the same time projected toward a redemption of their human existence.

Ennobled by these intensions, the architecture in Brazilian cities presented in this issue of EcoWebTown has regenerated itself in search of a new social mission, more authentic than that exhibited by affirmations from exorbitant protagonists, or what would be even more conformist, an uncritical leveling of the logics of the

international market. Experimenting new intervention models and figurative languages, commensurate with a creative combination of the disciplinary knowing how and of making the local society a protagonist, opens spaces for innovative research.

Here we rediscover themes we in Europe explored in the 1970s, for example Turner's self-help strategies or the site&services at the base of many World Bank programs and those of well-meaning governments at that time searching in vain for ways to fight the growing problem of marginalized areas of cities, which manifested itself any one of a variety ways, from illegal building to spontaneous or informal urbanization, from favelas to clandestine barrios and so on. But this time architecture appears to be culturally better equipped to offer quality buildings in peculiar settlement environments, environments which refuse to conform to the conventional models of the official city and instead demand a specificity of solutions, an adapting of the dwelling, bursting with individuality, but still underprivileged communities and up to now the indomitable bearers of an alternative culture.

There are some reasonable doubts about an architecture that aims to enrich the notion of sustainability with social value and quality conditions that will be able to permeate the inhabiting experience, making urban environments better and contributing positively to strengthening citizenship rights, but this seems still too distracted and not too sensitive to the specificity of the questions of sustainable development from an environmental point of view, delaying our taking responsibility as respects the new ethics, of an conscious respect for the physical and biological limits of those human activities that we mentioned at the beginning.

We will undoubtedly return to this issue often in the future, because sustainability to be sustainable must overcome sectorial approaches, in view of a more complex and articulated unity of planning strategies, brought together by the goal of elaborating a new model for development, as sensitive to the survival of environmental equilibria as to the universal affirmation of the rights to citizenship.

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