

## Observation, description and tale in the construction of the urban plan

*Think, for instance, of a writer who is trying to convey certain ideas which to him are contained in mental images. He isn't quite sure how those images fit together in his mind, and he **experiments around**, expressing things first one way and than another, and finally settles on some version. But does he know where it all came from? Only in a vague sense. Much of the source, like an iceberg, is deep underwater, unseen – and he knows that.*

*(Douglas Hofstadter, Gödel, Escher, Bach. Quoted in I. Calvino, 1988)*

In June 1984 the Italian writer Italo Calvino is officially invited to the Harvard University for a series of conferences to be given during the following academic year. The Lectures were inserted in the context of the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures and their content was free. Calvino suffers this absence of an assigned theme and starts then to work on the writing of the texts for the conferences as looking for a thread, collecting many materials and ideas; he arrives to define the texts for five of the six conferences before his departure, and decides the content for the remaining one, he thinks to write when in US. The six Lectures will speak about six aspects of writing Calvino intends to propose to his public as transversal and omnipresent in his *craft* as writer as well in his experience as reader, in his relationships with texts. Six aspects he defines as “values or qualities or specificities of literature [he] particularly cares about” and that he would like to entrust to the future of the overcoming new millennium.

I intend to refer to one of these texts in the present note, in order to speak about some issues I consider emergent from the concrete design experience of the case-study I am going to propose. The text I am talking about is investigating the issue of *visibility*.

The proposed case-study is the recent Structural Spatial Plan of Antwerp. The more general reflection the illustration of this case is referring to concerns the relations among observation, description and design.

It is a reflection which has a long history and that has brought planners, several times and alternatively, to try to codify, regulate and fix these relations, with the aim, for instance, to place on a scientific base the *method* of the construction of the plan; as well as, it has brought them to try to subvert those same codes and rules, to introduce variations and swerves which could give, from time to time, new space to segments considered as relevant or could create conditions for the implementation of new practices.

This reflection has seen opposite hypothesis to come one after the other: hypothesis for the construction of ordered and hierarchical successions among the three actions of observing, describing, projecting the transformation; hypothesis for a reciprocal autonomy of them, as referring to three distinct shapes of thought; hypothesis for the assimilation of each one of them with the others.

This reflection has often spoken about the hardness of sustaining the legitimacy of practices, in the observation, in the description or in the design of the city and the territory; it has spoken about moments of disorientation and loosing of sense, in relation to one or many of them; nevertheless it has also spoken about moments in which the emerging of new ideas or new tools was showing to urbanism new possible ways.

This is not however the object of my report.

I mentioned because I think it is possible to affirm that the Structural Spatial Plan of Antwerp is, for many aspects, a further moment of the same reflection, and certainly this is its background, one of the possible at least. The particular case of the Antwerp Structural Spatial Plan can be considered relevant because of a intense cohesion among the instruments it has used, in order to guide and structure as the study of the territory, as the formulation of issues for its transformation, as well as the construction of a *tale* on which to base the first communication of the intents and suggestion of the plan.

In the following note I will principally illustrate the meaning and implications the introduction and use of some *images* has had in the construction of the plan.

The proposed '*images of Antwerp*', that the Structural Spatial Plan has developed, were interpretative schemes and general concepts coming from consolidate ideas in the imaginary of the city, or arisen by contemporary needs and sensibilities: the text will point out their role and use, both - and contemporary - as interpretative tools and project themes, specifically in the exploration and description of the Antwerp districts, during the preliminary phase of the planning process.

The aspects I am specifically interested in discussing are two:

- the proposition to use a *not-neutral observation*: it deals with the degrees of *operativeness* of observation, when brought *inside* to a design hypothesis;
- the *descriptive dimension of the design*, intending a specific approach that not only claims the use of design as a tool for the exploration of hypothesis/possibilities, but also affirms the role of the design as an eye-regulation device.

The structure of the tale will follow the chronological sequence of the phases of elaboration of preliminary researches. The *American Lecture* by Italo Calvino about *visibility* will give me some suggestions and traces.

## 1.images of antwerp

*“nell’ideazione di un racconto la prima cosa che mi viene alla mente è un’immagine che per qualche ragione mi si presenta come **carica di significato**”*

*(Italo Calvino, 1988)*

*(in the conceiving of a novel, the first thing I get in my mind is an image that, for some reason, is present to me as **full of significance**)*

In January 2003 the team of designer and experts for the draw up of the new Structural Spatial Plan of Antwerp is constituted; it is composed by some internal professionals from the City of Antwerp Planning Department and by an external team in which have part, principally and together with others, the Italian office Studio03, under the direction of Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò, and the Belgian office Iris Consulting.

The first phase of formulation of the plan is mainly characterized by a very intense exchange of information in relation to a previous collection of data's and items. It is nevertheless also a phase of concentrated observation and listening, during which gradually a first idea about the city arises, made of many different materials and layers: the specific point of view of the numerous interlocutors, the tales by the inhabitants participating to the workshop, data's, the disarticulated and confused set of ideas that it is possible to read looking at the complex of

projects that have invested or are investing the city against the light. Finally there is also a last material more difficult to be translated, that is the experience of the city the designers are starting to do: for some of them, it is a completely new one.

From this first phase some things emerge, matters considered relevant, some questions the further investigations will have to answer to, some hypothesis about possible tasks.

Also first descriptions emerge.

And it emerges how they are going to be more dense around some thematic cores, how they are going to constitute themselves in some icastic synthesis, that define some *images*: the one of the city of water and a city with a harbour, the one of a city with a metropolitan spirit and history, the one of a city made of a constellation of places with a different dimension, at another scale, as villages inside it.

The emerging images appears as **full of significance**: they are able to talk about the long time of the city, they are questions open toward its future. They give possible references, they move reflections.

About them, the question "*where it all came from*" is looking for an answer. It is not a too hard task: differently than for the *imagination* of art, the *imaginary* has readable roots almost every time. The revelation of the origins of a mental figure is indeed a secondary problem, even in relation to the will to allow its sharing: since the moment it is given, it is expected the image will run the way by itself.

## 2.structuring a survey: looking to reality through images

*The idea of imagination is an idea with its own singular history; talking about it, Calvino quotes Jean Starobinski (La relation critique, Gallimard, Paris 1970), which describes two main and alternative forms of imagination, in reference to the ways it has been intended and explained along history: he points out, from one side, an imagination conceived as "communication with the spirit of the world", according to a neo-platonic concept that is at the same time present in the theories of romanticism or surrealism; from the other side, he points out the idea of an imagination conceived as an "cognitive tool", "according to which imagination, even if following different routes than the scientific cognition, can coexist with this one, and even cooperate with it".*

In April 2004 I had the opportunity to start my collaboration, working as urban designer assistant for Studio04, to the elaboration of the new Antwerp Structural Spatial Plan. The Italian office, together with Iris Consulting, had started one year and a half before to support as external team the group of the internal professionals from the City of Antwerp Planning Department.

Several researches and surveys about some main issues were already done and two intermediate documents, a *Start Nota* and a *Strategic Nota*, had been already proposed and discussed.

To the first phase of description I briefly mentioned before, a second survey had to follow at this moment, more systematic and already oriented toward the verification of some emerged interpretative hypothesis, in relation to the specificity of some actual situations. The team was particularly asked to observe closer each one of the ten districts the territory of Antwerp is made by; the working frame was supposing that the first public discussions of the plan had to start just from the districts.

The Antwerp districts are themselves another singular heritage of the history of the constitution of the city and its territory: they corresponds to villages autonomous in the past, external to the previous delimitation of the urban boundary till the IIWW and after included into the city administrative area. Born as rural settlements in the urbanized countryside that was structuring the territory outside the city walls since the XVII century, these centres have been growing as poles in a territory that during the XX century was assuming a character more and more urban, as a consequence of the expansion of the city.

The relation of the districts with the city has always been of a strong complementarity and if the project for the Great Antwerp, including them as parts of a new city at a new metropolitan scale, has stressed the dependency, nevertheless it never has cancelled their identities, very often defined by profound differences.

Somehow the survey had to take care of this duplicity of scales.

It used usual tools: observation of maps, direct observation, photographic surveys. The ways of use of these instruments were also quite 'conventional', making reference to experimented and codified strategies, as for instance the layering, as a practice immediately suggested by the use of GIS data.

This point could probably open a discussion about the codifying and normalizing processes of the survey practices, we could probably describe in the terms of a continuous alternation of introduction of new means, tools and methods, invented case by case, and return to certified codes. What I am more interested in underline, anyway, is that even when using not original tools and methods of the survey, the specific frames and the possible results of their permutations can originate a very vast field of variations and a very interesting one. I intend to talk about some *moves* operated inside this field of variations, thinking that they represents the most original element of the illustrated case-study.

In the physical observation of the Antwerp territory though is districts, two attempts were made: the first, to propose an observation *mediated* by the filter of the images, previously emerged; the second, to propose an observation *oriented* by some themes of the transformation.

This kind of interpolation and overlapping process of different layers has allowed the team to approach to the reality of the observed territory moving from two opposite and complementary readings: *from above*, from the generality of an image or of a comprehensive idea of the possible meanings of the orders, as well as of the possible general results of the transformation process; *from below*, from the minute multiplicity of the sensible experience of the places.

The consequence of this has been a demolition not only of the scale separations, but also and first of all of the conceptual separations that form the oppositions analyse-survey/project, proposal/verification.

To assume the *image point of view* as themes of the observation and description has allowed also the possibility to give them a specific concreteness, walking back and in different directions on the path between imaginaries and reality. Each one of the articulations of the images obtained in this way is also somehow the genealogy of the image itself: by mean of the set of the territorial descriptions that give substance to the images, they are rooted in the ground and are revealed in their belonging to the sediment of accumulations of meanings, intentions, actions that have built that territory. The operation of searching for the *prints* of images on the physical form of the territory makes their matter concrete.

Going on, I will describe shortly some of the procedural aspects and some results.

The images selected to be used in order to structure the survey on the districts were mainly five:

*waterstad*, to indicate the presence, the role and the possible problems related to the structure of the water system;  
*ecostad*, to inquiry the general question of the open spaces system and of the ecological systems;  
*havenstad*, to inquiry the elements that revealed the permanence of activities, spaces, practices related to the harbour, mainly in the districts along the river or proximate to the harbour area, and to investigate their degree of mixing with other activities and practices along the boundaries;  
*spoorstad*, to structure the investigation on the mobility system and on the centralities;  
*poreuzestad*, to inform a particular analysis of the tissues, with the aim to discover and measure their degrees of physical permeability, as well permeability to the flows, to the uses, to the introduction of new ecologies.

The surveys was executed in two sequences.

The first one was concerning space with a certain degree of morphological autonomy and physical continuity, that somehow were intersecting the districts territories as ideal section of the city; spaces as the one of the Kaaien, of the Singel, the space of the tracée, partially existent, of a further ring around the city, that was already discussed to be developed in the project of a park-way, spaces along the some important axes of the mobility system, as the Noorderlaan or the Boomsesteenweg, or finally the spaces along the Albert Kanaal. A second one, made at intervals with the previous, was concerning the territorial unities of the districts.

The discussions in each districts were the occasion for a first re-composition of the partial results of the two sequences, by parts correspondent to administrative-territorial units, than for macro-subdivisions of the city territory (the south, the northern villages..), very often also correspondent to subdivision of the physical system (some river valleys). Also the preparation of detailed studies about some relevant places/spaces, in the forms of design explorations, were an occasion for the re-composition of the investigated elements, by spatial units in this case.

The results of the surveys have collaborated to build a new description, whose elements were essentially divided in three types: some *maps*, made by the interpolation of the GIS digital data's; a *diary* of the surveys, made up of photographical pictures, maps and a text to collect all the observations and notes related to the concrete and sensible experiences of the places; a text, different by the previous, collecting all the informations and data's as for instace about the statistical sector, the volumes of flows, the detailed studies on specific items as the distribution and status of the commercial activities, of the industries a.s.o.

A first conclusion, than, concerns the methods and approaches of the survey and description. To elaborate it, I will make reference to some reflections developed by the research group of the Urbanism PhD in Architectural Institute of Venezia, directed by B.Secchi, and to some others developed in the professional experience of Secchi and Viganò office. I consider these references useful and important for two reasons: because they are documenting a research route that, by means and because of some concrete cases, has tried to develop, coherently but without rigidity, a speech on the practices of the construction of the plan; because they bring back the particular case of Antwerp to the generality of an inquiry about the possibilities and statutes of contemporary urbanism.

From 1992 to 1995 B. Secchi and V.Gandolfi, with P.Cigalotto, P.Viganò, S.Rizzotti, work to the project for the new General Plan of Bergamo. This plan is facing an interesting story of accumulation of readings and visions from previous plans that, for several aspects, have a crucial importance in the history of Italian urbanism. Also in Bergamo, than, some of the

readings of the new plan are based starting by the description of some of the *images* those previous plans had laid down.

What I am interesting to point out is however the preliminary introduction to the text presenting the new plan, where the “cognitive and design strategy” is explained; the authors speak here about a “series of operations” that, as different but concurrent “paths”, had allowed to pass through the event of the construction of the plan.

The mentioned “paths” are four: the path of the “listening”, the path of the “survey”, the path of the analysis and the path of the “design exploration”.

About the survey, this is what is said: “to make a survey is **first of all to see, to walk through, to inhabit, make concrete experience** of the city [...]. The one who measures the city is necessarily brought to discover its *physical* character, the stronger or weaker resistance the city opposes to the movements of bodies and to the happening of some fundamental social practices”.

During the same years, the Architectural Institute of Venezia publishes the results of a research about the transformations of the urban habitat in Europe, developed within the urbanism PhD course and coordinated, among the other, by C.Bianchetti, with the direction of B.Secchi.

In her essay, C.Bianchetti speaks about a contemporary situation in which the “difficulties in describing [...] are for several reasons quite general” and can be interpreted as the result of a “general crisis of the ways of telling, naming, describing the reality that appears as a crisis of the concepts of measure, dimension, homogenous and substantial space”.

The phenomena of the explosion of the urban space, the proposition to the observation of a new object as the territory of the sprawl, making ineffective the tools and methods traditionally used to describe the urban habitat, are at the origin of this crisis.

Nevertheless the un-known character of the object to be studied is also, according to the author, an important chance. The importance of description, because of the impossibility to build a general discourse about an object whose nature is still obscure, is evident. This description has some different possibilities to explore: among them, C.Bianchetti points out one and proposes the hypothesis of a “**comparison** as investigative tool”; she intends to focus on the possibility to build “descriptive-interpretative frames that, in their specificity and autonomy, could be able to have a dialogue”; she intends to focus on the possibility to reach some general assertions starting by “a long exploration of details”. The reference, even if rather translated, is to an idea of **biography** of places.

I will underline two arguments I consider as emerging themes of reflection.

The first. Comparison, list, analogy, similitude, metaphor.

If the description is a specific *structure of the discourse* (B.Secchi, 1984), than the *figures* of the discourse, the *moves* of the rhetoric, can be assumed at all as similar *devices* for the construction of possible descriptions.

In the experience of the Structural Spatial Plan of Antwerp they have been implicitly used and could be easily revealed.

The second. Biography, cycle of life, history, individual history.

The hypothesis of a description as *biography* of places contains two important elements: *individuality of the urban facts* and their *duration*.

A description as *biography* can only be, at the same time, general and particular, diachronic and synchronic.

### 3.surveying design: looking to reality through images of the future

*“sono le immagini stesse che sviluppano le loro potenzialità implicite, **il racconto che esse portano dentro di sé.** [...] nell’organizzazione di questo materiale che non è più solo visivo ma anche concettuale, interviene a questo punto anche una mia intenzione [...] quello che io faccio è cercare di stabilire quali significati possono essere compatibili e quali no, col disegno generale che vorrei dare alla storia, sempre lasciando un certo margine di **alternative possibili.**”*

*(Italo Calvino, 1988)*

*(images themselves develops their implicit potentials, **the novel they bring inside** [...] in the organization of this material that is not anymore only visual but also conceptual, at this point my intention too intervenes [...] what I do is to try to establish which significances can be fitted and which not with the general outline I would like to impress to the story, leaving however a certain margin of **possible alternatives**)*

To be parallel and contemporary to the verification of the *interpretative hypothesis* emerged, the survey of the Antwerp territory had also to serve as a moment of verification for some first *hypothesis of transformation*. These had been mainly elaborated in shape of scenarios, it means as a structuring of an *arrangement of the possible*, oriented by the assumption of some key-qualities; the images of Antwerp coming from its first description had suggested the development of some of these scenarios’, following a process that will be explained through an example.

One of the emerged images was telling of a city densely and capillarly served by a fine rail-based public transport network, capable to represent from one side the metropolitan character of the city, with its aims of modernization and efficiency, from the other side its identity of a city made of multiple and diffuse centralities; an image exerting a strong grip for a long time and that appeared weakened in the last decades because of the pervasive use of the automobile and the consequent rise of a new and alternative system of routes, flows, centralities.

The proposed scenario was formulated in a quite simple way: what would happen if Antwerp could move back by disposing its centralities in relation to the accessibility via a renovated and reinforced public transport system? If the series of the spaces along the tramlines and the spaces around the stations could be rethought as places with a strong urban character? In other words, what if Antwerp could become again a *spoorstad*?

As from this example, images worked as suggestions toward the rehabilitation, the reinforcing or the development of some characters of the city. They oriented some questions about the future of Antwerp.

During the preliminary phase of the plan, particularly in the discussion of some of its matters in the districts, images served to describe emerging characters of the territory and potentials of their transformation. Description and project were not built in a mutual relationship of deductive derivation, but as interactive processes.

### ***The project as the centre***

In the experience of the Structural Spatial Plan of Antwerp, the project is not intended to be the final result or the goal; it is conceived as a tool, as a device orienting the observation and as a field of demonstration of its own hypothesis, as the ground on which to experiment the effective combination of forces moved by different processes, resistances excited by different factors, petitions expressed by different subjects.

It is an *inspired* project. Inspired by the sedimentation of readings that have built along the time the identity of the city. By emerging sensibilities, by new recognitions of meanings and values that can be considered expression of the present civic community.

These two main recognitions are the two fundamental actions toward the construction of a base for the discussion and confrontation.

Also in this case, it seems useful to me to refer to some reflections I consider an essential part of the conceptual background of the approaches experimented by the plan. I will mention an essay P.Viganò has published in 1994, in the frame of the already quoted research on the transformation of the urban habitat in Europe.

In her text, P.Viganò affirms that it is possible to distinguish different dimensione and attitude of the projects: as a *discourse*, the project is not only and necessarily *tale* (about something that exists before and is transformed in to present, about the ways it happens, has happened or will do), but it can also be defined and interpreted as *description, representation or demonstration*.

“the thesis of this text is that descriptive and representative projects are not intending to deny and are not pretending to modify the structural characters of the space [...], but they on the contrary pretend to reveal the elements of rationality that is possible to see in those same characters [...]. The design operation concerns the **selection of the signs to conserve**”. If “urbanism is the place where the analysis and recognition of the structural phenomena of an **on-going evolution** are built”, than the hypothesis of an urban plan that could enter into this *in fieri* process and could assume it as its own specific place is an hypothesis of legitimation.

Assuming this hypothesis, “the project becomes survey itself”, inside a process in which “problem and solution interactively [and mutually] build each other” (F.Infussi, quoted in P.Viganò).

The key-words of a similar approach are, again, **identity** and **character**.

#### 4.the proposition of an epistemological problem

*“la fantasia dell’artista è un mondo di potenzialità che nessuna opera riuscirà a mettere in atto; quello di cui facciamo esperienza vivendo è un altro mondo, che risponde ad altre forme d’ordine e di disordine; gli strati di parole che si accumulano sulle pagine [...] sono un altro mondo ancora, anch’esso infinito, ma più governabile, meno refrattario a una forma. Il rapporto fra i tre mondi è quell’ [...] indecidibile, come il paradosso di un insieme infinito che contiene altri insiemi infiniti.”*  
*“io credo che attingere a questo golfo della molteplicità potenziale sia indispensabile per ogni forma di conoscenza”.*

(Italo Calvino, 1988)

*(the fantasy of the artist is a world of potentialities no work of art will never be able to transform in actuality; what we experiment by living is another world, responding to other forms of order and disorder; the layers of words cumulated on the pages [...] are another world more, it also infinite, but more governable, less resilient to a shape. The relation among the three worlds is that [...] indecidibile, as the paradox of an infinite set containing other infinite sets.)*

In a fundamental essay from 1984, many times implicitly quoted in the present note, B.Secchi reflects about the role of the *text* in the construction of the plan. Not only and not immediately in its communication, transmission, sharing, but even before, much more behind, in its own definition and in the proposition of the objects the plan will choose to care



about, of the ways in which it will do this, of the reasons it will consider to individuate for which the choosing of those objects could be considered necessary, useful or legitimate. For the author, beyond the recognition of a typical and intrinsic narrative structure of the texts of urbanism, what represents the core of the his reflection, better the origin of it, is mainly the recognition of the essential role of the text as a *world by itself*, something in between, as in Calvino's words, reality and its images, something with a certain its own autonomy.

The story of the Structural Spatial Plan of Antwerp, limiting this explanations to the parts of it I have here illustrated, shows the concrete effort of building relations of meaning and degree of operativeness among each of these worlds or layers; it shows a structured attempt to over pass the *rigidism* of separations among observation, description, analysis and project, with a consciousness, already perceived in the notes by Astengo and Dodi in the introduction to the 1969's plan for Bergamo, of the impossibility of an absolute scientific base of the plan and of the "unsuppressible [dimension of] *invention* of the great spatial choices". That however is also consciousness of their critic content.

The problem behind the reflection Calvino develops, as a writer and thinking to literature, or behind the reflections Astengo and Dodi, or Secchi, as planners and thinking to the city and the territory, is the same problem. It has to do not banally with the consciousness of one's own cognitive processes, but with the capability to sustain their pertinence and to indicate their limits. It is a problem of foundation of one's own point of view. Properly, it is the problem of epistemology.

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All the translations from italian texts are made by the Author of the present note.