

## **"Urban Center" as a privileged place for shaping shared urban vision \***

### **0. Introduction: the hermeneutic approach to "Urban Center" phenomenon**

When a phenomenon produces polysemic definitions (terms with very different meanings regarding social and cultural dynamic contexts), it is necessary to use the approach philosophers define as 'hermeneutic'. In fact, regarding matters concerning communication and participation to urban policies, the term 'Urban Centers' is often used ambiguously, including a variety of structures.

"Urban Center" is a term used to describe any institution whose core mission is to inform and engage the citizens in urban planning and public policy. Around the world, these kinds of institutions are fast becoming the most effective way cities can facilitate community involvement. Because they are supposed to offer the public a non-partisan, centralized location for all planning, policy and urban design information relative to their city, Urban Centers should be the perfect neutral ground for architects, planners, city officials, and community members to hold discussions and debates on proposed changes to public policy and the built environment.

This issue is related to the wider context of participatory approach in the public planning domain which has become institutionalized as a method of good planning practice as opposed to the "rational hierarchical comprehensive" approach. In the public sphere, especially in community planning, democratic principles and public participation have become increasingly accepted as means for balancing and rationalizing multiple interests and preferences. The goal of participation is to forge consensus among interested parties, including planners, decision-makers, citizens and advocacy groups, outside the traditional decision-making setup. Participation is thus viewed as a community action that is meant to increase the institutionalized democratic processes.

The theme of interpretative keys in the information points, participative and argumentative and approved (or at least convergent) discussion of urban policies seems to form the "*fil rouge*" which reconnects the kaleidoscope of different cultural roots, legal traditions, administrative dimensions and partnership styles with traditional and emerging stakeholders who have been characterising the phenomenon of the extension of decisional areas for several decades.

### **1. Why an Urban Center ?**

Over the past decades the term Urban Center (UC) has referred to several heterogeneous structures, initially created by citizens, private groups or even directly by local institutions in the city. Info-boxes, Centers of urban documentation, *Maisons de la ville*, UCs, and so on, were all born with specific missions and roles, however, they all contribute to improving the tool set for implementing participative democratic principles in urban management. They were created to open new opportunities for those active (or potentially interested) in decisional processes of urban policies, with the aim of improving the level of information, knowledge, participation, transparency, legitimacy in consensus.

The origin of UCs takes its roots in the 'migration' from the "authoritative model" (based on the "principle of authority" which citizens democratically delegate to a small group of decision makers) to the "consensual domain" where the urban transformation management is the fruit of the involvement of many stakeholders: a theme of great current value and disciplinary concreteness referring to the rhetoric of governance.

Nowadays, in fact, the traditional dichotomous-dialectic pattern (public/private) can be considered completely obsolete due to the increasing involvement of new civic stakeholders, who have proved to be very effective in influencing urban scenes. From this rises the necessity to give space to informative, participative, argumentative and cooperative dimensions not only for legitimating the implementation of local projects, but even the construction and validation of the urban policies guidelines.

The natural interpretation of *Urban Centers* derives from the various 'missions' which its inspired creators follow: the evolution of interpretations given to these initiatives is strictly related to the multiplication of actors that have arisen relatively recently in the urban arena.

### **1.1 Creators, missions and interpretations of Urban Centers**

Styles and interpretative forms of the Urban Center derive from classic models of legal culture: 'civil law' and 'common law'. In the first system, whose ancient origin is based on the Roman *Corpus Juris Civilis* and later on the *Napoleonic Code*, legislation is seen as the primary source of law. By default, courts thus base their judgments on the provisions of codes and statutes, from which solutions in particular cases are to be derived. By contrast, in the "common law" system (Anglo-Saxon countries) cases are the primary source of law.

In the first domain, the context of reference sees the creator generally identify itself with institutions of local government (City Council) exclusively or together with other authorities who follow "public interest" or "general interest".

In the latter, the legal, socio-economic, cultural area encourages groups of 'other' entities composed of heterogeneous segments of civil society in a 'happy collision' of universities, professional associations, non-profit companies, entrepreneurial groups, financial subjects, private Foundations, other groups pursuing particular interests, etc.

Historically the two models have generated precise 'interpretative styles' according to the cultural roots they are influenced by.

The structures promoted and financed by the city government, even if differently 'labelled', have a series of 'basic' aims in common, substantially concentrated in the Urban Center as a place of information and communication.

Generally the institutional UC presents itself as a Centre of documentation/exhibitions, a 'database' of urban dealings on various temporal horizons: the 'real time' of transformations in progress and the 'historical time' with permanent shows/archives of the reconstructions of urbanisation processes.

In these cases the activities carried out in UCs can reflect critical points or typical faults of the relationship between politicians, economics operators and citizenship: at times they become places of formal presentation to the public (with demagogical and ineffective debates) for the legitimization of 'black box' projects, often pre-packaged and already contextualised with privileged economical actors; otherwise they are conceived as places for arrhythmic and informal consultation, containing a very evident asymmetry of basic information, common knowledge, evaluation methods and clarity of strategies.

Urban Centers are very different in their styles and implications, animated by an ample mixture of actors (private and public, but external to the City Council). It is more natural to observe the "extensive interpretation" here, a structure conceived as a place of authentic socio-cultural interaction.

They are places in the city to listen to and partake in narrations by the traditional protagonists; meeting places for various social, economical, cultural and political ideas; true 'theatres of the *polis*'.

They often present themselves as incubators of initiative of 'self-knowledge' of the territory and of the activation of the so-called 'third actor' in the construction of ideas, research, laboratories, outlines for object planning, competitions; they become 'think tanks' of

creativity, ideas and resources in symbiosis between citizens, business communities and other individuals with a wide range of interests, with the object of increasing the liveability of the city and at the same time promoting its economic viability.

Considering the web of relationships, we could define these structures as 'interconnection nodes' representing both *civitas* and *urbs* in a complex network of trajectories, visions and philosophies of the civic community; they can be considered "synecdoches" of progressive scenes of urban participative democracy.

In its more advanced forms, besides setting up a "think tank", the Board of Urban Centers is engaged in pursuing qualified interactions with urban and regional public administrations through research (diagnostic studies and feasibility, scientific reports) and educational activities with maieutic-social aims (advocacy planning). They tend to be characterised according to their "diversity of voices" and independence of any political pressure by a dimension of neutrality and equidistance from any single interest.

### **1.2 The "American lesson"**

The creation of similar structures in Europe and particularly in Italy, is a relatively recent phenomenon (the nineties), and closely related to the diffusion of strategic planning experience promoted by the City Councils and by other sub-regional public administrations. Considering the cultural tradition of Italian planning, centred on the protagonism of the public sphere, the engine role of UCs was physiologically assumed by the City Councils, oriented towards the convergence of consensus on socio-economic development, environmental qualification and morphological quality.

However, (and this is one of the fundamental points of the theme) for a full understanding of the phenomenon and of its mature evolutionary forms in Europe, it is necessary to look beyond the Atlantic ocean at some success stories (already consolidated) in the United States, which boast of forty years experience.

In the USA the inspirational models of greatest interest are connected to emerging actors given the opportunity of influencing the *panel* of urban policies in a significant way. Among these are non-profit associations, sorts of "think tanks" operating through research, studies, diagnostic reports and projects, often animated by symbiosis between citizens and real estate promoters with the primary objective of increasing the liveability of the city and, at the same time, promoting its economic vitality. Moreover, we find Urban Centers for advocacy planning: they are oriented to increase the low-income community's capability to develop innovative solutions for socio-economic and environmental challenges they are forced to tackle; often they are supported by University institutions for mainly maieutic-social reasons. There are also structures animated by private Foundations, oriented to promote the city's identity and reinforce its sense of belonging and cohesion to the civil community, by means of informative, didactic or cultural activities connected to the knowledge of urban and metropolitan planning dealings and the specific quality of the expressive figure of the city scene and high level architectural spots.

Among the numerous success stories it is useful to recall three cases emblematically expressing specific interpretative styles, coherent with the cultural identities of the urban community they represent: San Francisco, New York Brooklyn and Chicago.

The San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) is San Francisco's preeminent public-policy "think tank". SPUR's mission is to develop balanced, informed and innovative solutions to urban problems in order to improve the quality of urban life and to promote greater understanding of urban issues facing San Francisco today.

It was founded in 1959 to fight for the revitalization of San Francisco as the Bay Area's central city. It was given the charge of channelling growth away from suburban sprawl and back into the urban core. Throughout the 1960s, SPUR worked to build support for the land

use, transportation, and investment strategies that could support center-oriented growth and urban economic vitality.

Since then, SPUR has been involved with virtually every major planning decision in the city. We bring together neighbourhood leaders, government officials, business leaders, planners, architects, students, and activists the full range of people who care about San Francisco debate, learn, and plan for the needs of the city as a whole. In a city dominated by single-interest politics, SPUR plays the crucial role of uniting citizens from all parts of the city to jointly craft solutions to common problems.

Though it was formed by a small homogenous group, it has become a diverse and multi-talented association. SPUR brings together business, professional and civic-minded San Franciscans representing a wide variety of viewpoints. The deliberations that come from this diversity in many cases create a proxy for the city as a whole. If the SPUR Board of Directors can accept a particular solution for a policy problem facing the city, that solution frequently has a reasonable chance for acceptance by the city as a whole.

SPUR is today, as it has been for forty years, an activist urban "think tank" and an "honest broker" attempting to bring various elements of the public policy community together to enhance the livability and vitality of San Francisco. SPUR has remained, over a period of four decades, a strong, articulate voice in addressing issues of key concern to San Francisco and the Bay Area.

Since its founding in 1963 when the United States was swept by movements for social change, the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development [now known as the Pratt Center for Community Development or Pratt Center, New York - Brooklyn] has used an advocacy planning model to work with local "change agents" and community based organizations to help revitalize low and moderate income communities. The Pratt Center therefore differs from other cases in US and Europe: its origin is due to a University institution and its primary mission is not to promote the City in a traditional sense but to work with the citizens of the city's lowest income neighborhoods to find ways to regenerate those quarters in social, economic and spatial terms. In this way the city rebuilds from the base up and becomes a better place for all its residents and more attractive to others and therefore more marketable. Albeit 'marketability of the city' was not the goal of the Center but a by-product of its endeavors --a by-product that might engender unintended consequences such as "gentrification" and "displacement" of those that the Center seeks to assist in the first place.

The Pratt Centers philosophy is based on the principles of "advocacy planning" and the "empowerment" of the people that make-up and reside in New York City's low and moderate-income neighborhoods. "Advocacy" -- where the planner takes responsibility for the choices made about political, economic, environmental and social issues; and "empowerment" -- where those the planner works with and or represents are encouraged to exert their democratic rights and to actively participate in the decisions that affect them. Both reflects the assertion by the planner of a system of "values." This is a radical departure from the rational planning process in which the planner is seen as a neutral technician who acts in the name of the "public good." The Pratt Center early on rejected the concept of neutrality and embraced the twin and inter-related concepts of advocacy and empowerment and in the process recognized the pluralistic nature of our society and our cities.

The Pratt Center for over 40 years had helped to facilitate a recognition of social diversity and pluralism and used them as a building block in helping as part of the community development movement to foster the revitalization of New York City from the base-up. It was this community-led revitalization that helped the city market itself and enabled the City to be more competitive in the process of globalization. The city becomes more competitive and marketable when it recognizes its genetic footprint and promotes its individuality, its pluralism.

The Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) was founded in 1966 by individuals whose achievements have become standards for emerging architecture centers worldwide. CAF's mission is to advance public interest and education in architecture and design, which the organization pursues through a comprehensive range of activities including architecture tours, exhibitions, lectures, special events, and youth and adult education programs. Through its programs, CAF inspires and challenges public audiences to understand the environments that shape their lives.

For the past forty years, CAF's programs have engaged the public in learning about architecture, infrastructure, urban planning, and design. An active network of more than 450 volunteer docents is a renewing source of commitment, enthusiasm and knowledge for the organization's public service. CAF's extensive docent training equips individuals from diverse communities and professional backgrounds to share their knowledge of the built environment with the 200,000 individuals who take CAF tours each year, and also enables docents to participate in discussions and decision-making in their own communities. A membership base of more than 8,500 individuals and families, along with long-standing relationships with key civic organizations, extends CAF's reach and influence, and strengthens the organization's ability to serve as a vehicle for raising public awareness of issues related to the built environment.

The global community is conscious of the need for cities to respond to pressing social, economic and environmental issues, and the challenge of preparing the public to meet that need. Many cities have failed to resolve issues related to historic preservation, urban renewal, city planning, aging infrastructure, and sustainability. Moreover, in an increasingly global economy, major cities like Chicago competing with cities like London, Dubai, and Shanghai for market share and well-educated workers.

For this reason Architecture Centers (or Urban Centers) are vitally important. These centers of public education, which serve as forums for dialogue about the built environment, are a critical component in preparing citizens to make informed decisions about the future of their cities. Ultimately, architecture and urban centers will be the places where individual citizens, city planners, architects, engineers, designers, educators, community activists, preservationists and developers convene. They have the potential to redefine the urban experience.

How do these experiences affect the Italian context?

Although American UCs models cannot be imported *sic et simpliciter* in the Italian context, they represent experiences which we should take into account for their capacity to extend participative democracy and positive criticism within the urban community as far as the extreme *border-line* fringes of society.

These different experiences all share the 'happy collision' of social demands, formative missions, interests in the business community; scholars and experts both stress how the maturation of the UC phenomenon in the USA is the mirror of evolution from the first season of advocacy planning in the sixties (Davidoff) to the theories (and applications) of following decades: communicative planning (Forester, related to the thought of Habermas), consensual planning (Voogd) and collaborative planning (Haley) for a "metropolitan community network".

### **1.3 The evolution of Urban Centers in Italy**

The profile of Urban Centers in Italy nowadays appears to be in rapid mutation in comparison with the first generation which had seen the birth of prevalently didactic models (such as the 'Infobox', the 'Centres of urban documentation' or the "Museums of the city"). All these models were conceived as simple showcases of information on the historical and recent urbanisation processes of the city and used these structures often as tools of 'ex post' legitimation for plans and projects already defined by private real estate promoters and other dominant economic-financial actors, without any previous involvement neither of the

general *civitas*, nor, of the recessive, weak stakeholders, generally gifted with little incisiveness in decisional processes.

The initial phase in the early nineties was marked by a "physiological supremacy" of the City Councils which conceived UCs as simple structures primarily directed towards communicative-informative missions and self-promoting public action.

From the second half of the nineties, UCs have begun to be used also as places of confrontation and debate on plans and projects, open to various subjects of discussion. One might speak of a new season as there has been an exponential growth of new UCs recently, created to manage the complex cycle of supporting the strategic plan process (Palermo, Florence, Pesaro) following some success experiences in Europe (Barcelona, Glasgow, etc.).

The most recent and advanced experimentations, in progress, conceive the UC as a place of authentic, symbolic aggregation for the construction of a "shared urban vision". Advanced structures for their innovation and creativity (as the *Urban Center Metropolitano* in Turin) host a wide set of activities<sup>1</sup>. and show significant evolution in the actors panel with complex forms of public-public partnership (City, Provincial and Regional Councils, Universities, etc.) and public-private partnerships (local authorities, bank foundations, non-profit associations, etc.).

With respect to the DNA of urban policies in Italy (and other European countries focused on the central role of the public domain, like France), the new management of these structures reflects, therefore, a gradual transition towards a public-private integrated model.

The "time factor" is crucial in affirming the reliability of these structures for the urban community. Of course, if the creation and resources of UCs depend on the local administration, their stability levels and main missions are deeply conditioned by the "ups-and-downs" of political decision-makers.

Some UCs are supposed to have a short life as their mission is limited to follow specific steps of the planning process (structures to interact in the start-up phase or the implementation of a master plan, or, more recently, to support the birth and management of a strategic plan). Some have a parallel duration with local political mandates, others last longer, modifying their relationship with the planning strategies.

As a dimension represented within communication, "time" is a particularly important key for UCs. It is often considered as a way of stressing the urban vision (towards the future), in other situations it is an interpretation key of the past-future relationship for issues concerning tackling decline and urban renewal policies.

As has occurred in cases of international success, growing importance is attributed to the physical site of the Urban Centers and to the new forms of communication in virtual space.

The physical building hosting the Urban Center, its site, image, recognisability, identity, symbolic value and architectural quality, all assume a fundamental significance in the characterisation of the structure: it may become an interpretative key as a spectacular or "discrete" communicative vector, by its contents and the involving nature of its activities; it may make itself more credible as a meeting place of privileged recognisability and accessibility; or it may be characterised by a didactic function or technical support.

A crucial feature for the effectiveness and pervasiveness of communication and divulgation of an Urban Center's activities is its website and use of new multimedia forms of technology: the virtual space of the city conveyed by telematic mediums is, in fact, the "litmus paper", the measure level of "homo tecnologicus" in the social community.

## **2. Social interaction web hypermedia environments for UCs as visionary contexts of strategic projects**

### **2.1 UCs as relational agorà**

From a communicative point of view it could be said that UCs promoted and financed by European public administrations are based on the informational paradigm of communication, i.e. on an interpretation of this latter as a process of transmission of information to a recipient by a sender, aimed at demonstrating an established truth and intended to have persuasive effects. But the informational paradigm of communication is opposed to the relational one, according to which communication coincides with the establishing of a bond between animate and inanimate objects, which implicates the allusions, cross-references and ambiguity of a real conversation, where meaning is not generated by the linguistic utterances of the sender, but by the interaction between sender and recipient<sup>2</sup>.

It could be also noted that there is an almost perfect coincidence between the informational paradigm of communication and the views which definitely separate public from private domains.

Generally speaking, however, the communicative approaches in spatial planning theories and practices never derive from the consideration of the intrinsic relational nature of physical space<sup>3</sup>. They are rather generated, consciously or unconsciously, by concerns regarding social and political issues perceived as particularly relevant.

So, it may be worthwhile to trying to shift from the informational paradigm of communication, typical of European UCs, towards a relational communicative view of them, capable of improving UC performances in the field of spatial planning and projecting, also in non European and more "social relational" contexts.

First of all it is necessary to recognize the above mentioned intrinsic relational value of physical space. In fact, the meaning expressed by physical space needs to be distinguished from a "linguistic signified", that is, it must express something that is not able to be expressed by the "linguistic signifier". There would be no need for means of non-linguistic communication means if it only served to communicate the same meanings as the linguistic ones<sup>4</sup>.

Following McLuhan, as in any medium – and it could possibly be said as in any human view and experience of "nature" - the message of a physical space coincides with the medium itself, i.e. with the relationships that is possible to establish with others and with ourselves through it, or else with the patterns of interdependence between people and with the relationship among the senses implicit in it. In this sense physical space can be also considered one of the iconic or aesthetic (non linguistic) media able to transmit relational meaning.

Because of the relational and aesthetic value of physical space, a place for debating about it should not be conceived neither a fully public nor private place. Rather, the two spheres should be put in close relation as has already occurred in the Greek Agorà.

By contrast, a place such as a UC, should not be devoted to reaching a final decision at all costs, but rather to fostering all kinds of interactions from which decisions can "eventually" derive.

In other words UCs, and their virtual environments, should be seen in themselves as the visionary frameworks of spatial planning and projecting.

## **2.2 Open Imagining Systems**

But how can we contribute to building such visions from inside a UC and particularly through its virtual environment?

To answer this question I think that special attention should be paid to the nature and the functions which can be played by the "environmental images" of a given territory.

Indeed codifying and mapping of the changes perceivable in the course of interaction with a changing environment is the ordinary method by means of which all living species provide adaptive responses to environmental change<sup>5</sup>.

So we might put forward the hypothesis<sup>6</sup> that the images of the urban environment<sup>7</sup> constitute a particular example of "maps", seen as relational structures between perceived differences, that is as organization of differences in the framework of a coherent structure<sup>8</sup>.

In this sense, however, it is essential to recognize that "environmental" images of this type do not simply constitute a "starting point" for the preparation of a plan. In fact, if it is true that in environmental and social processes behaviour of the entities interacting therein can be based only on maps<sup>9</sup>/images<sup>10</sup>, then the plan tends, in this perspective, to coincide with the image itself.

Thus we could speak of "plan-images", which tend to constitute the context in which different social actors may autonomously reach decisions regarding the territory with which they are interacting.

In other words, the creative potential of the image, which Lynch had already spoken of, is not the domain of experts alone, but is available to all, not so much and not only in a strictly technical and projecting sense, but in the sense that it tends to constitute for everyone a framework for project making and autonomous "situated" action<sup>11</sup>.

Re-formulation and extension to the entire environmental process of the concept of environmental image or map, and its potential identification with the plan, can be addressed satisfactorily through recourse to web technology. Indeed we can recognize that an image seen as a complex of different elements organized in a map can coincide with a complex of various files (audio, video, graphics, text) either interconnected or interconnectible one to the other<sup>12</sup>.

In particular it can be argued that the architecture of a web site of a UC conceived as a medium itself of aesthetic-relational communication should be assimilated to an Open Content System (OCS), intended as that particular kind of Content Management Systems (CMS) inheriting from Open Source Software (OSS) or intrinsically characterized, by some features very relevant to our purpose, among which those of:

- making content (all knowledge and information stored, created, used and modified) "open", that is explorable, accessible, retrievable, modifiable<sup>13</sup>;
- sharing, creating and disseminating knowledge/content thus making a "common good" of it<sup>14</sup>;
- supporting and enabling community building processes around specific targeted questions and issues<sup>15</sup>;
- supporting, in particular, building processes of virtual "open content communities"<sup>16</sup>, seen as "communities of knowledge"<sup>17</sup>, also conceivable as on-line communities of practice<sup>18</sup> or on-line network of practice<sup>19</sup> distributing knowledge in different formats and showing transparency, integrity and no discrimination to access<sup>20</sup>.
- being composed by individuals who, since they belong to other communities (virtual or not), are characterized by the plurality and diversity of their partisanship<sup>21</sup>;



- seeing positively any kind of divergence and storing and making available to contributors and to newcomers the content, keeping the trace of both the contents and the processes that generated those contents<sup>22</sup>, thus supplying support to reflection (therefore to feedback and learning).

We can easily associate the above mentioned fundamental features of an OCS to the basic features that an "Open Imagining System" (OIS), intended as the web site of an UC devoted to building the visionary context of strategic projecting. In fact:

- we can compare the image (and the "plan-image") to a framework of connections (hypertextuality) between information of various types (multimediality), that is to an "hypermedial image" (see above). But to generate the images it is necessary to move beyond a structure based on links (hypertextuality) between various types of information (multimediality or hyper-mediality), to enable work on shared materials, making open not only the structure of web interface, but also the materials emerging from online contributions and discussion;
- basic interaction mode inside a web environment for "plan-images" follows the format "each to all" - as distinguished from the formats "one (only) to all" or "few to all", typical of mass communication (and traditional planning) - to enable the generation, comparison and re-generation of images over a long period of time, necessary for devising and disseminating the images and for the gradual construction of the planning community on the network;
- the total openness of the environment and the "each to all" format, however, may be arranged into more "restricted" interaction sub-formats, also allowing communication "one to few" or "one to many (but not all)", hence enabling the emergence of images related to specific groups of people;
- the image/map should constitute the result of the multiplicity of interactions, constantly evolving; a multiplicity, however, that is not established (or reduced) *a priori*<sup>23</sup>, and that above all could give rise to the creation of new aggregations, thanks to the establishment of trans-organisational connections<sup>24</sup> fostered by the convergence on specific questions;
- in such images there is not a "reality" that is "represented"<sup>25</sup>, but there are senses, affections, emotions and values that are transmitted through the structure and make-up the structure itself;
- the meaning of "public images" could be referred to the sets of elements interconnected by the participants to the interactions whether they are shared or not. In other words an image should be considered "public" precisely because it is able to hold together different, even opposite elements.

Such an OCS/OIS should not be inscribed into the category of collaborative tools – aiming to help less or more restricted groups of people involved in a common task to achieve their goals – but more precisely into the emerging category of web environments for social interaction (the so called web 2.0), aiming at enabling people to meet, connect or collaborate through computer mediated communication.

In fact, the appropriate architecture of such web environments (and software), though intrinsically and above all characterized by no possibilities of discrimination to access<sup>26</sup>, allows the members of the virtual or on-line community, as already said, to communicate following different interaction schemes, thus allowing any kind of more restricted forms of interaction and contact, by means of synchronous and asynchronous tools.

This modularity of interaction should be one of the two fundamental ends of the architecture of an OIS for UCs, the second one consisting in the possibility of not doing it in a prevailing textual mode but in a really hypermedia mode<sup>27</sup>.

Finally, another fundamental feature of such an OIS should be the integration in the system of open source webgis<sup>28</sup>, which is considerable not only feasible but also very promising thanks to the possibilities provided by tools such as Map Server.

### 3. New missions and open problems

Recent evolution has now clarified how the role of UCs cannot be limited to a simple place of discussion about plans or projects which have already been "prepackaged behind closed doors" by experts in the city council offices or by real estate promoters; the risk must be combatted that urban transformations and strategic vision be merely the autonomous expression of experts and decision-makers, only nominally evaluated by stakeholders who are deprived of the necessary interaction tools.

By contrast, crucial matters should be questioned so that they can affect transformation scenes in the city to the core, when the mechanism of policy construction is formed before the final decision.

The "new mission", which seems to be the common denominator in these initiatives even in their various interpretations, is connected to a "style" of creating choices and a strategy which tends to assume complexity as an added value. It works with ordinary resources and powers in order to bring conflicts out into the light and manage them organically rather than hide them away. The beginning of the decisional process, from its initial phases to the participation of all actors, with dominant or recessive interests, should be a source of enrichment for conscious and jointly-made results for the transformation of the city and its territory.

Nonetheless, if the various types of experimentation currently in progress converge towards the role of Urban Centers as catalysers and privileged places for discussion and construction of city development policies, the question of "neutrality" and equidistance of public or private interests must be the "Gordian knot" which contemporary civil communities are called to undo.

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\* *This paper stems from a collaborative research work of the authors. Nevertheless B. Monardo took care in particular of chapters 0, 1 e 3 and L. De Bonis of chapter 2.*

<sup>1</sup> In the "Urban Center Metropolitan" of Turin, we can find "basic" activities oriented to communication/information (exhibitions, documentation-consultation, production and diffusion of publications, website). Advocacy and public services (education, projects evaluation, planning process support) are also offered together with more sophisticated functions of decisional support (forum, discussion, debate) and project research/exploration (diagnostic reports and assistance to transformation projects).

<sup>2</sup> Fatelli, G. (1994), "I paradigmi della comunicazione", in Abruzzese A., Morcellini M. (eds), *La comunicazione*, Viterbo: Stampa Alternativa.

<sup>3</sup> De Bonis, L. (2001), "Communication Technologies and Planning 'Technologies'", in *Plurimondi. An International Forum for Research and Debate on Human Settlement. Plural Cities, No. 5*, (January-June), edizioni, Bari; Dedalo.

<sup>4</sup> Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York: Chandler Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> Bateson, G. (1979), *Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity*, New York: E.P. Dutton.

<sup>6</sup> De Bonis, L. (2005) "Web Collaborative Environments for Planning Processes: towards Hypermedia Territorial Images, *Proc. EETI2004, New Technical And Cultural Challenges for Environmental Sustainability*, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 4-7 October 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

<sup>8</sup> Bateson, G. (1979), *cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibidem*

- <sup>10</sup> Boulding, K. (1956) *The Image. Knowledge in Life and Society*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press.
- <sup>11</sup> De Bonis, L. (2005) *cit.*
- <sup>12</sup> De Bonis, L. (2003) The Construction of 'Environ-mental' Maps on the Web, in Budoni, A., L. De Bonis and P. Maurelli, "Web Imageability", *Proc. CUPUM03, The 8th International Conference on Computers in Urban Planning and Urban Management*, Sendai, Japan, 2003.
- <sup>13</sup> Celino, A. & Concilio, G. 2005 "Open Content Systems for e-Governance: the Case of Environmental Planning", *eGovernment Workshop '05 (eGOV05)*, September 13 2005, Brunel University, London.
- <sup>14</sup> Newmarch, J. (2001) "Lessons from open source: Intellectual property and courseware", *First Monday*, No. 6 (6), [[http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue6\\_6/newmarch/](http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue6_6/newmarch/)].
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