

“It’s inspiring when we learn and work with each other.”

Right after arriving in Amsterdam and before giving a presentation at the COST TUD Exploratory Workshop on Urban Development and Mobility I get the opportunity to interview Antonio Borghi. At local level Borghi is a practicing architect in Milan, Italy. At a European level he is engaged with the Architects Council of Europe (ACE). “In the last 6 years I have been coordinating the Work Group Urban Issues of ACE, which is why I am invited at this COST TUD conference. My task within ACE is to track the developments of European urban policies and to try to promote the physical dimension, meaning the morphological and design aspect, as the creative synthesis between the complexity of a context and a building programme. Sustainable urban development includes economic, social and environmental issues but we should not forget the physical presence of urban fabrics and buildings, their cultural identity, how they affect interpersonal relationships, which are crucial to building a sustainable community.”

Well Designed and Built

"Urban policies are the outcome of an iterative process between theory and practice and it is interesting to see how knowledge and visions from the research and professional world flow into the official documents of the European institutions and in several EU measures that affect the Urbact environment." In the book "Well Designed and Built" Borghi writes about projects and discussions which he took part in at European level on behalf of ACE, as a thematic expert of the Urbact Programme, as researcher at the Politecnico di Milano and at the Town Planning Institute of the Stuttgart University. "I tried to get hold and reflect on the milestones of the European urban policies discourse during the past 10 years, trying to understand why the role of the physical dimension was quite high in the declaration of principles and then quite disappointing in the outcomes. In my research I tried to give an overview as comprehensive as possible of all urban related matters, but at the end the subjects I have treated more deeply are those I know better from my professional background. In the book there is less about economic development and social policies and more about housing, which includes many urban development aspects and since years is quite high on the European agenda."

Have housing needs and design changed over the years?

In 2006 and 2007 I contributed to the Urbact Houses Network, which dealt with the management and renewal of large housing estates in new and old member states. It was a great experience to touch and feel the differences in buildings, which were constructed before WWII compared to the ones built in the '60s, or the more modern buildings, in the different countries. The styles may vary but the issues, challenges, requirements and proposed solutions have definitely turned out to be comparable. For instance I had the opportunity to visit many *grande ensembles*, which were necessary in the boom of the '60s and '70s when families with many children moved to the industrial cities. What became clear is that buildings from that time are different in terms of provision of space, services and technology. However success or failure of a housing complex is always both urban and design related. A good example is the Barbican in London. Today this grand ensemble, paramount example of Brutalism architecture from the '60s is a very cool place to live in London, although it was built in a perfect modernist style. Thanks to the diverse range of art, music, theatre, dance, film and educational events taking place at the Barbican centre the whole neighborhood has become a great place to live and it attracts people from other parts of London as well, making this quite strange and out of scale architectural object lively and friendly. This is an example of how the urban context is more important than the single project. Barbican would surely not have worked so well in another context, country or time. It's both a direct supply to a current demand and a matter of how to adapt to a radical "climate change".

And how does it work the other way around? How do housing policies affect urban policy?

You can have the greatest, most beautiful and innovative zero-energy housing complex in a fantastic natural landscape, but without public transport, economic activities and social services it will never be a sustainable project. People need more than a sustainable home; they need a sustainable built environment. Urban policies have to consider economic, social and environmental related factors as part of an integrated and holistic approach and think about how things change over time because cities keep growing and changing. In the neighborhood where I live in Milan you can find one of the most "disadvantaged" housing estates and next to it another one which is well maintained and fully functional. They have been built almost at the same time, with comparable design concept and prefabricated concrete slabs as parts of a large social housing project, but the property and management scheme made the difference. In one case it resulted in a rather run-down area, in the other to a sustainable community. Many factors play a role in determining the quality of a housing estate in relation to demand. Before undertaking any physical regeneration project a careful and interdisciplinary professional assessment is needed.

Building houses for an ageing population

Urban and housing issues are strongly affected by demographic and migration trends. Ageing population and ethnic minorities have become a major issue in most European countries. Europeans are becoming older so urban planning and housing projects should bare in mind specific needs, services and facilities for elderly. This does not mean that we have to build homes specifically and only for the elderly but when building, bearing in mind the elderly, children and disabled people. People own and love their own things and growing old does not mean that you stop loving your own house. You have the right to stay in your house which is possible by creating houses which can be easily adaptable to your specific needs. Moreover people are going to live longer and play a very important role in society, supplying a lot of services that the welfare cannot afford anymore. Cities and buildings have to evolve accordingly.

In your book you mention the opportunity to use online indicators such as Walkscore as support for urban development policies. In The Nederland there is a similar tool which is called the "Leefbaarometer". Do you think that these kinds of tools make it more difficult for deprived areas to flourish?

Someone has said that the Internet has done a wonderful job at clearing streets from stupid people. Meaning people who prefer to build virtual "social networks" instead of living in the cities. By only filling out an online questionnaire nobody can find out whether a neighborhood is liveable or not. On the other side everyday we deal with indicators, if we like it or not, and I just recommend their appropriate use as a complementary tool for urban policy, to communicate and share decisions of the public administration and promote a more sustainable individual behaviour. All these indicators ultimately should recommend visiting the neighborhood personally to make up your own "real" opinion and choose your own your living environment, which is a fundamental choice in everyone's life. If you find out via an indicator that a certain neighborhood has a very high crime rate and that it's difficult to move around safely, then people will probably not take the next step to go check out the place for themselves, but that's part of the game.

But then that neighborhood might not get a chance to improve?

Not necessarily, it just means that the neighborhood and the municipality have to work harder to improve living conditions. Ultimately also for neighborhoods the most important aspect is the relationship between price and value. Artists, freelance professionals might choose to invest in a disadvantaged neighborhood if they see there is potential for improvement that is going to pay off in a few years. This is what happens all the time in London, in Berlin, in New York at the Bowery or at Porto Marghera nearby Venice. On the other hand young families may decide to pay a little extra or live a little smaller if they know they're in a good neighborhood or if they know they are comfortable and good to the environment because they are not going to be car dependent. If you have to travel for an hour by car everyday to and from work, then this is bad (even if you forget about the

environment and next generations). I have the impression people are not well enough informed to look for suitable neighborhoods to live in and indicators, like Walkscore, could help them in this extent.

A web based housing indicator on European level

I would like to see something like the Leefbaarometer or the Walkscore on a European level. A synthetic index without ambition to embrace the complexity of the urban environment, but an easy and free web based tool, quick and effective to get a first impression. The approach of the EU institutions is much more comprehensive and balanced, trying to consider the diversity of European regions and cities and the needs of every social group in a very differentiated way, but ultimately this means that we were not yet able to develop such a tool, despite relevant investment.

Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities will be a significant step forward for the harmonisation of European town planning

In December 2008 The EU Ministers in charge of urban development met in Marseille and agreed on *"the importance of urban statistics and comparative indicators at the European level and of the coordination of the information in order to be able draw a comparative picture between cities and to benchmark them"*. Today - as a follow up of the Leipzig Charta (2007) - a Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities RFSC is under construction and it is going to include a set of urban development recommended indicators. But I have to say that, as far as I can see, the use of this RFSC is not going to be as innovative, self-explaining and rewarding as I think such tools should be. Moreover it is supposed to be used only by the local decision makers and not by all stakeholders, which is a considerable limitation. Nevertheless I am confident that it will be a significant step forward for the harmonisation of European town planning culture and I hope it will become a useful complementary tool in respect to statistical monitoring tools like ESPON or the Urban Audit.

How about the economic crisis? How does this affect housing market and urban planning?

In California house prices have decreased with 35% in the past 2 years. In Europe maybe 3,5% in average. I am not an economist, but I don't think it is necessary to say that real estate (together with "creative" finance) enjoy too many advantages in our economic systems, compared to SMIs, professionals and manufacturing. Our cities are full of empty buildings which nobody can afford. The real estate market is too rigid, thanks to the enormous reserves that it has been able to accumulate and its *"liasons dangereuses"* with banks. This is too big of an advantage in an economy that is in crisis. By lowering the prices now when we are in trouble we could stimulate urban economy and the housing market which allows policy makers to carry on with their plans. Only then can the city keep on progressing and growing. We cannot move on within urban planning without a lively urban market. It's like there is a real estate law that states that prices can only go up, but this doesn't work in a flexible economy. Prices need to go down so that people can afford it, because it's so much more important that people use the space in their cities.

What makes a place/neighborhood/city liveable?

This is the question we should always keep in mind and try to find a creative answer to. It is like asking ourselves: how are we going to be happy? Sustainable cities are not just a matter of CO2 emissions, they are the places where citizens like to live and are willing to engage in contributing to urban development. Just like every city, every person has different needs depending on his own background and current conditions. But there are many things that all citizens need: a home, embedded in a community and a cultural context to live in; a regular job and the perspective to be able to sustain his/her own family; a healthy environment with the possibility to enjoy the services everyone needs in a safe and comfortable way. All these needs were well described in the Bristol Accord on Sustainable Communities (2005). I appreciated very much the pragmatic approach of this document also because it is very clear that a Sustainable Community must be Well Designed and Built, which became the title of my book. It is crucial that, once the community stakeholders agree on

a list of desired urban qualities, the capacity to coordinate actions to achieve them is there, because all these qualities are interconnected and inseparable. Sustainable urban development needs good governance and a long term integrated and holistic approach. If you are able to tackle all issues at the same time you will have the multiplier effect and start a virtuous circle, as we can see today in the cities like Copenhagen, Munich, Zurich, Barcelona, Helsinki, Stockholm etc. Economic development, social cohesion, environmental sensitiveness, cultural identity and good governance belong together.

What will urban policy in Europe look like in the future?

I hope there will be some sort of harmonization among different planning cultures - something which is already happening in architecture – so that we can understand each other better and speed up the cooperation we need to progress. Urban policy in Europe is a political discourse, which affects the national and regional levels of policies and this in its turn, affects Europe. I think it's important that European countries learn from each other. For example the Mediterranean countries can learn a lot on urban planning from the Nordic European countries and vice versa. There are many brilliant urban development policies in place in European cities: we just need to share them. This is also what "new" Member States expect, although they are very proud of their urban tradition. Local tradition should not be an excuse to replace borders we agreed to get rid of. It's inspiring when we learn and work with each other. It gives the sense that even within this economic crisis we can still get through it together.

By Elizabeth Winkel, EUKN

Links

Well Designed and Built: <http://welldesignedandbuilt.wordpress.com/>

EUKN Leefbaarometer:

http://www.eukn.org/E_library/Social_Inclusion_Integration/Social_Inclusion/What_makes_neighborhoods_livable