THE CONSERVATION OF URBAN STRUCTURES: SPECULATIONS ON POLITICAL AND SPATIAL LEGITIMACY

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Abstract
This essay originates from some speculations regarding urban structures, and inquires about a possible analogy between the legitimacy of a political setting and a certain spatial legitimacy – a topic that might be helpful in the context of urban interventions. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to raise some speculations. It was necessary, then, to try to articulate the following analytical categories: urban structure, collective memory and legitimacy. The path towards this articulation would not be possible without contributions from the social sciences.

Keywords: Conservation, urban planning, structural permanencies, legitimacy.

1.0 Introduction
This essay originates from some speculations regarding urban structures¹, particularly those which have become physical support to meanings shared both by residents and users, and thus symbolic support for the communities which have built them. Theses speculations raised some questions about a possible analogy between the permanence of theses structures and the legitimacy of a political setting – an issue that may be helpful in the context of urban intervention. To speculate, therefore, is the main object of this paper.

The argument of this article was structured into three parts. The first aims at finding correlations between what was defined in this essay as spatial legitimacy and the permanence of the spatial structures. The second one tried to explain how spatial configurations, by preserving the collective memory of the communities, guard and narrate their own history, basis of a local identity. The third one attempted to show that legitimacy should be considered a value of social coexistence.

2.0 Structural permanencies and spatial legitimacy
In fact, the present practice of planning (supported or not by an attitude of reflection) has departed from the positivist paradigms that prevailed until recently. These paradigms, with a strong ethos of centralization and technocracy, inevitably led to quantitative...
techniques and instruments for handling and intervening in reality. Accordingly, urban space was represented and received the intervention of an apparatus unable to express or communicate qualitative aspects of the cities. It is worth noting that these models possessed a symbolic content closely related to the notion of development predominant in the postwar period. Ideas such as radical transformation and modernity expressed the belief in the centralized planification of society.

In more recent times, integrated conservation has emerged as a field of reflection and practices that counterpose these previous paradigms. Although many ideas regarding conservation are not new, their application as the central concern of urban planning only occurs during the 70s and 80s, mainly in Italy.

The main ideas, principles and directives of integrated conservation were organized in 1975 in the Declaration of Amsterdam, including, among other aspects, the management, legislation and financing of interventions. All of these were grounded on the specific belief that all urban built stock was heritage. Other than the so-called historic centers, with their old and monumental areas, this heritage should expand in order to include all the urban fabric. The notion that the whole city is historic, in other words the historicized city, is partially based on the debates about the concept of historic center held at the Central Institute for Restoration, led by Giulio Carlo Argan and Cesare Brandi. Consequently, the major objective within urban planning should be the conservation of this heritage, acting mainly in the material dimension of the urban phenomenon.

If on the one hand, this built stock constitutes, *latu sensu*, a heritage, a spatial unit; on the other it is not homogeneous. It is not a simple unit, rather an integration capable of maintaining multiplicity. Recent studies show that there are various processes of production and appropriation of the city, nevertheless these studies generally ignore that this unit is formed by many parts. Thus, the city is the unity of a diversity, whose comprehension demands an analysis that is simultaneously particular and general.

This unity can only be understood through a careful study of the temporal dimension of the territory, therefore of its history. The Brazilian metropolis *[and actually any city]* results from the historical accumulation of urbanizing practices that molded the territory through stratification processes (the archeology of the urban occupation) and the juxtaposition of various products of human intervention over nature. *(Zancheti, Lacerda & Diniz, 1999:151).*

These propositions converge to the thought of the Annales School. According to Larochelle & Iamandi (1999:100):

This view of history, partly tributary to the impact of ‘new history’ [...] is related to the discovery of cyclical and oscillatory processes and of repetitive facts. According to this new dimension of history, applied to large areas and long periods, one should bring to light the stability of repetitions and discover a structural component. According to Braudel, structure refers to facts that remain unchanged over a very long period or that evolve imperceptibly (the ‘structural permanencies’).

In a city, *permanencies* refer to those parts whose spatial configuration has resisted, remaining practically unchanged. These *permanencies* tend to impose themselves when an intervention occurs in the structure of these parts, in other words, when the setting and order of its natural or built elements are altered.

The main challenge facing integrated conservation is to reconcile the necessary transformations of the built environment and the conservation of essential characteristics that are embodied in the *structural permanencies.*
At this point it is important to look at urban structures within the built environment as the systems of objects and the systems of actions that constitute space. According to Santos (1996:56), “one the one hand, object systems mould how actions occur and, on the other, action systems unfold on existing objects or lead to the creation of new objects”. Object systems are the result of human action and thus a legacy of history. Action systems are the result of material and immaterial needs (economic, social, political, cultural, moral, and psychological).

It is essential to consider the interaction of these two systems at the moment of the intervention in an urban structure. This presupposes the valuation and legitimation of states and processes, through which values will be transmitted to future generations.

This legitimation means to respect a certain structure, which on its turn entails a respect for customs and traditions, factors that are present in the spatial dimension itself. These factors, as will be discussed further in the argument, are among those that are foundational for legitimate action. This comprehension leads to the plausibility of a kind of legitimacy grounded in the spatial dimension itself.

These factors are related to these structural permanencies, defining those urban structures that have a higher resistance to change and that contribute the most to collective memory (Larochelle & Iamandi, 1999:100). The advent of a spatial legitimacy would reveal the pertinence of the actions carried out in the territory, in the sense that those actions that oppose to these structural permanencies might cause a discontinuity of the spatial identity.

The major issue at stake here is an analogy between the legitimacy of these permanencies and the legitimacy of the political setting that mold the interventions on these urban structures. The clarification of this depends on a plausible relation between these structures and collective memory, a crucial element for the local identity.

3.0 Collective memory and local identity

According to Duvignaud (1977:50), the city is the memory of itself, and thus, fights constantly against oblivion. This happens because it was edified during a process of identification. In this process, its many urban structures became the physical support of shared meanings, and thus the symbolic support for the communities that, through time, built these structures. The diverse spatial configuration of the city preserves the collective memory of its inhabitants and by doing so embodies a multiple history.

In this identification of inhabitants with the urban structures, the built environment performs an essential interface, carrying a constitutive significance. This interface operates in two scales: (i) in the city as a whole, that is, as the integration of its multiplicity, allowing its history to be “read” and revealing its identity; (ii) in its many localities, whose particularities are a consequence of history, that is, of the diverse forms of spatial production and appropriation that rendered these diverse identities.

The city center has an evident urban and symbolic meaning. It is, by excellence, the place that articulates the city’s multiplicity in a unit. After all, it is there that different urbanizing practices of different historic times condense. Inhabitants identify with these places, and as Dewitte (1999:83) observes “lest they [the inhabitants] forget who they are, it is enough, so to speak, to return to this place in order to remember; it is, in its presence of stone, the sensible recollection of who they are.”

But localities, with their respective communities, are capable of maintaining and narrating their own history. This is related to the capacity of urban structures to reveal their history.
Their level of transformation will be proportional to the value that inhabitants place in the traditions and customs related to the locality. In other words, tradition and customs have a crucial role in the level of permanence of urban structures. For inhabitants with these values, significant changes in the structure lead to changes in customs, particularly in how they experience the locality. These transformations could even jeopardize their sense of belonging.

It can not be ignored that inhabitants can establish a community by sharing this very sense of belonging. What is at stake is the difference between the sense of pertaining to a place (particular) and to the whole extension of the city, between the limited and the unlimited. In the face of transformations, this sense causes legitimate reactions. The past would cease to be an anchor and the future unknown.

4.0 Legitimacy as a value of social coexistence

According to Bobbio (1986:675), legitimacy means both a situation and a value of social coexistence. This value is a consensus freely expressed by a community of autonomous and conscious individuals. Moreover, legitimacy is an open unit, whose realization can occur in a possible future, yet to be defined. Present reality is nothing but a sketch of this future, and legitimacy exists as a potential that looks towards the future from the current concrete reality.

This potential, understood as a free consensus, occurs in a political process. According to Weber (apud Bobbio, 1987:93), there are three kinds of legitimate power, based on three motivations: (i) traditions and customs, which originate in the strength of those instances that last, in what has always existed and since then had no reason to be changed; (ii) legal procedures, derived from a belief in rationality of lawful behavior and (iii) charisma, that originates in the belief of extraordinary gifts of a leader. Weber did not exclude a possible relation between these motivations, conceding that it is difficult to determine their boundaries.

Since traditions and customs are one of the sources of legitimate power, free consensus can also occur in the context of a spatial process. Thus, it is admissible that even when based on legal procedures, urban interventions that ignore those traditions and customs revealed by structural permanencies end up in opposition to one of the principles of legitimation. Furthermore, they can disrupt the basic principles of collective action.

In the words of Remy & Voye (1992:25):

[…] there is a strong bond between spatial and social structure, to the extent that – as shown by Levi Strauss with the example of the Bororos –, if the spatial structure is dismantled, at the same time the principles of collective action are disorganized. Space is the major formalization of a group’s culture and social rules.

Or according to Ostrowetsky (1983:14):

To assert that space is a constitutive dimension of society, presupposes that space is not only a technical support for activities or symbolic support for organizations, not merely as result or means, but all at once, as psyche as well as materiality. Space is, beyond its practical and theoretical discourses, a constitutive dimension of the social. Inversely, the social is a constitutive dimension of space.
Therefore, a legitimate system of actions presupposes a process that acknowledges this link between spatial structure and community, whose actions unfold guided by a value of social coexistence. This, according to Bobbio, is a freely expressed consensus.

Furthermore it is essential to determine if this locality actually is a community “where the cohesion and community of inhabitants, not in all spheres, but at least so far as territorial interests are concerned, is sufficiently strong to establish a consensus binding on all.” (Ledrut, 1979:18). This consensus is capable of revealing to the community that “the disappearance of one urban order entails the emergence of another.” (Choay, 1965:14).

This new urban order threatens those traditions and customs of the community that generate the motivations that promote legitimate actions.

The risks of this new order probably would lead the inhabitants to promote political alignments (alliances) in opposition to such urban interventions. These alignments can easily extend beyond the locality itself, gathering supported from, among others, notorious social actors, religious leaders and political parties receptive to the community’s agenda. But inevitably opposite arrangements will occur and pressure will build on both sides. At stake are the transformations or the permanence of urban structures that support the meanings of the locality. The outcome will define winners and losers, or more accurately the degree of permanence and transformation.

5.0 Conclusion

The perception that under certain circumstances there is an interdependency between traditions/customs and collective action led to inquiries about the possibility of a analogy between the legitimacy of structural urban permanence and the legitimacy of political alignments, guided by specific variables of the social sciences.

Furthermore, this perception suggests that the possible disappearance of a certain urban order, in other words the destruction of structural urban permanencies, would result in diverse values of social coexistence. This would lead to collective actions that legitimately sought its conservation.

Wider research, including diverse spatial realities (symbolic support of their respective communities), would probably show that these reflections are plausible and pertinent in the context of intervening in urban spatial structures.

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