Redistributing Urban Space

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PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS	• Authors: Francesca Arcuri, Federico Parolotto • First published as Ridistribuire lo spazio urbano, in “Architettura del Paesaggio” – Rivista di Aiapp, Edifir, n° 31 semestrale 2/2015

The topic of space redistribution in urban planning touches upon many of the disciplines that govern planning processes. In the cities of the western world, we are witnessing the spread of a synergistic approach to the various aspects that shape the urban environment – an approach which aims to coordinate elements from the sphere of mobility with those typically associated with urban and landscape planning.

The very term mobility has come to embrace a more comprehensive notion of the act of moving, which factors in certain components (such as the environmental and experiential ones) that were mostly neglected by the traditional, functional approach to transportation planning (which instead was based exclusively on time and cost values – the so-called generalised cost of travel). To this end, then, the process of mobility planning has naturally come to include considerations on the impact and interaction with the surrounding landscape. One of the planning approaches that most obviously reflects this correlation is the recent one that emphasises the possibility of redistributing among the various users spaces dedicated to transportation, and specifically to automobiles, rather than introducing new road infrastructures.

The search for a new and more efficient balance between different modes of transport – and their respective flows – allows us to revise our land-budgeting strategies in both functional and geometric terms.

The automobile boom in the second half of the 20th century progressively ate away at the available surface, thus relegating the other modes of transport to minimal, residual spaces.

↑ The new reading of the urban connectivity rising from the synergy of the two public spaces and vehicular network

The goal is to reverse that trend, and give back to pedestrians, to bicycles and to above-ground public transport at least some of the spaces that over the years have been allocated almost exclusively to car traffic. The regeneration of a quality urban environment, that prioritizes liveability and safety, is therefore the end-point of a spatial revision process. This process begins by redefining urban mobility flows, and directly influences the planning of landscapes and of the public realm, bringing back spatial and connective systems that have long been eroded and hidden by the presence of the automobile.

To grasp the potential of a "light" approach to transport planning, let us think of Gilles Clément's words from his Manifeste du Tiers-Paysage. Clément points out that "biodiversity has no scale," and can be welcomed into vast areas as well as in fragmentary residual spaces, such as the ones we find even within well-established urban contexts.

From the largest to the smallest, any space can become landscape. In fact, it acquires value and dignity, not as a rigid and premeditated product of planning, that must necessarily be integrated within an existing urban context, but rather as an autonomous and vital element capable of taking on a life of its own – always different and precisely for this reason powerful. In this sense, planning urban mobility and adapting existing infrastructures to its new needs, frees up spaces that range in scale from very large (when removing entire road sections) to minuscule residual spaces (created through spatial redistribution processes associated with optimisation and compression of areas dedicated to vehicular traffic).

Following Clément's views on landscape, it is possible to see parallels with his notion of "diverse landscape," which always generates sequences of fragmented spaces. And precisely in light of Clément's idea, fragmentariness does not entail any limits to the potential for landscape planning. On the contrary, it is the unitary vision of a holistic approach to planning, conceived to ensure that those sections of land reclaimed from automobile space become the basis for systemic modifications to the urban fabric.

However, from a wider planning perspective, it is important to note that simply removing the automobile component from the urban equation, besides being highly unlikely, does not necessarily guarantee the creation of quality, liveable spaces. In fact, it can actually produce the opposite effect, and lead to a kind of "fossilisation" of the landscape, reducing it to an empty and unexploited container, as has been the case with several newly-created pedestrian areas.

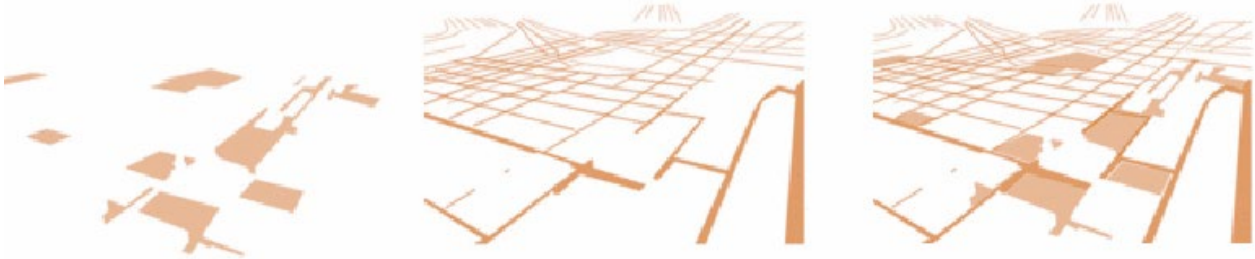
To prevent this from happening, it is therefore imperative to properly manage transport flows and demand. This must be done transversely across all modes of transit, with the goal of reaching an optimal balance, where it is possible to calibrate the motor vehicle infrastructure without unreasonably affecting its dynamics (which are, after all, a part of the urban landscape). At the same time, the process should foster the emergence of a thin connective network that supports means of transport other than automobiles, first and foremost pedestrian traffic.

Just as biodiversity is a primary resource of any environment, including urban ones, it is the coexistence of different users, functions and modes that leads to balance, not the primacy of one over the others.

To mention one example, the city of Paris has long been undergoing a series of radical pedestrianisation efforts, which have yielded both rousing successes and undeniable failures. La Défense's pedestrian plaza is a glaring example of a huge space conceived as segregated: with 100,000 square-metres of greenery and almost thrice as much of pavement and sidewalk, it was designed to accommodate the daily pedestrian movements of more than 180,000 workers and residents. In reality, however, it is used sparingly, and has effectively become a sterile and inhospitable area. This doesn't mean that it is always impracticable to undertake urban pedestrianisation efforts that clearly mark the border between car-accessible spaces and spaces reserved for people. In the old part of town, an entire 2-kilometre sector of the Rive Gauche, beginning at the Musée d'Orsay, was closed to traffic as part of a regeneration project that aims to reconnect Parisians to the Seine river (another section, about 4 kilometres long and on the opposite bank, will also soon be closed). From one day to the next, the 30,000 vehicles that habitually transited on that thoroughfare could no longer do so, yet there was no sign of the apocalyptic traffic jams predicted by the project's critics.

The reason for such a successful outcome is to be found in the very nature of traffic demand, which is by no means a fixed variable but is instead contingent upon the behaviour of motorists, who are human beings and therefore, by nature, are adaptable in their patterns. The malleability of transport habits is the key that allows us to think of spaces and of cities in a new way, thanks to what is defined as "elasticity of demand." What this means, in a nutshell, is that demand responds actively to the capacity supply and ultimately proves adjustable, allowing the reconfiguration of urban spaces and, more in general, of urban landscapes, in order to return part of these areas to a slower and perhaps more natural use. Turning our attention to Italy, the 2012 introduction of Area C in Milan is another clear example of how traffic levels don't necessarily have to block processes of functional revision of spaces. It is important to remember that the initiative led to a 30% reduction in vehicle entries to the city's centre from the very first day of implementation, and those results have remained stable in the long term. Both these cases show that society has developed an independent conscience regarding the use of private vehicles and their impact on the environment.

The altering of established habits through targeted policies, together with a planning approach centred around functional revision or reduction in the use of spaces (rather than around land consumption), are the ingredients for a sustainable development in mobility demand, which respects our environment and our surroundings.



↑ CCD Guadalajara, Mexico. From left: public spaces, vehicular network and a new reading of the urban connectivity rising from the synergy of the two of them.