

## VOICES: an urban map of sentiment

### Introduction

*"The feeling Milan gives me? I close my eyes and think that the word Milano is masculine. The word city is feminine. So maybe it's a hermaphrodite feeling."* (Alessandro Mendini – architect (1) )

As the pencil does with its graphite, can words, dipped in feelings, draw? Can they leave a visible mark, overlapping to the conventional representations of a city?

Talking about cities, from their planning to their living, means activating fields of dialogue with more and more heterogeneous connotations. It means being able to face, handle and argue not only themes with architectural features, concerning infrastructures, services and buildings, rather it presumes to involve human dimensions, somehow ephemeral, barely related to pure spatial and traditional paradigms. It means to interface with a complex system, with emerging qualities, which cannot be reduced to a merely static comprehension (Giorgia Lupi, 2013). It is the dynamic human grids, the multiplicity of the involved social interactions, information, people and emotions that, in an intense and shimmering exchange or game with the surrounding architecture, draft the tangible urban morphology.

The "**Urban fact**", as defined by Aldo Rossi at the end of seventies, becomes matter of the man. The architect itself puts the focus back to people, places where they live and their needs, detaching himself from the risk of a superficial demiurgic choice, which follows purely artistic paths and methods. The attention is gradually shifted, from the single space and time to the procedural aspect of living the public city. In our time, shared conditions, leading to new hopes and project's possibilities, are recreated. Fertile collective inheritances are collected. Possible futures are identified.

A question is still open. Data, here described and involved, are complex, various and multi-sensorial. How could we make them available and usable in portions of knowledge and significant urban stories? The city is a multifaceted and multidimensional organism. It is the result of the interaction among several specific contexts. It does not open to simple comprehensions but it develops in different shades, levels and behaviours.

In his *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino writes: *"I could tell you how many steps there are in the stair-like streets and the degrees of the portico arches, what zinc scales cover the roofs, but I know this would be like telling you nothing. This is not what the city is made of, it is made of the relationships between the dimensions of its space and the events of its past"*.

### Context

Resizing the matter to the reality of Milan, VOICES suggests an answer or an approach to the issue, revealing as the fresco of a city's map, painted and dotted by comments of people who live it. In a moment of great frenzy, like the 'Fuorisalone' (April 2014) 2, characterized by rapid movement and new products' presentation, the multimedia installation, designed by Domus and Studio Azzurro, diverts the traditional mechanism. It takes a step backward. Before talking, it listens. It gathers together, crosses and hands down stories and emotions of those who, for some reason, live Milan. It establishes a dialogue with the audience. It conceives the event as something that, by virtue of the modalities of contents presentation, puts in contact, for specific aims, people with other people or with things, converging them to a certain and determined place. It is conceived as an element that gives value to the territory itself.

It is part of a public manifestation, of which sometimes media intensify the aesthetic, frivolous and fashionable aspect, spreading a too simplified and commercial imagine of a phenomenon which, in reality, is deeper and more articulate. The rational discipline of design was born tending towards the optimization of the production, where process and product, repeatable endlessly on industrial scale, were completely detached from place and context. Now, in the contemporary landscape, facing globalization's dynamics and dematerialization of goods, with the local emergency and its need of 'distinction', we should think of the territorial dimension, not as a field of application but as a project's opportunity and responsibility (Eleonora Lupo, 2007).

## **Ideation of the fresco of a city's map**

It sounds out the urban space with specific aims. It makes tangible and presumable, or better that can be represented, the ephemeral dimension of this new plural urban mosaic. It involves more than fifty architects, designers, artists, stylists, students, enlightened businessmen, artisans, start-upper... It raises diverse questions to people variously linked to the art-architectural world, it addresses to well-known or common voices. It starts a dialogue and encourages the self-telling and share of their own urban experiences. It allows to participate and absorb an original proliferation of climates and feelings, thoughts and opinions, connected to places, cities and its services.

It generates 'live' information, often more important and immediately useful than a centralised and scientifically gathered one. It brings to life the knowledge of the community, through people who, once put in contact with one another, may be able to mobilise the sharing and wider appreciation of such knowledge. (Paolo Rosa, 2011)

It takes place, ideally and physically, in the courtyard of the 'Giuseppe Verdi' conservatory in Milan. No casual but significant choice. The courtyard, like the here presented theme, does not appear easily accessible to a superficial and hasty vision; it suggests a discovery, invites to cross the cognitive threshold, and not only the spatial one. It is the place used to stop and meditate. It forces to get some air, to sit down, before going ahead in the traditional close tracks, imposed by the design week. It is the linear space of the encounter, which, although at first sight associated with the concept of closeness, it has historically served as passage from a part of the same structure to another. Moreover, it belongs to a high education institution, dedicated to art and music, whose term (conservatory) etymologically refers to the act of preserving. Guarding without crystallizing or paralyse. It recalls, at the end, to the architectural typology of the house yard, where Milan discloses and deploys itself, offering unconventional and unexpected points of view about its identity.

We cross the main door. Between the columns, it is possible to see immediately a big, regular and coloured cube, placed exactly in the middle of the courtyard. On one side, its pure form has an horizontal wooden plan, used as a platform for the performances. On the other side, it leaves place for a led-wall, populated by faces and aerial imagines of the city. On the top, it gives up the horizontal element; in this way, it remains hollow and we can use that empty space as housing for a majestic air balloon.

The multimedia contents, skilfully gathered and developed, are accessible only on one face of the cube, both to restate and give the chance to imagine, on the other faces, the hidden and possible pictures of the city's multiple facets, and to underline the mechanism of transforming punctual visions and perceptions in collective maps.

Therefore, the unilateral view is able to produce the immediacy of the instantaneous space, which is

created in a process of synthesis while we take distance, as it happens when we watch a single moment of a show while keeping in mind the whole story.

The spherical balloon, during the day, gains altitude and floats in the air. It becomes a preferential eye on urban fabric and, at the same time, a visible element; extraneous from the everyday skyline. It takes a look and chases after looks.

It observes Milan and let be seen by it, in a relationship of mutual curiosity. It grabs, from the moving urban surface, sights from above and sound islands, on which unexpected interferences introduce voices and stories able to complete, or simply continue, the drawing and representation. When the evening comes, the eye goes down to in-between height. It gets closer to the viewer and interrupts its mapping activity. It leaves space to macro- visualisations of lighted elements and neon urban signs on the led-wall, while live musical improvisations are held in the surrounding open space, in order to demonstrate that it is not a closed work but it leaves the chance for further extemporaneous intuitions and cognitive reflections.

## **Reality's metaforic pictures, flexible restitutions**

Therefore, we witness a 'tool' able to take extremely comprehensible and clear reality's snap-shots, pictured through visual metaphors. The city is interpreted as an intense net of temporary and fragmented data, coming out from the man-place interaction. Divers and dynamic visual sequences are tailored in relation to the day. Perceptible narrations, where the temporal, relational and emotional dimension gains the same importance and relevance of the physical space of the map supporting them, or sometimes even more. Narrations able to go beyond the unpredictability of the future, potential stories never conclusive or unchangeable but articulated in flexible video – narrations, updatable and again 'interrogable', in order to face changes and possible evolutions.

VOICES presents itself as a privileged moment to promote learning and common creation of significances in a continuous dialogue between past and present, thanks to a dialectic and fluid memory. The more relevant local and 'live' information, the true knowledge, is often located in the mind of people who live in a specific geographic area. (Paolo Rosa, 2011). The oral culture allows the human density, typical of word-of-mouth telling, above all residing in gestures, expressions, dialects, glances' luminosity, intensity and inflection of silence. It offers people's portraits, able to hand over their emotions and to establish a direct communication, rather than usual interviews. It encourages, in this way, a prolific graft between a modern technological language and a more antique manner of telling and representing. It transforms an individual path into a shared listening, ensuring, with its contents, a plurality of points of view.

The spoken sequences activate and realize creative intensions, invite to unusual and surprising associations, work only if you abandon prejudices. They are thought as mobile units in an open structure, just to maintain the possibility of their endlessly recombination. You can create diverse versions and meanings, even depending on your interpretative keys and cultural background. The valueable turning point of VOICES lies in our capacity of ironically and sharply mirroring ourselves in signs, symbols and reflections on our city. They make us reflect and fascinate us, as soon as we recognise them. In line with the transversal features of multimedia languages, VOICES triggers the different sensitivities of the viewer, creating synaesthesia, involving his emotional component, up to leading him to be active; useful condition for a re-composition of your own narration.

The city, indeed, restores the overlapping and layering of its intertwined stories, which climb to the surface out of a kind of latent depth. It reveals an "ever growing" past, that "has never ceased to be" (Deleuze, 2001, p.42). It preserves and accumulates in this moment an experience, which emerges continuously on

the horizon of the present not just through traces, signs, but particularly through the stories, the memories, the recollections, the feelings, the dreams that “populate” the people, who inhabit and permeate them, clashing with the present and having a powerful influence on the future.

*“One has to rely on the sound of footsteps, follow the paths of experience, listen to the voices, the stories, the tales of those inhabitants who are constantly moving around it and through it, weaving invisible threads which mould the spaces in an incandescent fashion, feeding them with meaning. Only they will be able to conjure it up almost by magic. As in a kind of kaleidoscope where the images are continuously multiplying and overlapping.”* (Lidia Decandia, 2010)

## Conclusion and new paradigms

In the city of signs of which Italo Calvino once again says “the eye doesn’t see things but images of things that mean other things”. VOICES has been able to initiate both an immediate real need of in-depth analysis and comparison in the audience and an actual participation of the involved people. All of them, aware of being listened, have immediately exposed themselves, establishing a proactive dialogic practice. Besides supplying various suggestive images of the perceived city, the main challenge would be building true and proper methodologies of analysis and a graphic (or not) restitution of collected and identifiable data; it would be facilitating the usage and the approach to instrumental paradigms, based on possibilities’ diagrams and interpretations rather than a priori choices; it would be persuading the planning dynamics to become always less severe.

Waiting for a future ‘metabolizing’, now VOICES has been able to stimulate and gather ideas, impressions and portraits of what your own city can be. It has broadened reality. It has awakened the capacity of the fruitful sharing, of the reasoned listening; the whole work blended by a strong sentimental ingredient.

It has led us to reflect and to not confuse being with being present, but rather discover that what is seen is only the tip of the iceberg, the superficial road sign, the fold of a deeper reality which draws its essence from its own invisibility. It finally showed, with admirable fascination, that this city, like others, is much more than what it let us see.

*“It shall enable us to discover that in the midst of this hell we live in not all is hell (Calvino, 1972) and that perhaps right there where the traveller no longer expected to see anything, having become so accustomed to noticing nothing except clear cut lines and contours, there are still glimmers of stories and buds which need breathing room in order to show us how to get back to imagining the future.”* (Lidia Decandia, Sensitive City 2010)

It is the pivotal idea around which has revolved part of the artistic research of Studio Azzurro (Sensitive City in 2010, Sensible Map in 2008 and The fourth stairway in 2008). Dismantling the system of the cartographic representation, which had accustomed us to reducing a city to a simple set of signs, the format of the story bearers wants to make us aware that “*the territory is not just an empty space upon which one can lay any content indiscriminately. It is instead a highly diversified and continuously shifting space, with many layers and levels, and within which, beneath the surface, the thrust of invisible memories, forces and energies are constantly at work, inducing a never-ending change. And it is these forces which have to be taken into account when planning the future.*” (Lidia Decandia, Sensitive City 2010)

Concept, which not only broadens the notion of reality, but deletes the idea of a future detached from the present and a static or pre-constituted project, which – as in a utopian model – is only missing existence in

order to be. Therefore, the project, no longer envisaged as a still image, is conceived as “*a life that develops starting from (and within) a land that is not an empty blackboard, devoid of content: it is instead a dynamic and evolving form that lives inside time, capable of taking root, opening up, of becoming real through interactive steps triggered by continuous creative reinvention.*” (Lidia Decandia, Sensitive City 2010)

“*What feeling does Milan give me? First of all, I feel that it is my city. It takes a long time to conquer that word “mine”. You feel the city is yours when you’re old, otherwise you can’t say it. You don’t know what life has in store, or where you’ll end up. Now I can say it, because I like it here*” (Andrée Ruth Shammah – stage director and director of Teatro Franco Parenti (1) )

## Notes

1. Quotations by Alessandro Mendini and Andrée Ruth Shammah were taken from the VOICES interviews, which are available online divided and organised in six days

Project [http://www.domusweb.it/en/news/2014/03/31/domus\\_voices.html](http://www.domusweb.it/en/news/2014/03/31/domus_voices.html)

Day 1 [http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/09/studio\\_azzurro\\_domus\\_voices\\_1.html](http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/09/studio_azzurro_domus_voices_1.html)

Day 2 [http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/11/studio\\_azzurro\\_domus\\_voices\\_giorno\\_2.html](http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/11/studio_azzurro_domus_voices_giorno_2.html)

Day 3 [http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/13/studio\\_azzurro\\_domus\\_voices\\_giorno\\_3.html](http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/13/studio_azzurro_domus_voices_giorno_3.html)

Day 4 [http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/14/studio\\_azzurro\\_domus\\_voices\\_giorno\\_4.html](http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/14/studio_azzurro_domus_voices_giorno_4.html)

Day 5 [http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/15/studio\\_azzurro\\_domus\\_voices\\_giorno\\_5.html](http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/15/studio_azzurro_domus_voices_giorno_5.html)

Day 6 [http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/16/studio\\_azzurro\\_domus\\_voices\\_giorno\\_6.html](http://www.domusweb.it/it/video/2014/04/16/studio_azzurro_domus_voices_giorno_6.html)

2. Domus Voices, 8–13 April 2014 at the Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi

Opening Hours 11am–10pm

Live Performances 7pm

3. Sensitive City is the exhibition created by Studio Azzurro for the 2010 Universal Expo in Shanghai. The theme of the Expo 2010, “Better City, Better Life” invites the countries taking part to consider the future of the city and to suggest alternatives for how contemporary urbanisation should move forward. With Sensitive City, Italy has decided to underline a unique and very distinctive feature of its cities, revealing the quality of its small and medium size centres by presenting an interactive experience which enables the visitor to entertain a relationship with the digital images of people who live in these cities by stopping them (in a virtual sense) as if on the street and then listening to their comments.

<http://www.studioazzurro.com/>

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Esperienze e strumenti per cultura e territorio

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*Italiana di scienze transculturali*, Roma, Carocci editore/Fondazione Cecchini Pace, volume 14;  
Manganelli G. (1993), *Un luogo e? un linguaggio in Abbott A. Edwin* (1993), "Flatlandia. Racconto fantastico a piu? dimensioni", Adelphi Edizioni, Milano  
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Rossi A. (1966), *L'architettura della citta?*, Marsilio, Padova  
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