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BERNARDO SECCHI'S
GUIDING IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the main aspects of the theoretical-projectual contribution of the Italian urban planner Bernardo Secchi (1934-2014). Since the 1980s, Secchi contributed actively by publishing texts on magazines, conducting studies at the *Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia* (IUAV), and elaborating plans and projects alongside the architect Paola Viganò, turning the cities into great laboratories. His production evidences a permanent exchange between research and experimentation, marked by the international use of images as a way of interpreting the world and projecting the city. Three main concepts from Bernardo Secchi's work were chosen for this article, three "guiding ideas", a term inspired from Secchi's work, which means identifying concepts that can become instruments for planning and for concrete actions in the space.

KEYWORDS

Secchi, Bernardo (1934-2014). Contemporary city. Territorial urban planning (theory).

LAS IDEAS GUÍAS DE BERNARDO SECCHI

AS IDEIAS-GUIAS DE BERNARDO SECCHI

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta los principales aspectos de la contribución teórica y proyectual del urbanista italiano Bernardo Secchi (1934-2014). Desde la década de 1980 Secchi comenzó a contribuir activamente con la publicación de textos en revistas, con investigaciones en el Instituto Universitario de Arquitectura de Venecia (IUAV), y con la elaboración de planes y proyectos en asociación con la arquitecta Paola Viganò, haciendo de las ciudades un gran laboratorio. La producción muestra un continuo intercambio entre la investigación y la experimentación, marcada por el uso deliberado de imágenes como una forma de interpretar el mundo y el diseño de la ciudad. Para este trabajo se eligieron tres conceptos principales de la obra de Bernardo Secchi por su utilidad como una herramienta para la planificación e para acciones concretas en el espacio.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Secchi, Bernardo (1934-2014). Ciudad contemporánea. Planificación territorial urbana (teoría).

RESUMO

Esse artigo apresenta os aspectos principais da contribuição teórico-projetual do urbanista italiano Bernardo Secchi (1934-2014). Desde a década de 1980 Secchi passou a contribuir ativamente com a publicação de textos em revistas, com pesquisas no Instituto Universitário de Arquitetura de Veneza (IUAV), e com a elaboração de planos e projetos em parceria com a arquiteta Paola Viganò, fazendo das cidades um grande laboratório. A sua produção evidencia uma troca permanente entre pesquisa e experimentação, marcada pelo uso intencional de imagens como maneira de interpretar o mundo e de projetar a cidade. Para esse trabalho foram escolhidos três conceitos principais da obra de Bernardo Secchi, três “ideias-guias”, um termo inspirado no trabalho do próprio Secchi, cujo significado é o de identificar conceitos que podem se tornar um instrumento para o planejamento e para ações concretas no espaço.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Secchi, Bernardo (1934-2014). Cidade contemporânea. Planejamento territorial urbano (teoria).

INTRODUCTION

Bernardo Secchi, an Italian urban planner who died in 2014 at the age of 80 years old¹, left an important legacy for contemporary urbanism. His theoretical and practical production are based on studies conducted at the *Istituto Universitario di Architettura* (IUAV), in Venice; on the projects carried out at the office he kept with architect Paola Viganò in Milan; and on the professional activism developed in the magazines *Casabella* and *Urbanística*².

Secchi played an important part, especially after the 1980s, in the Italian and European urban planning, which was going through a period of crisis resulting from the end of the post-war expansion, and raised important questions that needed different answers. It was necessary to transform the way of intervening in cities, investing on a new outlook to go, according to Venuti (1994), from a culture of expansion to a culture of transformation. When analyzing this period, Fausto Nigrelli (1999) stated that the participation of urban planners in these debates was small, and intellectuals were not interested in urban planning. It is in this context that the first reflections upon a new scenario in which urban planning should be inserted started to emerge, and Bernardo Secchi participated in them from beginning to end.

¹ Secchi was born in Milan in 1934 and died in the same city on 10/15/2014.

² Secchi wrote a column for the magazine *Casabella* from 1984 to 1996 and was editor of the magazine *Urbanística* from 1984 to 1990.

It is important to emphasize that this does not mean that Secchi was an isolated voice in this context, or the only one that was in evidence; but, since he was the editor of one of the main Urban Planning magazines and a writer for another greatly important one, and also, at the same time, directed the Italian National Institute of Urbanism (INU), he was one of the most constant and coherent, according to Nigrelli (1999), voices at the time. He belonged to a generation that witnessed moments of great importance such as wars and crises, and that lived with the critics to the Modern Movement at the beginning of the sixties, with its applications during the post-war and with the uncertainties that lay ahead. Secchi managed to establish important relationships between theory and practice, and he knew how to criticize theory using history and vice-versa, which helped him put urban problems, again and again, in an enlarged manner.

Bernardo Secchi was an urban planner with a peculiar history. An Engineer, he specialized in Economics and became an important urban planner. He graduated in Engineering in 1960 from the *Politecnico di Milano* with a thesis on Urbanism advised by Giovanni Muzio (1893-1982), one of the important representatives of Milan's Novecento movement, which defended an architectural contribution to the national identity, and was part of the foundation years of the matrices and the identity of Urbanism teaching in the *Politecnico di Milano*.

He began his practical experience developing plans under the coordination of teachers like Giancarlo de Carlo (1919-2005) and Giuseppe Samonà (1898-1983). From 1966, invited by Samonà, he went on to teach at the IUAV and there found an environment where discussions on the urban dimension in education and its relationship between the city and architecture were taking place.

After some time away, directing the school of Milan (1976-1982), Secchi returns to Venice and elects, in 1984, the IUAV as his place. At this time he begins a close relationship with Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994), Vittorio Gregotti (1927-) and Aldo Rossi (1931-1997). With Tafuri, Secchi followed the discussions and research that

he was doing on the Renaissance in Venice; with Gregotti, who was then editor of *Casabella* magazine, he reflected on the changes in the territory, the city and architecture, and even taught courses alongside him; with Rossi, Secchi absorbed the contributions he had developed with Carlo Aymonino (1926-2010) at the *Gruppo Architettura*³ regarding the relationship between urban morphology and typology, as well as the search for an urban science based on studies of urban analysis.

Bernardo Secchi is considered to be a “theoretical and practical” urban planner. For him, it was hard to imagine the separation between these two worlds. He made sure to prioritize, in the Doctoral degree in Urban Planning of the IUAV, which he created in 1996, the need for integration between research and experimentation. He published a significant amount of texts, articles and editorials, book chapters and nine books of his own⁴.

With great intellectual ability to collect references from other areas of knowledge, Secchi had a unique view on the city we know today and on its future. His concern arises from a dissatisfaction with the way in which urban planning is done, with the codified forms of organizing the vision and speech of the city, which were unable to collect, describe and interpret the visible and invisible aspects of an ever more multifaceted and articulated reality.

In Italy, the *research program* of a city planner is recognized and valued, and is understood to be their cultural, bibliographical and reference baggage, and their working method, which uses all their cumulative knowledge, and demonstrates ability to deal with the themes presented by establishing a link between knowledge, projects, decisions and successes

There are several ways to think about urban planning in a given period of history. The option adopted here was to use the thinking and action of an important author to construct a frame of reference, to look for relationships of meaning, reflecting on the actions that can contribute to the comprehension of the contemporary city and its design.

Recognizing, delimiting and isolating the contribution of a professional is not easy: not only does one run the risk of assigning to a character what is part of a whole context, but also to do the reverse operation, assigning to a context what belongs to a character, and making something that was specific seem general (SECCHI, 1994, p. 9).

SECCHI'S LABORATORY

Secchi had triple career, as a teacher, urbanism theorist and urban designer. His speech is often marked by his experience with other areas of knowledge, and it is difficult not to find, in his writings, an approach to philosophy, to literature, or a comparison with music, an affective memory with places, people and situations.

The nucleus created by him in Venice, especially with the Doctoral course, became an active laboratory, a hotbed of ideas and interesting and updated debates. The participation of teachers and students with different backgrounds contributed to the enrichment of the exchanges and the spread of ideas that emerged there and reached many different contexts.

³ IUAV professors' study group (1968-1974), that encouraged the production of texts to be discussed with students.

⁴ For a more comprehensive look at his professional history and the relation of the main texts and books written by him, see VALVA (2011).

His study lab was the contemporary European city and its territory. From the 1980s, he began to look for alternatives for urban planning, experiencing the emergence of “urban design” as an alternative to the transformation of the city. Criticism to the modern city began to emerge in the 1960s, particularly with the publication of studies that put into question the modernist practice of thinking and building the cities. However, it was only during the first half of the 1980s that the plan began to be demonized, that it “became old and bulky”, seen as a bureaucratic instrument, rigid and unable to change the reality of the places.

In Italy, the debate about the actual functions of the plan and its form led to a search for completely redefining this instrument. The magazine *Urbanística*, led by Secchi at the time, played a key role both in the search for alternatives and in the construction of a new identity for the urban planner. It was necessary to respond to new demands of society, overcoming the traditional ways in which urban planning had been done.

In the same period, the magazine *Casabella*, then directed by Vittorio Gregotti, decided to stimulate the relationship between architecture and urban planning. The debate was fueled by Gregotti’s editorials and enriched with Secchi’s contribution, who furthered current issues and themes, reflecting a position of urban culture that sought a transition from a quantitative character, which, for many years, had characterized the expansion of the city, to a qualitative transformation (VENUTI, 1994). Secchi’s presence and posture in the reconstruction of the identity and autonomy of urbanism are largely recognized by the beginning of the reaction on the need to reposition urbanism in contemporary society.

The 1980s produced disillusioned balances and led many to ask “*more politics and less planning, more architecture and less urban planning, more projects and fewer rules*” (GABELLINI, 2010, p. 157). The main themes that guided the discussions on the ideology of the plan were: (1) the growing weight of abandoned areas of predominantly industrial origin; (2) the phenomenon of the displacement of lower class people from the city centers due to outsourcing; (3) a renewed interest by means of public transportation, also linked to the increase of noise and air pollution; (4) the increasing demand for green areas and leisure equipment in a consolidated city; and (5) the demand for tertiary equipment in the periphery (VENUTI, 1994).

The focus of Secchi’s main articles during that period seemed to revolve around the idea of “re-use” which, as the author indicates, is not an entirely new idea, but requires a new perception of its importance. New, he said, were the images and perspectives of all that became possible to re-use: buildings, roads, parts of cities and agricultural land, that is, the empty, the interstices and the complement that, in the end, reveal the intention of “a reconstruction of the city” or of a “construction of the city inside the city” (SECCHI, 1984b).

The theme had changed, and that is what Secchi sought to reflect on over a decade, noting that there was no more room for *ex-novo* construction. Unlike the modern era, that had moments of continuous emission of new things, what dominated later, mainly in the old world, was the opposite: a concern about using the existing storage, looking for a more consistent action with the general

decreasing growth (SECCHI, 1984a). The existing city became the center of a new problematic field, and the new theme was to give meaning and future, through continuous changes, to the city, the territory and the existing materials.

If the discussions of the 1980s focused on the existing city and the possibilities to change it, over the next decade the research object changed, with the territory taking a prominent place in the discussions and planning.

The 1990s directed the visions towards territorial changes and the development of a new urban culture, which becomes to make an expanded use of the territory and puts into focus discussions about lifestyle, housing, the environment, the economy and society. The contemporary city starts to take a different form than the modern city, which is not its evolution, nor its negation. In it, what prevails is the image of a fragmented city formed by heterogeneous and discontinuous parts with different scales, and which coexists with the scattering of objects, subjects, practices and economics. In Italy, this new reality originated, in the late 1980s, the studies initially developed by the IUAV, with the goal of describing and explaining the process of formation of a city model based on low density and linked to a large-scale “minimalist” urban network. From a dispersed urbanization, the result of the fragmentation of the city, the formation of a new type of city was revealed.

⁵ Scattered city.

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According to Gabellini (2010), from the 90s on there is an increased sensitivity of urban operations in the territories, processes and functioning of the political system, which gives the plans a decisively contextual feature. Attention to the malleability of the form of the plan is reinforced and the relationship between things is accentuated, regarding structuring and environmental, economic, financial and social sustainability.

Urbanism becomes aware of a new research object: the city and the contemporary territories, initially perceived as chaotic and lacking in understandable relations. It is, in short, a whole field to reset and design. The phenomenon of dispersion, there for at least thirty years, begins to be noticed more closely in Italy; the city-region was being investigated, and the “*città diffusa*”⁵ had just been nominated and presented by Francesco Indovina. All this supports the hypothesis that Europe was going from a phase of *transformation* of the city to a phase of *transition*. The context of social relations becomes much wider, giving way to a different urban condition (INDOVINA, 1990).

Secchi continues as editor of the magazine *Urbanística* until 1990. Since the late 1980s, he had been questioning the limits of the field of study of urbanism and its design: “*When looking at the territory, we see the new that is in progress in the economy and in society*” (SECCHI, 1989a, p. 4). Awakening to the complexity implies abandoning the idea of a homogeneous and isotropic space of time, which cannot be recognized universally, but requires, at first as a way of research, isolating the problematic places in an attempt to “reduce the complexity” The main fracture caused by “awakening to the complexity” lies in the different relationships between design, interpretations and descriptions (SECCHI, 1989a, p. 4).

The complexity that Secchi speaks of occurs above all with the attention to the “dispersion” of the city, the activities, and the social subjects, of a physical space where discontinuity and heterogeneity prevail, the apparent absence of any similarity, repetition or rule of order. According to Secchi, the urban planner of the 1980s did not realize that the “new” was in progress; maybe because they were too concerned with the affirmation of the differences, the specific, and the fragment, they did not pay much attention to a vision of the whole, and failed to develop or redevelop categories and concepts that allowed an ample view of society, the whole territory or its regions (SECCHI, 1992). Giuseppe Campos Venuti agrees with this statement and emphasizes that Italy in the 80s and 90s was still only looking at the impact on the city, at the “urban transformation”, and not at the galaxy of marginal centers, that is, at the “territorial transformations” (VENUTI, 2005, p. 98).

Considering that the territory was now used much more than before, the issue of the scale of the projects, or the need to constantly go through the scales, begins to be part of the concerns of urban planners, architects, administrators and the population. And, with that, not only did the perspectives change, but also the themes with which urban planning projects had to deal.

The contemporary city, according to Secchi, has the form of its territory. The great territorial landmarks become part of its project; it is the place where the territory re-emerges, with all its physical and symbolic depth, as a reaction to the homogenization of the spaces, the population and the economy imposed by the modern city (SECCHI; VIGANÒ, 1998). Coming from the same idea, Bianchetti reinforces the importance and the need for practices of knowledge when reading a territory, by recognizing its signs. He considers that the reading is, before anything else, a recognition of the “hieroglyphs of the territory”: “*Nothing can be found or learnt unless by interpreting the signs*” (BIANCHETTI, 2003, p. 10).

This approach, which reconsiders the territory not as an abstract operational field, but as the result of a long and slow layering of remains, agrees with the discussion André Corboz brings in “The territory as a palimpsest” (CORBOZ, 1985). In this work, Corboz, going over the long history, remembers that, after two centuries of management of the territory, when the only known recipe had been the *tabula rasa*, the territory began to re-encounter the dimension of its concept, its depth, with careful consideration of the traits and mutations that became part of the planning, as a point of support or stimulation.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the analysis of the urban dispersion and diffusion seems to have achieved a significant expression in territorial, economic and social research. The line of research developed by Secchi and his colleagues expressed the possibility of sharing the socio-economic analysis of the territory with the morphological analysis, and the study of lifestyles and social practices of different groups.

After he overcame the understanding of the territory performance and its form, Secchi’s work sought to reflect on a new geography of central places and green spaces, with the construction of a new geography of metropolitan issues. In this context, the challenge, in Secchi’s opinion (SECCHI; VIGANO, 1998), is

now to build a widespread permeability and accessibility of the territory, by being careful with the movement of pedestrians, along bikeways and the public transport road system.

GUIDING IDEAS: CONCEPTS THAT GENERATE PROJECTS

The guiding-ideas present the choice of Secchi's main ideas from the analysis of his texts and plans produced between the decades of 1980 until 2008. The intention is to highlight and further that which, in this urban planner's work, were important and original concepts.

One of the important lessons that can be learnt by comprehending Bernardo Secchi's history is that a project is the manner of study and research, the main tool that an architect-urban planner has to produce new knowledge. According to Viganò (2010), the project in different scales is understood as a cognitive device, a producer of new knowledge, an instrument to question a context and attach new materials to the existing knowledge. Through the conceptualization that can be found when facing the analysis of reality, comes the place in which a project produces knowledge.

Three basic concepts from Secchi's work were chosen for this article: the ground floor project, the *renovatio urbis*, and porosity.

THE GROUND FLOOR PROJECT

The ground floor project, an already-famous expression in urban planning, began to be used by Secchi during the 1980s almost as an image in the search for a new way of developing urban plans. He was motivated by the criticism to modern urban planning, mainly after the publication of Bernard Huet's (1984) text "The city as dwelling space: alternatives to the Charter of Athens", which started a debate in the magazine *Casabella* with Vittorio Gregotti (1985). Secchi sought to demonstrate that, more than the recommendations in the Charter of Athens or the thoughts of the protagonists of the International Congresses on Modern Architecture, one of the great problems lays in the reduction of the importance given to the context, which was reflected even on the representation, on the manner of designing the soil, with a marked tendency to something more encoded, iconic graphic.

According to Secchi (1986), until the mid-twentieth century this representation describing a homogeneous, isotropic and universal space, operated in at least three interconnected views in the way of using and designing the soil. The first one explored the soil and held the functions and meanings of the whole city through a building which wanted to be a city and became a multifunctional location of relations and images. The second one favored the flows channeled between objects and terminals, turning the soil into an amorphous support of technical elements; and the third one, which considered the soil only by its metric characteristics, distributing uses, functions and activities.

To break with the modernist tradition of treating the soil like a mere support, without being sensible to the multiple forms contained in the territory and the interconnected spaces that give meaning to the act of inhabiting, Secchi began to use the concept of the ground floor project as a moment to think the relationship between architecture and society. *"The urban project is largely a ground floor project that gains a purpose within an overall social design and value through an architectural project"* (SECCHI, 1984b, p. 196).

The article that introduces this term to Secchi's (1986) texts had wide repercussions, mainly because it began to draw attention to the collective open spaces of the city. It assumed that the main plane of the task was to design this open space, establishing links, making it a connection between the city and its parts, in an interconnection system able to modify the relationship between the built and the unbuilt, between private and public space, between the individual and the collective, and promoting articulations between these spaces.

Therefore, Secchi proposes to think of the city and its territory "by parts", considering their differences and specificities. In his opinion, recognizing the parts, interpreting and identifying the different subjects that transform the territory, may be the key to understanding the rules, the associative systematic relations, integration and dependence, opposition and exclusion. The parties must be recognized, described and nominated based on their visible, morphological characteristics.

The ground floor project, understood as a set of works and interventions of different scales, must modify the state and the characteristics of the "walkable" public soil, the one used by the public, by redefining its designs and its uses. It is not only about thinking of modifying the use of what already exists or replacing it with new architectures, but about completing the parts of an incomplete city, and, above all, designing the soil in a manner that is not trivial, reductionist, without technique and without articulation.

The theme of the ground floor project refers, again, to the search for a new way of thinking the city plan, for a way of acting in the intermediate, interstitial areas, between that which Secchi calls "hard parts", or structured parts, and the "soft parts", malleable (the empty, abandoned or almost-forgotten areas). In addition to that, there is the establishment of new connections, the re-interpretation of malleable parts, the "re-invention" of something that gave meaning to the set. Thus, new physical, functional and social clots are formed, new points of aggregation with more general perspectives through ample projects with more convincing and truthful discourses (SECCHI, 1984b).

It is important to emphasize that Secchi's reflections in his articles and editorials published on magazine *Urbanística* in the mid-80s correspond to the period in which he was developing, along with his team, the Plan for the city of Jesi, and, right after, the city of Siena, two Italian cities with strong identities and historical depth, which were going through a period of re-functionalization. In both plans, the main strategy was to further the reflection about the old, about the new, recognizing the parts and proposing the complementation of the city and its territory to reach its modification.

Therefore, the development of this concept, which is spread around Secchi's texts, was motivated not only as a critical reflection, but as a concrete way of acting in the space. Reflecting and questioning about the history of the design of the city and territory, from his plans, he established, thus, an instrumental pathway, and the concept took shape and acquired meaning.

The depth of the concept is clear. The ground floor project "physically" connects the parts, solving discontinuities and particularities with "systems"; connecting the earth, dictating conditions to the structures and rescuing the residues of unbuilt spaces; addressing the "collective" and the "general" dimensions of social demands. Definitely, he explored the possibility of composing some conflicts: between the parts and the whole, between the full and the empty space, between the interests of individuals and the interests of the whole city (SECCHI, 1984b).

Secchi had already been, for some time, discussing the need to find alternatives to city planning. The phase of survey, of an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the built and unbuilt spaces, began to be of fundamental importance in the elaboration of the plans. If, before, the plans started with the demographic analyses, now, with the study of the occupation, they became estimates. In the new plans the physical survey became the first stage to precede the plan.

According to Secchi (1986), it was necessary to understand "*what were the city spaces, how and how much they had been used*" (SECCHI, 1986, p. 22), trying to typify, classify, forming a repertoire of the buildings and the urban spaces, and, only after that, proceed to the more conventional analyses. Therefore, the first stage consisted of describing the city through the construction of a detailed chart, with the analysis of all its spaces, represented by plants, cuts, perspectives, not only of the buildings, but also the roads, the open spaces etc.

The idea was not to detail each one of these parts, but to evidence that this new form of planning introduces elements to the projects that did not exist before, not only in the manner of leading the development of the project, but also in the manner in which it was represented. It is worth noting that the plan was accompanied by "suggestions". With the understanding of the rules of each space, with the description and analyses of their characteristics, the plan details, from a morphological and typological point of view, how the problems from different parts of the city could be solved. A specific project is studied for each area, as if "it was about studying an architectural project".

In addition to innovating the way to lead the plan, the graphics and presentation of the plan became that of a "designed plan". The "ground floor project" chart, which contains the identification of open spaces and the possible articulations of these parts, becomes an important part in the presentation of the Plan. By taking the urban architectural design as an instrument of the Plan, he sought to produce a plan that was not only a document to be "read", but, more than that, to be "seen". This can be observed in the option to present the project through designed boards. The boards with traces of the creation of the planning process restore the ideas defended by them: that the territory demand, individual or collective, should be explored,

⁶The expression is usually not translated, and its literal meaning is “urban renovation”. The term, however, is used in a broader sense and refers to an innovation strategy characteristic of the Renaissance, comprehending an idea of *renovatio* in different fields of knowledge and human activity.

⁷This work started with a broad research program coordinated by Tafuri and developed by several researchers, and culminated in the seminar “Venice at the time of Doge Andrea Gritti”, and was included in the theme of the research “The long Renaissance”. See Tafuri and Foscari (1983), Tafuri (1984).

requested and directed by proposing specific solutions, able to give “form” to the interests and conflicts and, therefore, to become “predictable” when performing the choices (SECCHI, 1989b). According to Secchi, the problems faced by these plans referred to the legitimacy of each project in particular, and of all the projects on which they would act, and also the definition of the criteria to which they should be linked. Projecting the void and modifying the city highlights the need to search for new relations for the plan and the project.

According to Gabellini (2010), the numerous designs that accompanied the elaboration phase of the Plan structure the reflections of technicians, administrators, official departments and specific operators. These designs – which assume a prescriptive value, not only an explanatory one – are synthesized on the boards of “suggestions”, and are, therefore, the result of an interactive process between different subjects, and not the point of view of only one segment.

RENOVATIO URBS

The concept of *renovatio urbis*⁶ appears in Secchi’s work with the challenge of developing urban plans for cities with relevant historical heritages, marked by the tension between conservation and transformation, which brings important questions about how to modify their spaces and territories. In this moment, when he needed to establish a more adequate methodology for the development of this type of city that Secchi leaned on the research Manfredi was developing about the Renaissance.

Secchi was conceptually inspired by the *renovatio urbis cinquecentesca*, characterized by politics of redefining all the urban structure, its image, its aspect, its part and its meaning, and was based on a limited series of specific projects capable of changing the function and the meaning of whole parts of cities or even whole cities. The conceptual basis of this policy, according to Secchi (2006), is in the book *Harmony and Conflicts* (1983)⁷, written by Tafuri, alongside Antonio Foscari, which brings a discussion regarding the renovations of the Church of *San Francesco della Vigna*, in Venice, an initial argument that enables the reflection about urban politics in the 16th century.

During the second half of the *Cinquecento*, Venice lived through several meaningful urban episodes that turned their looks towards its key-areas, with the goal of building a city inside the city. The re-articulation of collective-use public spaces was intense, not only in the central areas but also in the peripheral ones. If studied from a geographical point of view of the city as a whole and under a “long time” optic, the various steps taken show that the issue of complex urban design was somehow present in the government of the Venetian Republic. This does not mean, however, a lucid urban plan, nor architecturally formulated projects, compactly, from start to finish. However, it may mean the existence of a selective intention on the form of the city and its parts (CALABI, 2001).

This is the context in which Tafuri's research was developed. It focused on the conflicts occurred during the renovations of the church of *San Francesco della Vigna*, around 1535, one of the most notable operations of re-structuration of the *Cinquecento* in Venice, in Tafuri's opinion. It was there, according to Tafuri, that a *renovatio* began, even before the more central area. Tafuri believed the expansion of the church of *San Francesco della Vigna* put into discussion a process of broad urban re-definition of the area.

Secchi used the *renovatio urbis* studied by Tafuri as an idea, a metaphor. It consists of a different way of thinking the construction of a city project and an alternative to what Secchi was searching. In Secchi's opinion, Tafuri's study made clear the need of paying attention to the research of the legitimacy of the project in the plan regarding the different actors and disciplines, as well as the reflections about different ideological and time horizons, operative instruments and techniques. According to Secchi, behind these specific projects there is a policy that acts on different levels, researching and adopting understandable criteria with a view to a clear image of the future of a city that uses specific, locally limited instruments.

One of the great problems with this type of strategy is ensuring the quality of the final project, which will have the function of re-structuring an area and giving meaning to a part of a city or to a set. Both Secchi and Tafuri believe that, because of urgency and other concerns, the architects responsible by the final project, many times, fail to recognize the more lasting structural characteristics. Because of that, what can be seen are projects that cannot deal with a set of artistic languages, physical realities, behaviors, urban dimensions and political-economic dynamics (SECCHI, 2006).

According to Secchi⁸, the *renovatio urbis* does not negate the past, but re-elaborates it, seeking to re-write the meaning of places that had been lost in the trivializing practices of modern times. Thus, it seeks to redesign the functional and symbolic geography of the city, bringing it closer to the mental map of contemporary society, and not the map of the monetary values. Because it opposes the market, it adds a layer to the urban palimpsest, which gives it a new interpretation.

Secchi opts to be inspired by the Renaissance strategies to trust the city design and planning to a selection of limited and carefully defined strategic interventions. In his intentions, he does not intend to recover such an old concept or to update the past. And, perhaps, it is Tafuri himself that helps justify his procedure: "*the story has nothing to teach us about the operative plan, but it can help us interpret different cultural objects and contribute to the current discourse*" (TAFURI; FOSCARI, 1983 apud. SECCHI, 2006, p. 2).

By linking the concept that Secchi developed for the design of the contemporary city with Tafuri's research, it is possible to observe the intention of giving greater "visibility" to this concept and perhaps the desire to associate it to the rich discussion that took place in Venice in the 1980s, the result of previous lessons taught by masters such as Muratori and Samonà, for example. Tafuri, Gregotti, Aymonino, Rossi and many others had, in the background, the discussions about the context and modifying the architecture and the city, each

⁸ Interview given to Adalberto Retto Jr. and Christian Traficante, in April of 2004. See Retto Jr. and Traficante, 2004.

with its particular way of research. The philosophy of the studies developed in Venice revolved around the idea that the architectural project, the city and the territory could not escape from a critical relationship with the specific and rigorously analyzed context. It should be added that the IUAV also contributed to an important debate that was in the center of the discussion of Secchi's *renovatio urbis* regarding the relationship between architecture and urbanism, between the plan and the project.

POROSITY

Porosity has been part, for a long time, of the imaginary and the repertoire of Italian scholars, and related to the description that Walter Benjamin made of the city of Naples in 1925, in a "splendid and little known" text, according to Giandomenico Amêndola (2009). In this text, Benjamin relates that the rocky and porous aspect constitutes the guideline for comprehending such a peculiar urban and social structure:

Naples is porous like its architecture. Porous in its form, in its social relations, in the characteristics of its inhabitants. The soul of the city, therefore, cannot be captured in one point, in one image. It escapes the definitions, penetrates the city, it is porous like its walls (BENJAMIN, 1925, apud AMENDOLA, 2009, p. 65).

Benjamin was impressed by the characteristic of permanent scenes in the city, by the proximity of characters, magical and monstrous figures, subjectivity and theatricality that lived there. He understood that it was a fundamental aspect of the urban conditions and the impossibility of deciphering it. This view of the city was opposed, according to Amendola (2003), to the historical phase, characterized by the search for analytical and homogeneous principles in the name of modernity, like the great plans that tried to unify the city. Benjamin, differently from urban planners, sociologists and scholars, understood, in his experience in Naples, two fundamental aspects of the modern city: the porosity and the impossibility to be defined.

One year after Benjamin's text, Ernst Bloch uses the concept of porosity to describe the nature and particularity of the Italian urban and social structures, first using the example of Naples (MANTIA, 2006), and then the Mediterranean *vivre ensemble*, individual and, at the same time, profoundly shared (VIGANÒ, 2006).

According to Secchi⁹, using this term for reflecting on the condition of the contemporary city was due to a text Massimo Cacciari presented in a seminar in Naples in 1992¹⁰, when the philosopher, based on Benjamin's texts, proposed a reading of the meaning and content of a porous city:

[...] the porous city is a city in which nothing advances according to the fine lines, the ruptures [...]. The form of this city is never developed by projects, by programs [...]. The more I think, the more I'm convinced of the strength of the Benjaminian image about the porosity of Naples: it is about imagining this city as colossal [...] a sponge extended over the sea, that does not face its problems through macro-projects, [...] that does not reduce the complexity of

⁹Information given to the author in interview in December of 2008.

¹⁰The seminar *La città porosa: conversazioni su Napoli* had the participation of Massimo Cacciari, Antonio D'Amato, Gustaw Herling, Mario Martone and Francesco Venezia.

the tensions, of the conflicts, that does not make itself small, but assimilates and almost nourishes itself (CACCIARI, 1992, p. 163-164).

In addition to emerging as a metaphor, porosity is a concept of the natural sciences, mainly from earth science and physics related to the phenomena of infiltration and percolation. In physics, percolation defines the slow passage of a liquid falling from the top down, through a solid filtering mass, and therefore has to do with the idea of not going through a perfect empty space, but through other bodies (MANTIA, 2006; VIGANÒ, 2006).

In the study by Secchi and Viganò, porosity is a conceptual instrument to investigate and project the contemporary territory. It appeared for the first time in the laboratory for the plan for Brescia, from the identification of the strength of empty spaces between the fragments of the city. In the plan for Lecce, in the region of Salento, south of Italy, it acquired a fundamental importance as the central theme for thinking of a scattered territory, mainly connected to the environmental system and the infrastructure. From then on it became a relevant concept in the projects and studies conducted by Secchi and Viganò. The concept of porosity was used to talk about the ecology of the landscape, as well as for describing and interpreting the contemporary city.

In the works of these urban planners, porosity refers to density, to distances, to the awareness of elements of ecological rationality, and it also has profound social and economic implications. In the Plan that Secchi and Viganò developed for the city of Antwerp, in Belgium, in 2005, this concept was used as the North of the work and defined in the following manner:

Porosity relates to different ways of use of urban space and displacement within the city by different users, not only humans, but also of other species. Porosity is a description and a project attitude, a different and unusual way of conceiving spaces (interstices of compact tissue, such as private gardens, open spaces in the big modern cities, passage for people and nature in the built spaces discontinuous, parks, squares, gardens) and public, individual and collective practices. To work with the porosity is necessary to have opportunities to improve the accessibility and permeability of the urban tissue, improving the quality of public domain and increasing public practices. This reasoning may lead to a new project for the city, from its material constitution, changing its image and its way of working a project with great emphasis on its social and economic character (ANTWERP, TERRITORY OF A NEW MODERNITY, 2005, p. 121).

In the scale of the territory, porosity is connected to the configuration of the infrastructure of mobility and to the dynamics of the movement of cars. Secchi and Viganò divide the infrastructure in two classes: tubes (that is, the part that establishes trades with the territory only through a few well defined points, isolating the road flow from what is around it) and sponges (which, conversely, allow each conductor to interface with the territory at any moment). The tubes are the roads, the highways, the tangential which, no matter the context, have the goal of making the traffic flow efficient. Reality shows that, as the demand for mobility grows, bigger tubes are built to ensure the high-speed traffic, thus decreasing connectivity. The sponge, on the other

hand, consists of smaller networks, of very small meshes. These networks allow osmotic relationships with the context, corresponding to a very dense set of roads that works as a filtering mass.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The three guiding ideas presented here reinforce the thesis that in Bernardo Secchi's history there was always a special attention given to open spaces, from which he developed important ideas, concepts, which became project instruments. The guiding ideas selected and discussed in this article express the way in which Secchi faced the challenges presented by the contemporary city.

The ground floor project represented a new way of developing urban plans. It is, without a doubt, an original contribution by Secchi, which focuses on the intermediate moment between urbanism, architecture and society. The urban plan is, in many ways, a solo project, which nowadays, when the city is associated to a scattered form, gains more importance in the resolution of projects relating to density and proximity. It can be said, after analyzing Secchi's body of work, that the solo project, which is understood as the search for an adequate distance between the objects and between the people in different modalities, dissolved into the concept of porosity.

The reflection about the importance of the solo project is connected to the concept of *renovatio urbis*, which assumes, with Secchi, a new aspect related to specific interventions that, however, can affect the city as a whole. Secchi was one of the firsts to perceive that urban planning requires an approximation in two scales, a global scale for the city and a specific project for certain areas of the city, a view that now can seem obvious, but which, at the time, was greatly original. But the *renovatio urbis*, thought with an end in itself, does not contribute to solving the problems of cities; it must be connected to a general idea of the city and its planning, and it only had meaning when connected to the solo project. In Secchi's history, this concept was re-dimensioned and questioned. It lost a bit of meaning and aged because of its limitations, but it was used again in the most recent plans as a way of giving the city plans consistency, and to reinforce the potential of its various parts, finding in the architectural project the way of producing strong connections, including social and cultural ones, in a city that is trying to develop over itself, using sub-utilized spaces, trying to bring people together, and having in mind a view to the future.

The porous city is not only a *slogan* for Secchi's projects. It emerged as a metaphor and transformed into a project category that has the goal of interconnecting the different parts of the city and the territory, in search of the utopic isotropic city. It is profoundly connected to the concept of solo project and to a contemporary view of the physical dimensions of space, distances, urban materials, of the new strategies of attention and of the possible ways of living together.

What characterizes Secchi is the exercise he proposes of imagining the city; and in the speeches he gives about the contemporary city it can be seen that

he intentionally uses images, not as allegories, but to build a hypothesis for interpreting the world and a project of action on the reality. The imagination, for Secchi, is an operative component. When “constructing images”, the use of analogies for formulating theories is very common, and the metaphor is a resource considered to be a “moment of passage”, that which allows the best definition of the theory. According to Secchi, the urban planning practice almost always acquired meaning inside a narrative, inside a discursive structure, where it is possible to recognize figures. The metaphor is one of these possible figures that allow objects, situations or events, which are not always similar, to relate. In Secchi’s work there is a great use of metaphoric connections, which causes the conceptual and theoretical background to be reinforced by the presence of images. Secchi is recognized in Italy as the author that more systematically put imagination at the basis of the renovation of urban rationality.

It can be said that Secchi developed throughout his history a constructive thinking, a creative knowledge and a projectual mentality, comprehending very well the lessons he learned from the masters he worked with, like Giuseppe Samonà, distinguishing himself from the triviality or the urban plans produced nowadays.

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