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Paris, a metropolis in design: Urban architecture through the prism of the large scale

Cristiana Mazzoni

The mirroring of different metropolitan situations brings out the difficulty of thinking about major contemporary territories through a project approach capable of grasping the whole as the result of a dialogue between its constituent parts: dense cores, urban edges, infrastructures, natural elements, new poles, etc. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the thinkers of the modern metropolis - this new urban entity resulting from the industrial revolution that was both fascinating and difficult to define - had nevertheless suggested the importance of understanding its unity through the acceptance of multiplicity and the confrontation of opposites. Georg Simmel's image of the metropolitan man and his culture is enlightening in this respect: the evolution of each human being appears in his discourse as a «bundle of lines of growth», starting in the most disparate directions for journeys of various lengths. But it would not be with one of these lines of growth, in its singular fulfillment, that man cultivates himself: it is «only when they are significant for the development of the indefinable unity of the person. Or, in other words: culture is the path from the closed unit to the deployed unit, through the deployment of multiplicity» (Simmel, 1911). By transposing this reading of the individual and his culture to the places where he lives and meets, this thought on unity as a deployment of multiplicity interests us so as to understand the meaning behind large-scale architecture. The metropolitan project could find its meaning today in a process of understanding unity through the dialectic of contrasts born of the confrontation between the parties. We will try to develop this approach on the basis of three axes: the «humanist»¹ meaning linked to the notion of the metropolis; the figures and images of the metropolitan project; governance and the project as a philosophy of action.

Thinking the metropolis in terms of humanist culture

Pierre Mansat thus underlines the dichotomy that characterizes the metropolitan territory of the Île-de-France region and the need to articulate in a new way, in debates as well as in facts, the Paris/Suburbs equation that has been forging minds for more than a century². Metropolitan territory, metropolitan identity and a sense of belonging to the metropolis are part of a political project that today takes on a new meaning in the local debate. The difficulty of imagining Paris as a metropolitan territory with an identity and a federating character prompts us to look at the definitions given to the term «metropolis» by researchers who have attempted to compare Paris with other metropolitan situations.

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View over Paris at dusk, from the top platform
of the Montparnasse tower, 2008.
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The term metropolis has different meanings in different cultures and disciplines. The Franco-German team – Gilles Duhem, Boris Grésillon, Dorothee Kohler – which in the 1990s offered a crossed-perspective of Paris and Berlin, emphasizes that the French, by ignoring the demographic question, seem to willingly resort to the word metropolis and use it indiscriminately to designate very varied urban entities: from cities with several million inhabitants to regional metropolises of 200 000 inhabitants, including «metropolises of balance». In this sense, the Germans seem to use the term «metropolis» more restrictively: a metropolis is a city of at least one million inhabitants, of international standing and connected to global decision-making networks.

While it is difficult to give a unilateral definition of the word metropolis on the basis of demographic data, the image of «central place», of «decision-making » node in a network of cities» seems, on the contrary, to federate positions. Dieter Läpple points out that over the centuries several models of metropolis have been developed, all of which are linked to the literary meaning of «mother city» – an urban polarity that has a central place in a network of other cities³. In the Western world, the current era of large cities begins with the chaos produced by the meeting of the 19th century model of the dense metropolis – dominated by a compact, hierarchical and ordered space – and the counter model of the functional city – dominated by an extended, isotropic and fluid space: today, these forms of urban structuring are in crisis and presuppose new approaches to understanding their multiplicity. Like most European cities, Paris must seek its new identity in the idea that it is no longer confronted with the world of large capital cities taken as emblematic models. Paris has to deal with a huge range of disparate forms of urban agglomeration, so that the very word «metropolitan model» seems to be becoming obsolete.

The image of a «central place», a «decision-making node in a network of cities» is linked to the new process of globalization. If, at the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance, with the networks of merchant cities, the first forms of «capitalist world economies» emerged, and at the time of the industrial revolutions of the 19th century, the States played a major role with their voluntarist policies and allowed world trade to intensify, today the deindustrialization of developed economies allows the passage to a third stage of globalization: that of a post-Fordist, flexible organisation of the production system, with strong delocalisation, the generalisation of a service economy and the development of electronics (Leroy 2000). The metropolis is thus called upon to play an important role among the world's cities as a place that brings together the command centres of the new «world economy» - headquarters, stock exchanges, networks. These cities of the latest generation have been defined as «metropolitan islands», strongly connected to each other, forming an «archipelago» that breaks down state borders (Velz, 1997). The most important cities of this archipelago are described as «global cities»: they are the cities that concentrate the bulk of economic and especially financial

power and are home to highly specialized service activities (service industries) for the largest companies, especially multinational firms (Sassen 2001).

A «Millionaire City», a «central place» in a network of cities, a «decision-making node», a «metropolitan island», the metropolis is also emerging as a place of culture, innovation, creation and connection, of impulse and creativity. According to the Franco-German researchers cited above, this definition is close to the meaning given in Germany to the word *Metropole*, used almost as a synonym for *Weltstadt*: world city. Compared to definitions that focus on demographic and economic criteria, these statements rather underline the intrinsic cultural dimension of metropolises. For Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, the German word *Metropole* means *Weltstadt*, i.e. «in contrast to the Romance or Anglo-Saxon speaking countries, not just 'big city' (*Großstadt*), but more, a cultural standard, and the highest there is» . According to the Germanic idea of the world city, a metropolis would be a large city that no longer distinguishes between foreign and native people. What matters is not so much the demographic rate or the surface area of the city, but the fact that it is the site of an increasingly disparate network of human relations, like an «urban leopard's skin on which new ways of life and survival are woven» (Petreschi, 2005). As a result, today's metropolis reveals itself as a network of cities within the city. Born of an extremely complex diasporic system, it is made up of an infinite multitude of people who communicate and, through these forms of communication, give life to countless urban narratives. It is made up of signs and symbols that derive from these narratives and which must find echo in the multiplicity of its spaces. Hence the need to recover, according to Petreschi, a «forgotten rituality, even the ability to attribute symbolic and iconographic values to the elements that surround us».

The metropolis is above all multicultural and it is here that it can look for its new identity. In this sense, in metropolises there is no identity of place, but cultural identities forged by the perceptions and experiences of people in places: «It is impossible to have a metropolitan identity. Identity is a question of relationships of scale, identity is linked to myth, identity has no a priori belonging, but a belonging in the process of being built, identity is visible, lived. You don't live in the 140 square kilometres of a metropolis»⁴. We should therefore refer to a notion of networks of cultural identities with structures and devices that ensure the functioning of these partial identities without them becoming identities in opposition. This is the meaning of the metropolitan polycentricity that we talk so much about today. The greatest political and societal challenge for any metropolis would be to correspond in the strongest sense of the word, to a *Weltstadt*, a world city made up of partial identities, almost countless cities articulated with each other.

In this interpretation of the metropolis as a world city made up of plural identities, the notion of urbanity takes on new meanings. It is known that its common definition indicates the qualities of the man of the city, his «politeness» and, in a broader sense, the practice of the conventions in use in the city. However,

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«Le Grand Pari(s) de la région parisienne»
International competition, 2008: *The Soft metropolis*.
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urbanity is not the only prerogative of relationships and ways of being in the city, it also concerns the spaces of the city, the way they facilitate the life of city dwellers and their pleasure or feeling of being in the city (Clavel, 2004). From the discourses of sociologists emerges the idea that in the multiple and multicultural urban reality of today's metropolis, dominated by mobility, urbanity increasingly depends on the capacity of conventions and traditional codes to open up to new practices and new relationships between individuals, as well as on the capacity of spaces to respond to these figures of exchange. The city dweller in the metropolis would be required, on the one hand, to respect the rules of conventional civility and, on the other hand, to make these same rules evolve without claiming to compartmentalize them within a single vision of the world. At the same time, metropolitan areas should allow for different forms of friction and should invent possible dialogues beyond the cuts and partitions of territories. It is also by reflecting on the meaning of rejected places, by accepting their dysfunctions and roughness that the metropolis could express the highest degree of urbanity.

The notion of urbanity, extended to the conception of space, thus introduces the need to work on what represents the threshold, the interface, the limit, on what can be thought of at the same time as an element of cut and connection. Placing man at the heart of the metropolitan project – his perceptions and experiences, his modes of encounter with the Other, his memory linked to places and their morphological and topological characteristics, his myths and rituals – allows each of the spaces of the *Weltstadt* to be given their meaning and specificity, in a work that aims at a constant back and forth between understanding the spirit of the whole and its parts.

**Diffuse city, metropolitan archipelago and mosaic territory:
large-scale project figures**

From the point of view of its spatial organization, the contemporary metropolis is more than ever in search of structuring images and strong conceptual tools. For some thirty years now – the time when the notion of the «urban project» emerged and the functionalist operational practice was gradually abandoned – it has been a real «work in progress» (Marcelloni, 2005)⁵. What has emerged forcefully since the 1980s is that the contemporary metropolis is called upon to develop a spatial structure totally different from that inherited from Fordism, with its restrictive division of living, working and leisure places, and emanating from a clear distinction between living and working time. Today's metropolis increasingly offers a mixture of temporalities and functions in the same space, which seems to give rise, despite any form of globalization or globalisation, for each territorial context, to different types of urbanisation. What conceptual tools then allow us to understand the spatial specificity of the large contemporary city? Which project figures are now operational at the macro scale? How can we understand the place and role of the different territories that make it up, each with its own specificity?



In thinking about the metropolitan space, the great difficulty to overcome seems to be the divide between the disciplines and trades involved in its conceptualization and the impossibility of making them interact in the analysis and operational practice of the project on a large scale. The transition from the analysis and development of conceptual tools that take into account the new dimensions of the urban question, to the phases of programme writing, project development and the definition of technical standards is always problematic. These phases remain compartmentalized, preventing a back-and-forth between a macroscopic and microscopic vision of territorial issues. The telescoping between these two visions would, on the contrary, make it possible to define the contemporary metropolis both as a global system and as an ensemble composed of different places which, like pieces of a mosaic, return to its very essence.

Disciplines and professions dealing with the urban environment agree that the contemporary city no longer seems to have any dimensions: the compression of the space-time relationship tends to cancel out any distance and make us imagine that we live in a single immense city. In this «limitless» city, the borders between town and country, the relationship between centres and peripheries seems to dissolve. However, the widespread notion of the «diffuse city», which emphasizes its isotropic character, would not have made it possible to understand the multiple issues related to these complex metropolitan spaces (Indovina, 2005). The territory, in its extension, has become the container of different forms of spatial organization, by diffusion but also by densification, multipolarity, integration. While it is characterised by an unparalleled urban sprawl, it is also defined by a very great heterogeneity of space, with new forms of agglomeration around industrial and craft zones, economic centres or «centres of excellence», leisure sectors, logistics and storage centres. The contemporary city thus appears, on the one hand, disaggregated and dispersed, and on the other hand, composed of polarities, aggregations, territorial bodies that form potential bases for the development of new urban centres and that represent the opposite phenomenon of dispersion. In this sense, for some time now, the metaphor of the archipelago has been the most suggestive and capable of defining, on a large scale, the metropolitan territory.

Used as much by architect-urban planners as by economists or sociologists, the figure of the metropolitan archipelago refers to this new territorial structure, defined by some as a «hyperville», against the image of an anti-urban «diffuse city». This figure underlines the disparate intensity of the centres that confront each other and are integrated into a unitary territory even if differently urbanized. In this territory, we come across a new citizen whose practices affect several of its centres. Its individual and collective life experience, relating to the political, functional, productive, cultural and emotional spheres, is carried out on two levels: at the local level and at the metropolitan level. At these two levels, the experiences that until recently were those of the inhabitants of the big city, separated from each other, combine and merge into each other, bringing new

forms of freedom of behaviour. This is the most important element of any «metropolitan archipelago». The latter forges a new «personality» in its inhabitant that adapts to situations and considers the territory composed of different «things» that it can appropriate and whose diversity (of people and places) is each time a new possible experience. This situation continually imposes a «choice». It is not excluded that this choice is charged with loneliness and anguish, but it also brings freedom and a new self-awareness (Indovina, 2005).

However, the figure of the archipelago proves to be completely unsuitable to express this complexity, as it only allows well-defined islands to emerge in the middle of a shapeless magma. In most approaches that present the space of the metropolis through the figure of the archipelago, the difficulty emerges in thinking of this space in terms of a project strategy that presupposes a «humanist» approach and that articulates analyses and projections on a large scale with those that are more contextual. Far too closely linked to a functionalist vision of space, the figure of the archipelago should be conjugated with another figure that interacts with it dialectically: that of the mosaic. This image makes it possible to identify and give a name to all these territories which, in the archipelago, appear, between the islands, as liquid and shapeless expanses. The process of evolution of metropolises can thus be explained as a chain of specialized elements, an assembly of a heterogeneous series of urban elements.

The conjugation of the figures of the archipelago and the mosaic presupposes a dialogue between the territories in transformation and the consolidated sectors, and this through a questioning of the notions of threshold, interface and spatial limit. The figure of the mosaic can thus accompany the reflection on the transformation of these parts of the city into a field of investigation and, at the same time, a foundation for the metropolitan project. It can help to recognize the symbols still hidden from these new urban realities, to rediscover the deep characters of their space, without denying their friction, their differences and their loss of unity. This approach can help us to understand these undefined areas of the metropolis as real «places», each with its own «genius» and where meaningful spaces find their place.

Two dimensions are finally to be taken into account in the mosaic figure. The first is that of the dense poles of the archipelago and the large expanses that lie between them. The second is that of interstitial spaces within the different tissues, rich in places with multiple values. In these two dimensions, the networks are called upon to play the role of a true metropolitan framework that acts as an architecture on both a large and small scale. In their variety, ranging from slow to high-speed paths, they form the complex and varied binder of the pieces of the mosaic that draw the whole of the territories. Networks can thus be read as the basis of hierarchical forms that do not follow the traditional pyramid shape, with a privileged centre and poles located in ever lower levels, but, rather, follow the image of mountain ranges drawing different ridges and valleys (Indovina, 2005).

Notes

1. By humanist culture we mean a way of thinking that claims to be humanism as defined in the 18th century, which «takes man as its end» and which differs in this respect from the most common meaning of humanism, which refers to the Renaissance and its desire to «raise the dignity of the human spirit». Alain Rey (ed.), article «Humanisme», *Dictionnaire culturel de la langue française*, Robert, 2005.
2. Pierre Mansat, intervention in the round table debate organised at the Île-de-France Regional Council in the framework of the «Paris Métropoles en miroir» programme, Workshop organised at the Regional Council of Île-de-France, 24 June 2008.
3. Dieter Läßle, intervention at the Workshop organised at the Maison Suger on 23 June 2008.
4. Yannis Tsiomis, intervention in the debate of the Workshop on 24 June 2008.
5. In our article, we repeatedly refer to this international colloquium, organized in Rome in 2004, in which François Asher also participated for France. This moment of conclusion of two researches programmes questioning governance and the Plan/Project relationship allowed an efficient synthesis between sociological, anthropological, economic, urbanistic and architectural visions of the metropolitan project.

Metropolitan governance and project philosophy

In Paris, the history of metropolitan governance began with the French Revolution and, with the advent of the industrial era, it saw the transition from a fragmented communal space to the establishment of a dynamic of urban agglomeration and institutional collaboration (Fourcaut, Bellanger and Flonneau, 2007). Today, urban governance in the capital region and the organization of a centralized conurbation reflect a way of thinking that gives the State – the guarantor of the public interest – a predominant place: from the former tutelary, or even feudal, domination of the capital on its margins derives the permanence of the radiocentric model of the territory. However, over and above these questions linked to the forms of government and the domination of the city centre on its periphery, metropolitan governance today opens up a fundamental field: that of the link between «philosophy» and «action», between the thinking behind territorial projects and their management (Panerai, 2008).

On the subject of urban governance as a «form of action», we know that in a few years it has become a shared term, which has very quickly been taken up by researchers, urban technicians and politicians alike (Jouve, 2003). Polysemic in nature, it serves to designate a transformation of the frameworks and content of urban policies against the backdrop of the phenomenon of metropolization and the globalization of the political, economic and cultural spheres. It is now accepted that cities are increasingly the spatial, political, economic, social and environmental frameworks from which contemporary societies are called upon to transform themselves: they are becoming the nodal spaces in the regularisation of modern societies in relation to States. Cities are giving rise to new configurations of relations between states and local authorities, in an institutional framework that has to deal with forces at play – social, political and economic – that are extremely fragmented (Ampe, Neuschwander, 2002).

As for governance as a «philosophy» underlying action, the idea has been put forward on several occasions that the term governance replaces the term planning, in the sense that it expresses the new dialectical relationship between the project and its management. For a long time, planning referred to the operational practice that separates the phase of project predisposition from that of its implementation, the second phase being managed for the most part by the public administration, without the project authors or actors close to the field being given a significant role. In contrast, the principle of urban governance rather emphasizes the reciprocal influence of the two moments and aims to integrate and manage both the short temporality, that of the operativity of planning, and the long temporality, that of political and strategic choices (Marcelloni, 2005). The most important novelty of this form of reciprocity concerns the search for a consensus among interested parties – institutional players, operators, investors, directors and managers, as well as users. But, in this sought-after dialectic between projects and their management, how can we overcome the illusion of a desire to reach a

generalized consensus? How can we not fall into the lure of a pacification of conflicts if it is indeed from these conflicts, differences and friction that the metropolis feeds and in which it finds its very essence?

Another way of taking this issue into account would be to consider the metropolitan project as a form of narrative of the territory. By narrative we mean here the discourse and drawing of observation relating to space, at once topological, morphological, social and political. By referring to the conceptual and concrete value of its images, the project should be able to convey the richest possible narrative of the places it focuses on. It should be defined as a narrative that attempts to describe their history through research on toponymy or on their morphological evolution. It should be able to describe the landscapes, the relationship between the forms and their primordial components, and the perceptions and attachment of city dwellers to these landscapes. Finally, it should «ensure the visibility of a public sphere of representation of political action on the territory» (Lussault, 2005).

Thus the project would not seek the illusion of a consensus based on images at market value. Rather, it would define the open-ended result of back and forth between suggestions emanating from the place and interpretations that take distance from it. In this philosophy of action, which presupposes a strong dialogue between the different actors, the development project has a role of «facilitator». It moves away from an approach that links city forms to a set of normative/cognitive laws and theories and instead proposes an inductive analysis of urban form. It is built, both at the local and metropolitan levels, on the basis of the confrontation and interaction of several urban cultures that give life to narratives in the making, substituting for any a priori defined spatial form.

Through these narratives, the construction of a development project becomes the means to collectively question the identity of a site, to organize its overall description and to imagine scenarios of its transformation: it becomes the means to understand again a spatial and social reality, to organize the elements that compose and describe it, and thus to grasp a unity behind the apparent fragmentation. Instead of a fixed image of the territory, the actors concerned would thus have at their disposal images that have the value of «passing concepts» through which the different urban cultures and the relative ideas of transformation of spaces are put into drawings. If metropolitan governance expresses the new dialectical relationship between the territorial project and its management, it should be able to put in place, beyond the different forms of power over the territory, the elements to make this drawing up of the narratives of the different places possible. A design that expresses at the same time the unity and multiplicity of places, their cultural and humanistic value and the possibility of inscribing them in a meaningful mosaic.

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