

The Urban Village: Territorialization of Sustainable Development

Review article of Alberto Magnaghi (2005), *The Urban Village, A Charter for Democracy and Local Self-Sustainable Development*, London-New York: Zed Books

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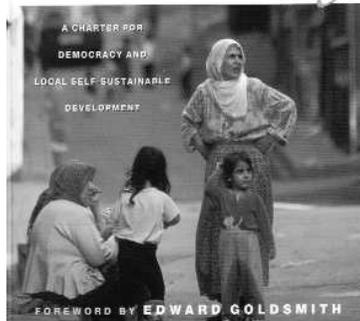
Introduction

The relation between technology and space in modern society is a rather contentious issue. Many have argued that in the process of modernization 'locality' has been abolished as a relevant point of reference (Ploeg and Dijk, 1995). This is directly related to the classical understanding of modernization as a transition from agrarian and rural community to an industrial and urban society. In practice, this idea works as a self-fulfilling prophecy, since policies are designed to facilitate this type of transition. It has been argued that the coincidence of industrialization and urbanization fostered the radical development of towns and cities into *megapolis* and the drain of rural settlements, eventuating in the scattering of the rural settlement structure (Köymen, 1937; Halperin, 1963; Friedmann, 1996). It has also been



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the Urban Village



argued that in this process of modernization, 'locality as a geographical unit, as a place' has been emptied and turned into space, conceptualized as isotropic (everywhere the same) and reducible to a formal or uniform grid, lacking specificity (Poovey, 1995; Ruivenkamp, 2005).

The role of technology is a special one, since the development of technology and science is hold for a main catalyst of industrialization and therefore co-responsible for turning place into abstract space. Within this context of a classical understanding of modernization the idea of *localizing* technology development seems a contradiction in terms, since technology is viewed as fostering the transition of place into space, while localizing technology refers to the quest of a technology development, which empowers the potentials of location-specific developments. Yet, one could also reverse the logic of this proposition, and argue instead that the idea of localizing technology development asks for a serious reconsideration of the concept of modernization. Such reconsideration breaks away from the equation of modernization with a process of abstraction, turning places into functional sites and people into flows of labor power. But what will then be the content of modernization and which role will localizing technologies play?

In *The Urban Village*, Alberto Magnaghi, Professor of Land Use Planning at the University of Florence, has sparked off a debate on a theoretical and practical model to re-define modernization, as a process of territorialized development, to be understood as a collective appropriation of space, and thereby transforming abstract space into places of democratic and actor-oriented development. Magnaghi starts off with a critique on the classical paradigm of modernization, and follows this with a plea for a new organization of space, i.e. that we reconsider the process of urbanization, eventuating in the *megapolis* space, in order to convert that process into the development of a network of localities; location-specific places. In this, Magnaghi emphatically frames his model within an intellectual current of thought represented by the work of such libertarian (or even anarchist) thinkers as William Morris (1890), Ebenezer Howard (1902), and Murray Bookchin (1979). In this review article I will discuss Alberto Magnaghi's set of ideas for re-designing space against the background of two currents of thought. The first one is the libertarian tradition Magnaghi refers to himself. The second one is a nationalist tradition. Both traditions share a critique on the dominant conceptual mode of understanding modernization and its *megapolis* form, as well as a quest for a reconstruction of space into place for the re-constitution of social life, although their political implications are very different. Finally, I will say a few words on what these different currents of thought signify for localizing technology.

The Production of Space and Place

Magnaghi's subtitles his book, 'A charter for democracy and local self-sustainable development', referring to his proposal for a bottom-up globalization. It is emphasized that this proposal has to be distinguished from globalist theory which argues that 'a local community will develop when "contaminated" by the global, thus bringing into the local the innovations needed for integration into worldwide networks. 'But there we are faced with a problem like squaring the circle (establishing mutual interrelations between local and global), since the intervention of the global in the local tends to drain energies and resources from the local and restore dominance' (Magnaghi, 2005: 201). The issue at stake, Magnaghi continues, is the way of combining the (horizontal) length of (global) networks with the (vertical) depth of the territory, without the latter being crushed. He proposes a bottom-up globalization, perceived as the production and strengthening of sustainable horizontal networks between localities.

The approach of building horizontal and sustainable local networks is referred to as the *Territorialist School* (Magnaghi 2005: 80). Etymologically, the term 'territory' derives from the Latin *terra* meaning *land* and *torrium* meaning *belonging*, and the concept was originally applied to the districts surrounding a city over it which had authority (Taylor 1985). Magnaghi argues that the territory was the product of a co-evolution of culture and nature, comprising both rural and urban entities. He argues that this particular territorial constellation became undermined by technological civilization, which treated the territory as an insignificant surface and buried it with objects, works, functions, waste and poison. The Territorialist School holds that locality has to be (re-)produced by a regeneration of the territory, i.e. renewing the relation between human settlements and the environment. The *production of territoriality* is defined as the 'production of high environmental and living quality and enriched local and urban identities, new municipalities and a sense of belonging, typical products in typical landscapes, and the growth of local societies' (ibid. 53).

In Magnaghi's argument the modern city - the *megapolis* - stands symbol for the transformation of places into space. The process of de-territorialization is illustrated by, among other things, the disappearance of public spaces, which are turned into car parks, crossings, traffic junctions, hypermarkets, business

centers, i.e. functions for the *megapolis*. Magnaghi relates this physical disappearance of public spaces to the local community's gradual loss of power in public affairs. Referring to Lewis Mumford (Mumford, 1961), Magnaghi argues that the *megapolis* generates a destructive and self-destructive evolution towards the '*necropolis*', the city of the dead. He continues that 'the contemporary "*megapolis*" is not a pathology, a disease, a cancerous degeneration of the healthy body of the modern city, an excess to be curbed, but the rule, intrinsic to the structure and character of the body itself.' Continuing the biological metaphor, he goes on to suggest that the *morphogenesis* of the *megapolis* is *hypertrophy* (the abnormal enlargement of an entity) and *topophagy* (feeding on the surface), responsible for destroying the reproductive capacity of its own environment. From this treatment of the city as a living organism, it is understandable that Magnaghi should contend that the 'genetic laws of development and of settlements' need to be changed (Magnaghi 2005: 11, 9, 30). We might note, however, that this metaphor of the city as a living organism, its development governed by genetic laws, is rather contradictory to the social constructivist approach Magnaghi seems to adhere to..

When criticizing the *megapolis*, Magnaghi emphasizes that he is not adopting an anti-urban, rural, or pre-modern stance. On the contrary, he argues, the *megapolis* form is the negation of the city, a kind of *urbanization* which is actually anti-urban, since it destroys the city by breaking up urban spaces into functional sites, meant to optimize the production machinery and the market. Magnaghi argues against the transformation of the city into sites and for the embracement of the production of complexity (or variety). In his view, the city is a multiverse of urban centers. Spatial planning therefore, should focus on 1) plurality within urban centers (a city of places, or network city, studded with small centers connected in dense constellations), which is connected with 2) a quest towards plurality among settlements in the wider territory, looked upon as a network of integrating rural and urban places, a polycentric network, which is 3) itself connected with other territorial networks (Magnaghi, 2005: 140-146).

Durkheim

The idea that modern society is an urban society and that development is thus to be equated with the transition of rural-agricultural communities to urban-industrial society is the dominant paradigm of our times and a key suggestion in the work of sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies. Magnaghi rallies against this classical understanding of moderniza-

tion. The modernization process does not signify a transition from rural-agricultural communities to industrial urban societies, he argues, but on the contrary produced them as two separate entities. Magnaghi recalls a time when agriculture and industry were thoroughly combined, and the Italian territory of his homeland characterized by a dense and complex network of settlements comprising a great variety of peoples and landscapes. But the European modernization process characterized by the factory-city (the coinciding of urbanization and industrialization) produced spatial imbalances and disintegration, with its main expression in pathologic cities.

While rejecting the *Durkheimian* idea of the direction of modernization (and the development of communities into societies), Magnaghi is still rather *Durkheimian* in another respect, the idea that the social sciences - in Magnaghi's case '*planning*' - should relate their studies to spatially established communities. In an article Emile Durkheim wrote in 1913 together with his nephew Marcel Mauss, both social scientists argued that social phenomena should be related to human groups occupying a determinate portion of geographically representable space. 'It seems then, on first view that collective life can develop only within political organisms having definite contours, within strictly marked limits' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1998). For Durkheim this is the nation, which he considered an integrating entity and provider of existential meaning, inspiring a sense of pride and belonging, a human association that plays an integrating role in the modern world. Magnaghi too relates his analysis to the idea of spatially established communities, which he refers to as local identity-communities. These identity communities are defined as places inhabited by communities with a particular socio-cultural identity, which in aggregated form make a 'meta-nation' (a nation of nations) (Magnaghi 2005: 79).

Magnaghi defines communities in terms of their (historical) identity, and not as geographically determined and interdependent and interacting actors. This identity concept - defined in socio-cultural terms - is rather important (and problematic). It is at the foundation of the planning model called '*the statute of places*', which divides into a descriptive '*atlas of the heritage*' and a transformative '*statutory regulation*'. The '*atlas of the heritage*' is a planning tool constructed by selecting constitutive parts of a locality's heritage, which includes the 'long-term collective socio-cultural identity'. The production of public place requires a convergence between the 'long-term identity of a place' and the current inhabitants. The '*statutory regulation*' has to provide tools (scenarios) for such a transformation process of space into place. The idea of a long-term socio-cultural identity is problematic insofar as it seems to imply that the cultural is spatially bounded. This principle is based on the widespread

assumption that cultures are established in clearly demarcated territories. Cultures do not, however, exist as geographically-packaged bundles of people, and we ought to abandon the idea that group identity necessarily implies that 'cultures' need to be conceived of as spatially bounded (Giddens 1985; Taylor 1985; Appadurai 1995).

As mentioned, Magnaghi is rather fond of the biology metaphor, making frequent use of 'body language' and the metaphor of the organism in 'The Urban Village'. As well as the description of *megapolis* in terms of pathology (cancerous, hypertrophy, etc), a 'place' is seen as endowed with individuality or personality, and human settlements have 'genetic laws'. The body is an ancient metaphor of political institutions. However, in the work of the positivists (running from Saint Simon to Comte, Durkheim and others) it became used as a more general metaphor for the structure and function of society as a whole. Society became visualized as an organism, and Magnaghi likewise sketches settlements and places as living entities. But the organism metaphor can easily run into functionalism, the idea that phenomena can be best explained in terms of the functions it performs for the continuation of the whole (actors provide functions for the creation and maintenance of communities and localities), and into determinism, the idea that phenomena are governed by causal and universal laws (the long-term heritage and genetic laws of a place) - a functionalistic and deterministic approach which may make it difficult to embrace the local potentials of turning abstract space into a place and to understand the role which localizing technology may play in that transformation process.

Civil and Nationalist Outlooks

Magnaghi stands in a tradition of visionary planners, such as Ebenezer Howard, who in his book 'Garden Cities of Tomorrow', argued for the development of a *network of sustainable rural-urban communities*. His work was influenced by the anarchist Kropotkin, who in his 1899 work 'Fields, Factories and Workshops' rejected the development of enormous factory-cities and defended the development of self-governing industrial villages. Yet Magnaghi's work reminds me most of the work of John Friedmann, Honorary Professor at the **School of Community and Regional Planning**, and former Professor of **Planning (Urban Planning Program) at the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning and the School of Public Policy and Social Research, University of California at Los Angeles**. The starting point of his analysis is the rejection of the rural-urban divide, arguing that it pits

cities against the countryside as two irreconcilable formations. Implementation of this urban-industrial development model is to drain the countryside from its surplus, releasing all but a residual working population to the *megapolis*. This densification of the population was thought to be *the* spatial format of modern society, but is rejected by Friedmann, who, referring to Manuel Castells, argues that these new cities are not able to provide livelihood to all their inhabitants, and have turned into wild and dangerous places to live (Friedmann 1996).

Referring to Kropotkin and Howard (but also to Lewis Mumford, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mao Ze Dong) Friedmann indicates that he was moved to find ways to overcome the rural-urban divide, and develops a strategy of what he terms '*agropolitan*' development, which comes down to a model of creating self-governing basic urban modules, acting as (multiple) *service centers* for their environment (and not as singular centers of production, as is the case with factory-cities). The main objective of this modular urbanization model is social and ecological sustainable development, by creating a balanced district (Magnaghi would call it territory) economy and democratic administration (Friedmann, 1996).

However, the domain of *re-thinking* modernity and *re-designing* settlements and settlement structures is not exclusively owned by social scientists and planners concerned with processes of sustainability and democratization, but also an area of nationalist policies. In 'Settlement Wars', a study in which I, among others, discuss the rationale of settlement policies in Turkey, I have interrelated the continuous efforts of settlement planning to assimilate peoples to a Turkish national identity (Jongerden, 2006). The term 'nation-building' is more than a manner of speaking here, for architects and rural planners have seriously believed that the new environments they have created could turn villagers into Turks.

By the 1930s, the Turkish sociologist Nusret Kemal Köymen had already developed a systematic critique of the concept of modernization and settlement (Köymen, 1937). Köymen argued that the coincidence of urbanization and industrialization was not a law of history, but the biggest mistake in European history. It produced a scatter of desolate villages and pathologic cities. Köymen - like Magnaghi - was fond of biological metaphors to describe the evil of the *megapolis*. He compared it with orthogenesis, the unstoppable growth of an organ damaging other organs and the body (the nation) in which it exists. Köymen argued that the first cities in history were relatively small and not the seats of production (as opposed to the modern factory-city), but rather administrative, cultural and economic service centers, and an integrated

part of Magnaghian territorial entities. In Anatolia, agriculture and industry had been integrated, contended Köymen; villages at that time were the seats of a variety of industries, and many towns were nothing else but industrial villages. The de-industrialization of villages in Anatolia was an effect of the industrial revolution which occurred in 19th century Europe, when under protection of the state, heavy and cumbersome machines were placed near urban centers, turning them into factory-cities. He considered this development the gravest danger for the nation, since the factory city produced socio-cultural differentiation and class-society. Köymen's proposal was to establish a network of new settlements, to be created from an integration of rural and urban modules (economically founded upon an integration of agriculture and industry), which he named '*rurban*'.

A similar search for a development 'beyond modernization' and the re-design of public space was been made by Haim Halperin, an agrarian-economist from Israel. He too argued that the urbanization of industry had created cities and villages as irreconcilable social formations, fostering the former, draining the latter, and having a tremendous negative impact on society (Friedmann, 1996: 129-30; Halperin, 1963: 1-9). Like Köymen, Halperin also thought that the rural-urban dichotomy could be abolished by the development of a new settlement type. The lengthy citation below serves as an illustration of his thinking on this matter (Halperin, 1963).

'Ours is a bewildered generation. We have scaled the heights but it seems that the ground is slipping from beneath our feet (...) (T)he village is beginning to vanish from the face of the earth (...) Are we so certain that no crisis is in store for industry and that we have not gone beyond the bound of prudence in concentrating millions of human beings in single cities (...). It is difficult, if not completely impossible, for any man in our age to imagine the future city with teeming millions. Can it possibly be an integrated unit? (...) But why should we give up rural society entirely? Are we indeed capable of developing a better, more integrative society; one that is more robust - not only physically but also morally - more patriotic and more upright? (...) Agriculture can be combined with industry without undermining the age-old social asset - the village. We can improve and even reform the village and bring it into line with changing conditions (...) Up to this day we know of no city which has rural characteristics. But the converse, a village possessing elements of the town, is feasible. Moreover, it is far more desirable to establish an industrial center in a rural setting. Within a group of 25, 30 or even 40 villages, let us say, an industrial set-

ting would be developed possessing all those attributes of a city, which the villagers find so attractive. The urge towards mobility, so deeply rooted within us, would also be satisfied.'

Both Köymen and Halperin explicitly related the development of new settlements to a cultural-nationalist program. The new environments created were supposed to assimilate populations within a national identity and contribute to the development of the nation. In this context, planning becomes a policy for identity politics. Magnaghi, on the other hand, stands firmly in a libertarian tradition, marked by thinkers like Kropotkin or Bookchin, relating settlement policies to the 'liberation' of the subject and a project of radical democracy, and emphasizing the need to link the 'settlement issue' to the search for new agencies and forms of direct and participatory democracy. And his suggestion for a way in which to produce new territoriality, by a constant weaving of the web of civic networks, is thought provoking. Yet his emphasis on disclosing the long term cultural identity of places (or concepts such as 'place consciousness') risks the danger of bringing in a nationalist agenda through the back-door.

Conclusions

Magnaghi's book is highly recommended for those who are interested in the issue of 'place' (and its social construction), regardless of whether this is a 'place' in local development, local technology or local democracy, or all. To paraphrase Henry Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1991): Place is becoming the principal stake of goal-directed actions and struggles. It cannot be looked upon as an essence, a scenery or arena. It is both the medium of and mediated by social action. Without the concept of place and its production, social activities, including the design of technologies, cannot attain concreteness. The question is, whither place?

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