

Thinking with Quarantine Urbanism?

Reflecting on the urban discourse which is apparently coalescing around the Coronavirus and its effects on the city, are a series of arguments and hypotheses, bound by an epidemiological vision of space, in which attention is placed on the system of relationships that define our practices of dwelling and space production, rather than on the inhabitant or society as a whole.

Of concern are the reasons and consequences of relational exchange and particularly the effects produced by the biological and chemical conditions that accompany them. This vision and project tension can be called Quarantine Urbanism.

In its most basic form, quarantine is a separation and containment strategy. The creation of a border, between two or more environments, ecologies, subjects and social groups. The goal is to protect one from the exposure to the other. Quarantine is a matter of perimeters, of control and interruption of biological exchanges through a spatial separation between what is perceived as clean or dirty, safe or dangerous, healthy or sick, foreign or native. It is a spatial response to situations of threat, suspicion, uncertainty. From the artificial islands of the archipelago of New York, to the cruise ships loaded with tourists kept at a distance from the ports, to the architectural experiments of the sanatoriums of the first half of the twentieth century, the territories, spaces and languages of the quarantine are varied. The design implications of quarantine can range from the management of ballast water in ships to the way we plan our cities, from the choice of clothes in the suitcases of tourists to the control of seeds of trees and shrubs stuck in the soles of travellers' shoes. At the beginning of the 20th Century, the 'quarantine lines' between Sudan and Egypt made it possible to define the borders between the two nations.¹

Quarantine is also a narrative *dispositif* used extensively in literature and movies: *I Am Legend* (2007), *Alien* (1979), *World War Z* (2013), *The Last Town on Earth* (2006), *The Plague* (1992) and, of course, *Quarantine* (2008). From Boccaccio's Decameron and 'disinfected' email protocols, to the Pandemic board game. Through it, it is possible to bring together biology and social sciences, science fiction and ancient history in a fertile and captivating dialogue. In the city of quarantine, the phenomena of social interaction are not found at the Grote Markt, along the Ramblas or in Syntagma Square, but are made visible through the sudden proliferation, for example, of mutual aid groups born to provide support to the most vulnerable during isolation, bringing together a variety of subjects by age group, class and demographic strata. Such phenomenon of reconfiguration of social bodies is accompanied by three main innovations where urban planning issues are mixed with issues of geopolitics, commerce, ethics, migrations, as below.

Surveillance

Quarantine implies control on subjects and space, but the way we are used to defining, interpreting and resisting surveillance has changed radically. The epidemiological view of society is changing common sentiment on it. The reconstruction of the infection by monitoring the mobile phones of the infected subjects is now considered a more important defence tool than the protection of privacy and anonymity. Many forms of collection and processing of personal data are no longer considered social

¹ Bashford, A. (ed.). (2006). *Medicine at the Border: Disease, Globalization And Security, 1850 to the Present*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

surveillance and control, just as the delation and social surveillance about any dangerous behaviours or presence of risky subjects is considered, rather, a form civic practice.

Silent Trade

In the anxiety/trauma produced by spatial distancing, the forms of commerce born from the fusion of online sales platforms and the logistics of delivery systems contribute to maintaining the cohesion of the social fabric, despite the exposure of workers and labourers to health risks. In the quarantine city, shops are closed, streets are empty, and yet the flows of goods and food continue, almost undisrupted and arguably increased becoming part of the public sphere. If the possibility of coupling iron and glass allowed, in the early nineteenth century, the invention of the Parisian *Passages* and the intensification of metropolitan life through the configuration of new urban interior systems, silent trade produces conditions on one hand of more rarefied, empty and isolated urban areas, yet on the other one of densification of multifunctional living space. The silent trade, it can be said, no longer represents something fragile and evanescent compared to the robust city, but rather the opposite, though it is built on vulnerable individuals and sacrificial bodies.

Socio-spatial justice

Quarantine can be a luxury, for those who can afford it, an opportunity to reclaim some personal time and even a condition to aestheticise the emptiness of cities as a dystopian object of contemplation, evoking ‘the romanticism of the ruins’ or the colonial gaze that observes the ‘remains of a lost civilization’. But for those who experience poverty, marginalization, risks of violence and housing discomfort there is no spiritual landscape in ruins. The main roads of our cities may be empty, the mountains on the horizon finally clearly visible, but many, especially in the the global south, are forced to share limited and precarious spaces. Those who need to mix with others to earn a living, experience at the same time the loss of urbanity, conditions of spatial compression and feelings of panic and desolation. The city of quarantine is a definitively unjust city if not scary city.

The risks of oversimplification

Quarantine Urbanism raises issues that cannot be underestimated: in the construction of space, in the way of inhabiting it, in economic and social relations as well as narratives that are both estranged and visionary. Nonetheless it can quickly become an empty neologism to be used on an international market, serving a too simplistic rhetoric not able to grasp seriously the reality and simply constructing conformism in the field of urban studies.

In other words, the trend towards the invention of yet another neologism that alludes to a new universal is updated and tuned to the new present conditions, runs the risk of posing itself in continuity with old attitudes and approaches. These are discourses, forms of projects and knowledge of a colonial and Eurocentric origin, as they have a universal character. And it is exactly the conditions, the ecologies produced by these discourses and by their spatial translations that have produced *hyper objects*, using Timothy Morton’s allusive words², the environments favourable to the spread of pathologies such as Coronavirus.

This is exactly the point we wish to offer to the discussion. How does the notion of ***Quarantine Urbanism*** manage to escape such conformist repetition? How could it possibly contribute to redesign

² Morton, T. (2012). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

the field of urban studies without falling into the neoliberal shortcuts and its rhetoric? How could the project and the contemporary urban discourse manage to change (at least not in completely marginal aspects)? If it has ambition to move somehow ethically, which politics could it usefully be directed towards? What is at stake for us, is not the possibility of proposing a new complacent and aestheticizing narrative of the phenomena in progress, but the ability to construct a discourse up to the problems posed by the new conditions that concern first of all spatial and living issues (silent trade), ethics (the redefinition of the debate on control and surveillance) and social justice. In the rest of this brief commentary we would like to offer some of such reflections to avoid oversimplification and, possibly, suggests some provisional reflections.

Decoding the urban question with quarantine

The impossibility of movement, imprisonment, multiplication of internal and external borders, mobility limitations, police state, and extreme valorization and social polarization are not unprecedented traits that *Quarantine Urbanism* introduces, they are crucial elements of the way in which a global urban question is being currently restructured.

We are used to telling ourselves that every time the structure of the economy and society changes, every time the relationship between capital and labour changes, the urban question comes to the fore. There is a long history to witness it. Even today, things are framed by these terms. And if this hypothesis is also partially acceptable, then it is on this level that the discussion must be set. Talking about Quarantine Urbanism is not only inappropriate and simplistic, but it proposes a colonial approach to those who see reality through the conventional western characteristics of privilege. The point therefore is, in our opinion, to reject the latter urbanism and to focus on the centrality that quarantine, as a condition of the present, suggests decoding the urban question. The four examples that follow, to us at this moment, seem the main ones.

Differential vulnerabilities

Many commentators, from Butler to Žižek, have pointed out the risk reproduction and increase of radical inequalities and capitalist violence in the pandemic zone. While others as Nancy or Esposito argue on the contrary that the coronavirus reaffirms equality, bringing us together new commons and new potentials. To us, such equality seems more the sign the wealthy and the privileged—those who are lucky enough to have a house to spend their quarantine in, and who do not need to work or can work from home. Vulnerability, therefore, is a *differential vulnerability*. The virus did not erode social and racial inequalities by bringing us to a common belonging, either biological or the fate of the future, rather is producing and multiplying vulnerability from which individuals and groups are governed and immobilised. Tazzioli speaks of “biopolitics through mobility”³ mobilizing categories that does not oppose vital forces to those that generate death but organizes the grey area between the first and second ones. Thinking this situation is truly thinking biopolitics its various declinations as a set of actions that govern mobility and immobility; recode mobility through immobility; grasp the differential character of actions that make the limits between the quarantine area and what lies outside it, porous in different ways for different subjects, and bring out a socio-ethical way of regulatory judgment.

Bodies and spaces

³ Tazzioli, M. (2019). *The Making of Migration: Biopolitics of Mobility at Europe's Borders*, London: Sage, 106

Within this ethical connotation of vulnerabilities, the relationship between body and space is also redrawn. The core of this correlation is the body (healthy, sick, dead, closed in on itself, in its obsessions, desires, pathologies or open to the world⁴. The Body not as an interior space, nor as a purely social entity. But an immanent chain of forces, fluxes and passions. Body that is ‘affected in many ways’ Spinoza would say, which touches and is touched, which it knows through the hand, which by touching reveals the resistance of the objects and, on them, it leaves a trace. That by touching, it gets sick. With a burning radicality, the pandemic repositions the question that was already a Deleuzian one: ‘what can a body?’. What a body can do in its fragility, materiality and immanence it is always located in space, and interrelated with other human and non-human bodies. Therefore a reflection on potency on possibilities and potentials – again with Spinoza - rather than with vulnerabilities, limits, or traumas.

Local

The forms that the pandemic generates in the economy, in social relations, around care, are mostly forms of proximity. Government actions also recall a notion of a local that has nothing to do with the one celebrated in the so-called season of ‘local development’. Nothing celebratory of the qualities of a single territory. Nothing capitalized in the sense of Boltanski and Esquerre.⁵ The spatial devices of the pandemic have enhanced a new domesticity, radicalized fixed assets and above all made large urban spaces that were already marginal, opaquer. The local finds new needs. A locale that multiplies and sometimes expands till subsuming a nationalist ‘we’. The risks of slipping back into the two opposite anti-liberal and conservative conditions of localism and nationalism constitute a third direction for rethinking the new urban question

Infrastructures of care.

The pandemic brings out an ethics of fragility that opens up to a politics of support, of mutual support and care. The latter materializes primarily in the request for welfare, health services, social safety nets but brings with it the possibility of a politicization of social reproduction as a field of contention for the rethinking of society itself as a whole. To take the most direct example: not for everyone the house reflects the acquisition of a right. We could take the simplifying universalism of the Stay Home as immunological strategy, as the starting point of a reflection on the neoliberal deflagration of rights⁶. A deflagration that brings into play the possibility of rethinking the home as a care infrastructure where “being in common at a distance [...] is the exercise that makes it possible to invent new words, new poses, new horizons”.⁷ But it is an exercise that needs a lot of patience and care. A broad rethinking of the urban question and its relationship with law also opens up along this fourth direction. We have to inhabit the present, inhabitation is a form of caring.⁸ To live is to be present is caring for the present.

⁴ Bianchetti, C. (2020). *Bodies. Between Space and Design*, Berlin: Jovis (forthcoming).

⁵ Boltanski L., Arnaud Esquerre, A. (2017). *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*, Paris: Gallimard

⁶ Alain Supiot A. (2010). *L'Esprit de Philadelphie*, Paris: Seuil

⁷ [https://www.utpjournals.press/journals/topia/being-in-common-at-a-distance?=
=](https://www.utpjournals.press/journals/topia/being-in-common-at-a-distance?=)

⁸ Boano, C., Astolfo, G., (2020) Notes around hospitality as inhabitation. Engaging with the politics of care and refugees dwelling practices in the Italian urban context. *Migration and Society: Advances in Research*, Vol.3, 222–232.

Recentring the urban question⁹ means placing the fractured and decomposed character of vulnerability decisively at the core of the urban project and the urban discourses; the ethical connotation of the link between body and space; the rethinking of the local outside any conservative shortcuts; and the need for new infrastructure of care that have the courage to bring us to other ways of acting and practicing. All this requires a non-defensive but affirmative project. The pandemic requires us to get out of the political economy of mourning, of melancholy. Is it possible to imagine affirmative design practices capable of responding to horizons of hope and resistance that do not bring us to nihilism? We do not know. However, what we seem to understand is that it is not useful for this to refer to yet another [Quarantine] Urbanism. One of the many neologisms that pretend to qualify the urban space and scratch the real as well as its complexity, but rather let the reality escape so their meanings become simple, subtle, unable to grasp any real. A shortcut. On the other hand, it acts as a *dejà vu* semantically making the novelty of the present with the use of a medical term, the quarantine, which in fact was already manifested in the history of planning and the urban form. Alienation and separation, segregation, formalization, rationalization globally was the spatial manifestation of the dispositive of the quarantine. Alternating in the form of the punitive city of Foucault, the basis of the space-power matrix, or in the capitalist city and its aesthetics of the sacred representation of the ban on otherness.

⁹ Bernardo S, (2015). La nuova questione urbana in *Il futuro si costruisce giorno per giorno*, [The New Urban Question in *The future is built day by day*], Roma: Donzelli, 151-158