The city as a text and the participatory role of environmental graphics

Adriana Caldarone

The promotion of the available resources and of the embedded fabric is fundamental both in central cities and in small towns, in the suburbs or in historic places. The fabric comes out of the combination between solids and voids, but also from the temporary works, exhibits, services and citizens that are part of it. The places make up the city are identified as real texts and not just as contexts. In so doing, the role of drawing and environmental graphics becomes more meaningful when it involves the communication area and it merges with the goods needed for everyday life. This paper focuses on the critical observation of some static or dynamic works, realised in different urban contexts: the covering of the construction sites’ fences, urban art, the conditions related to the events. The reflections help to develop the knowledge of the different forms of urban expressiveness and to highlight the increasing role of environmental graphics as a sign and a player of the ongoing social process: it promotes the user's involvement that becomes more “citizen” and less customer than before.

Keywords: environmental graphics, living city, urban expressiveness.

1. Introduction: from the representation of the city to the city of representation

Many frameworks have explored during the years the representation of the city and of its image: sociology, psychology, architecture, town planning and representation studies. The latter focuses on the most communicative and perceptual aspects of her image according to the approach suggested by Kevin Lynch in 1960 in his work *Image of the city* where he claims that a place’s environmental image and its recognizability identity are the results of a mutual process between the observer and his setting. The image of the city and its perception, provided in a citizen’s mind (or in a traveller’s, a tourist’s, an observer’s one), takes to the setting of an urban scenery resulting from the relationship between an urban surrounding and its observer. The city starts to be seen as a scene (FAGNONI 2011) that talks about herself and interacts with her users. The great potential of a city’s communicative and social skills has been understood since the time of ancient Rome thanks to public life and to the design of urban areas meant for it. Besides public areas, the “urban images” have had a fundamental role as a way to express moral, religious and civic values, supporting the development of the urban community’s identity; honorary monuments, buildings and obelisks were often decorated with bas reliefs narrating the Emperor’s military and civil deeds or the historic events, supporting the identification process between the Roman citizen and the Empire that was the legitimacy of the imperial power. The images were always used as embellishments in some buildings (Trajan’s column, Constantine’s arch) whose civil purpose became itself image (AISA 2010). During the Renaissance and the Baroque, a strong and immediate relationship started to emerge between scenery and architecture forming an inseparable pairing for design and representation. The city becomes a stage. The final baroque city is not just the result of the individual interventions or the combination of the multiple staging areas with urban furniture and perspectival and illusory measures; it rather consists of the realising perception of urban spaces. The urban interventions in the papal city of Rome, started by Pope Sixto V, aimed to assess the power of the Church on the city through a skillful manipulation of the semantic hints.

La città come testo e il ruolo partecipativo della grafica ambientale

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Nelle città, siano esse di piccole o grandi dimensioni, storiche o non, ai margini o centrali, è fondamentale la valorizzazione delle risorse esistenti e del tessuto strutturale. Il tessuto nasce dall’insieme dei piani e dei vuoti, ma anche dagli interventi temporanei, dagli eventi, dai servizi e dai cittadini che ne fanno parte. I luoghi che compongono la città vengono identificati non più come contesti ma come veri e propri testi. In tale quadro, il ruolo del disegno, e quello della cosiddetta “grafica ambientale”, diventa più significativo quando interessa la sfera della comunicazione e si fonde con i manufatti necessari alle azioni quotidiane. L’articolo si concentra sull’osservazione critica di opere realizzate in differenti contesti urbani e di diversa natura, siano esse statiche o dinamiche: dalla vestizione delle cesate di cantiere, alla urban art, ai meccanismi legati agli eventi. Le riflessioni contribuiscono a creare un quadro conoscitivo sulle forme di espressività urbana e sottolineeranno come la grafica ambientale stia diventando segno e allo stesso tempo player dei processi sociali in atto: promuove la partecipazione del “fruitore” che diviene più cittadino e meno utente.

Parole chiave: città partecipata, espressività urbana, grafica ambientale.
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Even if it cannot be defined yet as environmental graphics, this is rather an image come out of the space perception, it is possible to recognize a symbolism of the messages for the users and the community in the juxtaposing of the coats of arms of papal families on buildings, columns’ embellishments, frontdoors, windows and frames of the Sicilian and Salentin Baroque. The perfect union between graphics and architecture or between graphics and urban space is a recent issue born from the desire to use persuasive techniques to promote products: it issued from mass production at the time of the Industrial Revolution during the second half of the 18th century. At the end of the 19th century, the building plans promoted by the Fascism and the new Rome’s development plan expressed the celebration and the exaltation of Mussolini through their magnitude. Likewise, the posters of the political campaigns showed the Gobierno of the regime on public spaces and on monumental buildings aimed to influence public opinion targeting the mass behaviours and expressing the power’s self-congratulation (fig. 2).

The Bauhaus’ school studies on mural painting, typography, and advertisement had been very important for the application of graphics to architecture and urban spaces. These studies allowed the creation of new communication systems and new customers directions in advertising campaigns and they anticipated the current outlive expression of the multimedia. The central role of communication in architecture is an important theme of the postmodern movement; the restructuring plan of the 42th Street and of Times Square in New York is a factual example of it: the design-art and advertisements are the media and the citizens are identified as customers (fig. 1; ANCESCHI 1999). At the beginning of the 20th century, the building plans promoted by the Fascism and the new Rome’s development plan expressed the celebration and the exaltation of Mussolini through their magnitude. Likewise, the posters of the political campaigns showed the Gobierno of the regime on public spaces and on monumental buildings aimed to influence public opinion targeting the mass behaviours and expressing the power’s self-congratulation (fig. 2).

The campaign’s public posters came out together with the sale of putting up spaces. The harmonious mix of words and images communicated successfully the advertising message, the factory and the product; the city seemed to change its face and it represented the citizens’ habits and the ongoing cultural evolution. The sociological paradigm is evident in this case: the new power and the new cultural hegemony is represented by industry and consumption; semplificamente il risultato dei singoli interventi, tantomeno la sommatoria dei numerosi allestimenti con elementi di arredo urbano o di accorgimenti prospettici ed illusori, piuttosto consiste nella percezione della spazialità urbana che ne scaturisce. Gli interventi urbanistici della Roma papale, iniziati con Sisto V, mirano, attraverso una sapiente manipolazione degli indizi semantici, a stabilire il potere della Chiesa sulla città.

Se ancora non si può parlare di grafica am- bientale, piuttosto di un’immagine nata dalla percezione dello spazio, è possibile rintracciar- re nella giustapposizione degli stemmi araldici delle famiglie papali sui palazzi, negli ornamen- ti di capitelli, portali, finestre, cornici, del barocco salentino o siciliano un’iconicità e un simbolismo dei messaggi per gli utenti e la comunità. Il vero connubio tra grafica ed architettura, tra grafica e spazio urbano, è un fenome- meno piuttosto recente: nasce dalla volontà di utilizzare tecniche persuasive per promuovere prodotti, è figlio della produzione di massa e si afferma con la rivoluzione industriale nella seconda metà del Settecento. In particolare, negli ultimi decenni del XIX secolo si assiste ai primi manifesti pubblicitari ed alla vendita di spazi destinati all’affissione. L’integrazione organica di parola ed immagine comunica in maniera efficace il messaggio pubblicitario e valori come l’industria ed il prodotto: la città cambia volto e si rappresenta nelle abitudini dei suoi abitanti, nell’evoluzione culturale in corso. Il paradigma sociologico è chiaro anche in questo caso: il nuovo potere e la nuova egemonia culturale sono rappresentati da industria e consumo, l’arte e il segno della pubblicità ne costituiscono i tratti, l’identità degli abitanti diventa quella di “consumatori” (fig. 1; ANCESCHI 1999). Agli inizi del XX secolo, i programmi edilizi promossi dal Fascismo ed il nuovo piano regolatore di Roma esprimono l’immagine di un’esaltazione mussoliniana per la grandezza. Allo stesso modo, i manifesti di propaganda inseriti negli spazi pubblici ed in particolare sulle palazzine monumentali erano azione mirata ad influire sull’opinione pubblica orientando i comportamenti collettivi e visivi esprimendo una sorta di autocelebrazione del potere (fig. 2).
When a plural and multicultural consumer society, characterized by a multiple (and nowadays almost indiscriminate) use of the image begins to take shape, the communication of urban images becomes bilateral; it is possible to point out what Michel de Certeau asserted in his book *L’invention du quotidien*, 1980 (DE CERTEAU 2010): when he cites Foucault and his structures of power, he demonstrates the ability to “invent the practice of everyday life” thanks to the arts and tactics through which he overrides the constraints of dominant power and ordinary culture thus making a new and unpredictable use of images and products that are imposed on him (THIBAULT 2016, p. 22). Even if billboards, a key player of the images spread all over the city, can be still considered as a type of one-sided communication, the circulation of an image or a representation does not tell us anything of what it means for the final user, whereas the will to influence the citizens during the Roman age or by the temporal power of the Church, was absolutely clear. Consumer society is marked by the user-involvement (i.e. the citizen) in the communication process. In the theories of Certeau and Foucault there is an unaware participation of the final recipients of the images. In order to reach public awareness of the use of the image, some dynamics closely connected with the city of our contemporaneity are to be considered. First of all, public space has lost its meaning as a “monumental place” to become rather a relational space; moreover, globalization, on the one hand, has produced a variety of life-styles, on the other hand it has created urban insecurity and urban space shows the tension created between this two effects (PERCU 2013, p. 15). The need to overcome the communities’ disorientation that followed to a loss of identity, has led to the birth of spontaneous phenomena within the inhabitants, who, through signs, graphics and images, affect and intervene on the conformation of urban space and on what it wants to communicate, thus constituting a new paradigm. The sociological theory of James Suzuki expresses this phenomenon in the *Wisdom of Crowds*, recognizing in the mass of inexperienced individuals the ability to provide an adequate response to
specific problems and needs. Thanks to the network, individuals become able to organize and create crowdfunding and crowdsourcing campaigns through which they selffinance in order to find solutions and achieve common goals. This attitude has stimulated many reflections within entrepreneurs, administrators, intellectuals, activists, artists that collaborate between them becoming a “creative class” capable of regenerating places and aggregating the city’s parts, transforming them in aggregative places (fig. 3; PERICU 2013, p. 47).

No longer the power or the consumer, but the man, conceived as a citizen with certain needs, is at the same time the receiver and the player of the transforming processes taking place; in this way the physical space becomes the scenario and the test for the creative and participatory classes that find their own identity in art and urban images. In this collaborative context, Street Art, a form of art that was at first spontaneous and often illegal, becomes Urban Art, a controlled form of art that is subject to rules and able to renegotiate the social relations between public and private, individual and collective (fig. 4); on one hand the principles of provocation, on the other hand the principles of architectural and urban planning. The work created by the artist Federico Massa in agreement with the entrepreneurs and the residents of the Ostiense district in Rome is emblematic; it is a mural on a 1000 sq. façade, done with Airlite technology, an antipollution paint able to clean up the air from pathogens. The façade of the building and the public space in which it is inserted becomes a place of environmental life. Big or small events that are communities’ attracting elements to achieve the goal of technology, this dynamic becomes a sort between the creator of the image, the community and eliminating the contraposition between sustainable art and cultural details (fig. 6).

The scenario, enriched by elements such as play of lines, shapes and colours (fig. 6), between the path of aggregation and participation for an active community, who are urged to look for new solutions to facilitate accessibility and to improve the use of the space, the quality and the perception of urban areas through everyday practices (fig. 7; LO TURCO 2016). In this regard, it is important to listen to the needs of the citizens by activating comparisons that allow the administrations to define the best strategies for “luogo monumentale” to become space relational, in other words, to favor the globalization, as a result of the urban space production, the result from a set of the strategies created in the city, as James Surowiecki expresses, a “creative class” (fig. 3; PERICU 2013, p. 47). Non più il potere o il consumatore, ma l’uomo in quanto cittadino con determinate esigenze, è al tempo stesso destinatario e player dei processi di trasformazione in atto e lo spazio pubblico diviene scenario e testo per le classi creative e partecipative che trovano una propria identità nella rappresentazione e nelle immagini urbane. In questo contesto collaborativo, la Street Art, forma di arte che prima si manifestava spontaneamente e spesso con metodi poco legali, si tramuta in Urban Art, ovvero una forma d’arte controllata, sottoposta a regole e in grado di rinegoziare i rapporti sociali tra pubblico e privato, tra individuo e collettivo (fig. 4); da una parte i principi di provocazione, dall’altro i principi di determinazione dei sistemi locali: imprenditori, amministratori, intellettuali, artisti, in collaborazione tra loro, formano una “classe creativa” capace di rinnovare il rapporto tra cittadini, fondando luoghi di condivisione.
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In this context construction sites have always been considered as a visual, physical and perceptive barrier, a gap within the city space; they also cause inconvenience in terms of air pollution, noise pollution and traffic redistribution. Hence the need to establish a dialogue with the city spaces’ users and with the final users of the product. The first examples can already be seen in scaffolding’s dressing, especially for those buildings whose facade is on its restoration, which, for their centrality, historicity or importance have collective value (fig. 8). The images generally represent the building itself in a postrestoration state through façade’s photogrammetry, even if it is still not possible to talk about user’s participation, it is evident the participatory aspect of the initiative.

In the Mausoleum of Augustus restoration site, in Rome, a fixedterm museum was carried out along the entire perimeter of the building site: the fence of the restoration site became a path of about 300 meters communicating to the public the place’s history, Augustus history and the different uses of the sepulchre over the centuries. In addition, twelve lenticular printed panels and five hollow masks, depicting Augustus face, represented optical illusions activated by the user’s movement along the perimeter (fig. 10). Audio installations and LED lights with adjustable colours, activated in the evening, contributed to provide a multiscopic experience to users. In this case, synergy among public and private aims to redeem Mausoleum’s image in the eyes of citizens, transforming a symbol of Rome’s urban blight, into a newfound relationship with citizens and programs for the wellbeing of the community. In this context construction sites have always been considered as a visual, physical and perceptive barrier, a gap within the city space; they also cause inconvenience in terms of air pollution, noise pollution and traffic redistribution. Hence the need to establish a dialogue with the city spaces’ users and with the final users of the product. The first examples can already be seen in scaffolding’s dressing, especially for those buildings whose facade is on its restoration, which, for their centrality, historicity or importance have collective value (fig. 8). The images generally represent the building itself in a postrestoration state through façade’s photogrammetry, even if it is still not possible to talk about user’s participation, it is evident the participatory aspect of the initiative.

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3. Imaginary cities and the images in the city

The close relationship between city planning and city structure, between forms of power, sociological structure and image distribution is nothing new; in fact, as Orwell stated in 1984 «Power is not a mean, it is an end» (ORWELL 2016, p. 321): Power uses images that are widespread in public spaces to persuade the community. It is therefore interesting to investigate the role of environmental graphics through an iconological analysis of the images disseminated in the cities by the cinematography, which tell a dystopian future; thanks to this analysis we can find the connection between company form, mass media role, urban structure and its inhabitants. Many scholars wonder about the science fiction city’s shape (QUICI 2017, pp. 2437; PRINA 2013; CRESTI 2010): since the time of the earliest expressions of cinematographic art, the relationship between architecture and science fiction was indissoluble, the most advanced hypotheses on the future urban development assimilated and widened the expressive languages of the avant-gardes, they showed interesting lines of research of architectural syntax or gave shape to disturbing dystopias. Furthermore, it has been given to the users the opportunity to exercise in multilevel action’s self-channel of communication. Player and users have access to the information that promoters and administrators communicate through real time communications.

In this context, environmental graphics become enriched by multimedia, interaction and technological solutions and it becomes a sort of osmostimembrane thanks to which customers, promoters and administrators communicate with users, they are all equally centre stage, and users have access to the information that involves them; citizens have the opportunity to participate in the ongoing transformation processes and to take part in a creative recycling of the urban environment by opening a bilateral channel of communication. Player and users at the same time exercise in multilevel action’s self-fasensionment: thinking about action in the fields of built heritage, urban voids and services can regenerate the urban fabric; it can modify its paradigm and can rewrite a new text.

con i frutti sia degli spazi cittadini che con quelli finali del prodotto. I primi esempi sono essere ravvisati già nella vestizione dei ponteggi in particolare di quegli edifici che facciasa è in fase di restauro, che per centralità, per storicità o per importanza hanno valore collettivo (fig. 8). Le immagini generalmente rappresentano l’edificio stesso nel suo stato post-ristauro tramite fotorealisimazioni del prospetto; se ancora non è possibile parlare di partecipazione, risulta evidente una volontà di valorizzare l’intera area di cantiere e di migliorare la percezione dello spazio cittadino. Un’evoluzione è visibile nei cantiere per la costruzione della linea metropolitana M4 a Milano, dove l’amministrazione ha sottolineato la necessità di trasformare il cantiere in un’occasione di pubblico interesse, ponendolo al centro di un progetto più esteso di comunicazione territoriale, utilizzando le cesate come uno strumento di informazione sulle lavorazioni in corso e rendendo i cittadini attivi nella realizzazione delle immagini stesse. Per i cantiere sono state previste tre forme di allestimento: una dedicata alla comunicazione istituzionale, una destinata alla comunicazione commerciale locale e un’altra destinata a interventi creativi realizzati direttamente dai cittadini o realtà locali (fig. 9). La campagna di comunicazione associata, attraverso lo slogan “Scelgi la tua linea Blu” mette in evidenza l’aspetto partecipativo dell’iniziativa.

Nel cantiere di restauro del Mausoleo di Augusto a Roma è stata messa in atto un’installazione museale a tempo determinato lungo tutto il perimetro del cantiere: la recinzione del cantiere diventa un percorso di circa 300 metri che comunica al pubblico la storia del sito, dell’imperatore Augusto e dei diversi usi di cui il sepolcro fu oggetto nei secoli. Inoltre dodici pannelli in stampe lenticolare e circonos bicolour mask che ritraggono il volto di Augusto, contribuiscono diverse illusioni ottiche che si attivano con il movimento dell’utente durante il percorso (fig. 10). Audio–installazioni e luci led con colori modulabili che si attivano in fase serale contribuiscono a fornire all’utente un’esperienza multisensatoriale. In questo caso la sinergia tra pubblico e privato mira a riscattare l’immagine del Mausoleo agli occhi della...
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1. Città immaginarie ed immagini in città

Lo stretto rapporto che intercorre tra urbanistica e struttura della città, forme del potere, struttura sociologica e diffusione delle immagini non è certo una novità in quanto, come affermava Orwell in 1984, «Il potere non è un mezzo, è un fine» (ORWELL 2016, p. 321): il potere si serve delle immagini diffuse negli spazi pubblici per la persuasione della comunità. Risulta dunque interessante approfondire il ruolo della grafica ambientale attraverso un’analisi iconologica delle immagini diffuse nelle città dell’immaginario cinematografico di un futuro distopico, cogliendo i collegamenti tra forma societaria, ruolo dei mass media, struttura urbana ed abitanti. In molti si sono già interrogati sulla forma delle città dell’immaginario cinematografico (QUICI 2017, pp. 24–37; PRINA 2013; CRESTI 2010) fin dal principio: «Il potere non è un mezzo, è un fine»: il rapporto fra architettura e cinema di fantascienza è stato indissolubile, le più avanzate ipotesi sui futuri sviluppi dell’urbanistica, la loro ispirazione, l’interazione tra forme dell’arte e idee, hanno portato a considerare la città e la sua grafica come un’analisi iconologica delle immagini diffuse nel contesto urbanistico. Il potere si serve delle immagini diffuse negli spazi pubblici per la persuasione della comunità, ma le immagini diventano un mezzo attraverso il quale il potere si esprime e si diffonde. Le immagini diventano un mezzo di comunicazione, un mezzo di persuasione, un mezzo di controllo. Le immagini diventano un mezzo attraverso il quale il potere si esprime e si diffonde. Le immagini diventano un mezzo di comunicazione, un mezzo di persuasione, un mezzo di controllo.

2. Urban form or a company system

of their urban scenarios and the diffusion of environmental graphics, we can observe a close uncanny or perhaps intentional relationship. In a capitalist society, the environmental graphic is focused on the advertising of products and the citizen is placed again at the core of communication as a consumer; on the contrary, in a totalitarian regime, urban images are used to legitimate power or they are completely absent. The city is no longer a text and the citizen’s role is marginal. It is interesting to note that in Blade Runner 2049, a dystopian society, the urban form or as a company system, it is possible to compare Metropolis to the cities of Blade Runner, the television series by Charlie Brooker (fig. 13): in a community dominated by Internet totalitarianism, where citizens live in an individual way, cities are aseptic and lacking in images of any kind. In fact, the role of public space as a common space has completely disappeared, replaced by the social space that becomes the main scenario of social and interpersonal relationships. In both examples, the participation’s role of environmental graphics, the possibility of every citizen to insert itself in urban dynamics with a bottomup approach, the conception of the common space as a space for possibilities, sharing and inclusion, have completely disappeared. Conclusions

Can the environmental graphics prove to be an experimental area for a social use of public spaces aimed at improving the livability parameters of the territory? This question refers to the philosophical anxiety of every discovery as for another question. Can the Internet free people by increasing their awareness, or would the network lead to even more suble and structured hierarchical forms of domination?
The answer is not in the technology or in the architectural discipline: the will to change this condition and to return a social meaning to public spaces of our cities emerges from the multiplication of interventions, episodic, actions in the various urban realities of our world. Urban environment, urban environment, as a place of social, political and cultural exchange, represents an architecture that brings it values back. It becomes the scenario where the relationship between social innovation and administrator's responsibility could be experimented. In this context, the role of research in the Representation field consists in analyzing the state of the art, examining the most effective communication languages and the symbolism of the messages; it consists in collaborating with other fields and disciplines (urban planners, landscape architects, sociologists, architects, graphic designers, designers) to obtain a strategic vision of the urban project in general that offers proposals and solutions. Thanks to the ability to make informed choices regarding products, technologies, images, signs and communication devices, opening processes of dialogue with administrations and citizens it is possible to educate, orientate, persuade, directing users to read that living hypertext in which citizens themselves are involved.

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