

Governing fragmentation in contemporary urban societies: strengths and weaknesses of participatory approaches

Alessandro Balducci
Dipartimento di Architettura e Pianificazione
Politecnico di Milano
Via Bonardi 3
20135 Milano
tel +39 02 23995463
fax 02 23995454
e-mail: sandro.balducci@polimi.it

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FIRST DRAFT

Abstract

Drawing from the experience in research and practice the paper tries to discuss the effectiveness of participatory approaches in dealing with the problem of the growing fragmentation of contemporary urban societies.

It is divided into three parts. In the first part there is a description of how “fragmentation” can be a key concept to interpret very different phenomena in contemporary urban societies.

The second part illustrates how new demands of public treatment emerge from and must deal with this situation of fragmentation. The third part argues that while traditional hierarchical approaches are completely ineffective in the new areas of intervention participatory approaches look more promising at two different levels:

- the level of the construction of strategic guidance in order to mobilise a scattered society toward temporary common goals;
- the level of the construction of local integrated actions.

A fourth and conclusive part proposes a discussion about the linkages between the two levels and about the issue of the effectiveness of participatory approaches.

1. The new environment of cities: the territory of fragmentation

The term fragmentation has been used for a long time now to refer to the break in the connections between the parts and the whole in contemporary cities and society. On the one hand, as Tosi (1994) observes, it is a category used to refer to an inability of theory to deal with new complexity, while on the other it appears to be the only effective image capable of describing phenomena which invest social, political and government institutional spheres as well as the spatial configuration of cities.

As for *urban society* in general the last two decades have seen the increasingly more evident weakening of primary groups (Giddens, 1999). This has been accompanied by intense residential mobility that has resulted in concentrations of the elderly population in specific areas, polarisation according to socio-economic class and the emergence of pockets of marginalisation often linked to the acceleration of immigration from poorer countries; and this has all occurred in a wide variety of spatial patterns. Metropolitan areas have been heavily affected by this kind of phenomenon that tends to change urban social organisation from within. The neighbourhood, which in the recent past had been so important as a mediator of the urban fabric, has progressively lost its meaning: bars are no longer meeting places for adult male citizens but have changed into resplendent fast-food outlets; traditional local shopping centres have given way to massive shopping malls; the parish churches and the local branches of political parties no longer manage to promote debate on local issues. Meanwhile there has been a proliferation of networks that connect individuals on the basis of economic, professional and cultural affinities irrespective of physical proximity.⁵ There is consequently an increase in social relationships, but the ties are unstable and weak as opposed to the previously fewer but much stronger relationships.

The outcome is the multiplication of the opportunities to socialise, but the risk, if not necessarily the actual result, is the atomisation of society, the emergence of a city made of footloose and mobile populations without roots (Martinotti, 1993) that erode social capital rather than produce it with a series of complex consequences in terms of new demands for state treatment of problems once treated without any government intervention.

In the *political sphere* traditional forms of representation have suffered crisis: political parties have changed into movements of opinion that obtain support that is constantly fluctuating as is seen in Italy from the continuous changes in political leadership over the last 20 years; trade unions and employers associations are increasingly less able to represent general interests due to the pulverisation of the economy. They have lost their capacity to represent the attitudes and aspirations of large areas of society such as the right or the left, lower, middle and upper classes, religious denominations, generation groups and also local or regional communities.

It is easy to see in Italy how channels of communication between society and the institutions have broken down as a result of the crisis suffered by elected bodies. City councils are no longer important decision making bodies, not only because of the strong leadership of directly elected mayors, but also because their members are representatives of increasingly more numerous small minorities. They are representatives who have neither strong political nor community ties.

In the administrative sphere the term fragmentation has been used for a long time now to describe processes affecting the organisation of government institutions (Dente, 1985). Widening of the public sector has been accompanied by the proliferation of specialist functions and administrative units to deal with the different problems arising from different parts of society. This proliferation of departments, agencies, consortiums and public sector controlled joint stock companies, has made the implementation of public policies increasingly more oppressive, bureaucratic and overcrowded.

At the same time privatisation and the spread of private business practices in the public sector have facilitated the employment of private sector organisations for public policy implementation. This initially occurred with the employment of private organisations to provide services traditionally supplied directly by the public sector and later started to involve private organisations in the actual formulation of public policies.

This process of re-structuring became even more complex after the entrance of the European Union into the arena. This not only introduced yet another tier of government onto the already overcrowded public policy scene but also proposed a new direct relationship between the European Commission and the final percipients of European funds with the aim of providing direct support to innovative approaches and strategies. This occurred in the urban policy field as well as many others.

This style has been imitated in Italy by national and regional governments and has systematically produced the simultaneous presence of all levels of government even in programs of an eminently local character. The excessive number of actors and levels of government involved in the formulation of policies has made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to implement consistent planning policies by means of a legally enforceable general plans.

The category of fragmentation can also be employed to interpret actual *physical transformations* in the morphology of the city today. Observation of Milan and central Lombardy, to give an example, shows that the area has become largely uniform in character as far as residential and economic use is concerned. Increased use of private transport and a capillary network of road infrastructures has moved the front line of urban growth further and further out from the heart of the metropolis to reach areas such as the Alpine foothill belt in the North and agricultural areas to the South on the Po Valley plain which were once completely on the margins of urban life (Palermo, 1997). There is however lively demand for housing also in central areas due to the spread of offices into residential stock, the fall in family size and increased immigration of poor populations. The outcome of these migratory processes is the shaping of one large urban formation covering a very wide area in which the traditional configuration of neighbourhood, town and city centres is undergoing redefinition with new centres linked to the infrastructure system, to new shopping centres and large leisure centres.

The fragmented nature of new urban space poses problems of interpretation therefore even within the boundaries of the actual city itself (Secchi, 1999) because the generative principles and rationalities that determine spatial behaviour patterns bear no relationship to the old political boundaries.

While the concept of fragmentation helps us to understand some of the causes of the crisis in urban policies, it must also be seen in the context of another characteristic of recent social, economic and political processes, that of instability.

The culture of modern urban government and planning was born in periods characterised not only by clearly identifiable unitary traits, but also by strong stability. As authors like Friedmann and Webber observed many years ago, traditional methods of planning and programming run up against the

combined effects of the fast acceleration of change and the increased variety of issues and problems to be dealt with.

Early in 1971 Donald Schön spoke in his influential book, *Beyond the Stable State*, of the “loss of a stable state” as a specific feature of contemporary society, in contrast with the alternation in the past of long stable periods with periods of rapid and intense change. From this perspective Schön invited us to reflect on the need to rethink forms of public intervention that were basically designed to function in a stable and slow changing society. And then a quick look at the past tells us that new information technologies are in the process of changing the entire world economy in the course of just a few years, while the so-called post-industrial era lasted 25 years and the industrial age before that about a century. The pace of change is increasing geometrically (Savitch, 1998).

Political systems, power structures, the use of capital and population trends themselves are all highly unstable. The great axioms of traditional politics no longer function, but fall quickly into empty rethoric; political leaders rely more and more upon volatile opinions to interpret fast changes in society and these provide a very weak basis on which to legitimate decision making.

It is all too evident that the inability to produce credible tools to orient urban policies is also a result of this rapid change and of the inadequacy of the attitudes and paradigms employed by those responsible for taking public decisions. It is a continuously moving target, very difficult to hit with an ancient bronze cannon.

2. New urban problems to be addressed

A look at recent years quickly shows us that the list of problems that local governments are required to deal with has become longer and longer. This widening of the urban policy field is at the same time both the cause and effect of the fragmentation, instability and acceleration of change that I have tried to illustrate so far.

New demands on government concern the complex issue of *support for local economic development*, a problem which until very recently was dealt with as a national and regional sectoral policy or, at the local level, by the simple allocation of land for use. De-industrialisation processes and the fragmentation of the economy have given local governments a series of difficult tasks in the area of economic leadership:⁶ guaranteeing territorial competitiveness by means of urban marketing policies and attracting infrastructure investment; co-ordinating economic development processes through a series of policies designed to maintain the economy flexible and varied; organising training programmes to provide a rapidly changing labour market with new skills. All this goes far beyond the traditional land-use support of the past.

There is a *new demand in the field of land use transformations* for leadership of complex redevelopment initiatives in areas of the city that have lost their function: industrial plants, schools, hospitals, railways, military barracks and so on. The demand here is twofold, to build and maintain consensus around development schemes and to ensure public sector action essential for the feasibility of schemes.

While the atomisation of urban society accentuates the threat of Nimby syndromes, it is also all too evident, that the implementation of major urban private projects depends on huge public sector investment (universities, congress centres, museums, theatres, light railways etc.) that must be guaranteed both financially and politically, conditions that are extremely difficult to meet and forecast.

Other new demands are for *improving the quality of the environment*, after the functional era of the past where only numbers in housing, transport and workplaces mattered. There are demands for the care of public spaces and for the quality of the environment in town centres as well as in the outskirts of towns and these are made not only by residents, but also by businessmen who are starting to consider the quality of the environment as an important factor in the location of new businesses in addition to the traditional question of mere access.

New demands come from *growing interest in leisure and culture* due amongst other things to the crisis of traditional methods of socialisation and related to this there are demands for changes in urban timetables and for a wider range of choice for citizens.

A new category of demands of growing importance concern the problems of *social exclusion* and poverty that have worsened due to the weakening of primary assistance networks. Problems include access to housing and services for workers who become permanently unemployed in middle age, for single-parent families in economic difficulty, for the elderly and for the huge numbers of immigrants.

Also new, and strongly emphasised in the media in recent years, is the demand for *law and order policies*. The question is at times raised without justification by some political parties, but the demand is rooted in processes of isolation of individuals and families that erode sociability and a sense of security. All these are demands for new policies in which the spatial

dimension is either completely absent or is linked to decisions of a management character.

One last area of new demands made on local government is that of the need to *compete for European Union or national Government funds*. Transfer of these funds is becoming less automatic and more competitive with funding going to integrated projects which are also able to attract private sector funds. It is a demand that selects local administrations on their ability to grasp opportunities rapidly as they arise and to abandon traditional and bureaucratic attitudes in favour of business practices and skills in complex project management. This type of demand again tends to discard the logic of a general plan. Most of the transformations currently underway in the City of Milan are the result of this type of opportunity triggered by new programmes at national level.⁷

These new demands must be added to the more traditional demands for urban maintenance and running conventional services in a situation where local government resources are generally scarce due amongst other things to spending cuts imposed by the fiscal policies of European Union (Savitch, 1998).

Consequently administrations find themselves in a contradictory position. On the one hand they are called upon to widen their range of action to cover much broader fields and on the other they are equipped with total resources (ability to plan, available attention, technical resources, financial resources) that are either stationary or decreasing.

This has caused increasingly greater use of capabilities, skills and resources from outside traditional local government departments both as a method of meeting new demands more effectively and as an organisational necessity. This has occurred in all fields from that of the supply and management of services to that of urban maintenance and even the production of infrastructures.

3. Forms of governance in changing urban society

It is in this complex framework that there arises the problem of how to interpret the development of systems of government towards forms of *governance*.

In the new situation of fragmented cities, government action can be interpreted in two ways: as the simple withdrawal of government from complex social processes in favour of essentially delegated and basically private sector action, or in terms of the opportunities offered by the new situation for a profound change in the nature of government action. The latter necessarily also involves a withdrawal from direct action in many spheres, but at the same time seeks, in the changed and more complex context, to govern using tools and means which remain in part still to be discovered (Healey, 1997).

Only the second way recognises as a problem the proliferation of demands and response mechanisms because they may “pull” public policies in all directions to the point where the term “public” loses all meaning (Donolo, 1997).

The problem is therefore how to re-construct and recognise an area of common concern in the fragmented and rapidly changing city.

Two are the relevant policy fields in which this objective can be pursued and they are both connected to some form of participation of lay actors as a way of re-establishing connections between parts and the whole:

- the first one is the field of the definition of a public discourse upon the city and its problems in order to select priorities and a set of legitimate policies *vis a vis* the fragmentation process;
- the second is the local field, the scale of the neighbourhood (whatever this could mean in different contexts) where to cope with most of problems it is really necessary to thicken local relationships and to discover and mobilise local resources.

Of course this is only an hypothesis. It indicates a path bristling with troubles. Other apparently more easy paths are possible and practised in Italy as strengthening the leadership of charismatic personalities for the first type of problem, coupled with a technocratic and authoritarian approach for the second.

3.1 A shared comprehensive view of city's problems and resources

In order to discuss this I want to make more explicit reference to a real situation.

Milan is a city reduced today to less than 1.3 millions inhabitants. It has lost nearly half a million people in 25 years. It has a very small municipal territory and a very large metropolitan basin with at least 4,5 million inhabitants. While the population of the city got more and more old because it expelled most of the young population, commuting has grown until unsustainable levels; and it is not only commuting for work reasons but also for study reasons, for loisir and cultural consumption. The outcome is a city in which every day enter about 900.000 cars.

As it is absent any effective policy of price control for private housing, as public housing became residual, and as there are very weak policies of traffic control and public transport, the city is experiencing a growing divarication between the population that *use* it either during the day and during the night, and the population that *reside* in it. The latter is a population basically older and is strongly polarised in social terms: on the one side marginal subjects and protected social categories that live in the residual public housing, and on the other side the upper and middle class that still live in the historical center.

The combined effect of these processes is on the one hand an impoverishment of sociability, of the density of relationships, the weakening of the cohesion of the city, and on the other hand the growth of problems of livability and security, and in general of conflicts between those populations that transitory live in the city and those that steadily reside in it.

We can easily think to the problems of pollution linked to massive commuting, or to problems due to the growing of a city of nightclubs and restaurants that outside any real control is spreading in some parts of the old town that used to be typically popular and residential. Or we can analyse the penetration of new economic sectors like fashion, design and advertising in the industrial periphery of the city, with a beneficial impact upon local economy, but with connected problems of gentrification and congestion of the same areas.

Similar type of conflicts show up in the external areas that have been the destination of migratory processes of the more dynamic population or of the population that has been pushed outside by the tendencies of property market. These are suburban areas where new conflicts are triggered off by the location of new shopping malls, great loisir infrastructures, garbage dumps or treatment plants, that upset the residential conditions of these areas in terms of accessibility and congestion.

These kind of macro phenomena call for an activity of strategic nature. In fragmented urban societies there is a need to preside a function of taking structural and legitimate decisions that can affect the wealth of the city as a whole. Just to take an example we can see how social housing policies are supported by only a very weak minority of the urban population but their absence has wider consequences in terms of ageing of the city and its social impoverishment that can affect in turn its liveability and economic attractiveness.

It is not given that it is possible to do something at the level of these kind of great phenomena, but it is certain that only a process of public discussion of city's transformations can create the conditions for designing politically feasible policies of this kind.

It must be also said that in the "ecological" approach to governance no general vision of this kind is requested because the perspective is that of a game of purely incremental not easily regulated forces. At the most it is a question of producing a minimum of regulation over land use. But in the alternative interpretation of governance the creation of a general vision is an essential way of escaping the opportunistic, sector and interest-led character of day-to-day decisions. In its absence it is difficult not only to tackle structural problems, but also to evaluate advantages and disadvantages of development projects and last but not least to produce the conditions for joint efforts. This activity is not comprehensive spatial planning of traditional character, but rather a selective policy discourse which presents a common understanding of city problems and of opportunities to intervene with principles for future decisions.

This is very important in order to legitimise the assumption of non-distributive policies capable of tackling problems like the ageing of population, the preservation of social and economic diversity and the protection and betterment of the environment.

It is important to notice that this kind of activity has an important anchorage in the spatial dimension, even if it does not coincide at all with the traditional spatial planning.

Just as government has lost its centrality as an exclusive provider of a series of services, the spatial dimension has lost its centrality as a structural dimension of government action. Many non governmental organisations satisfy public demands and they operate in physical structures that are increasingly less specialised and dependent on a specific geographical location. In this context traditional urban planning tends to be more of an obstacle to be removed than a solution. It is interesting to note, however, that the treatment of the spatial dimension acquires meaning when it is integrated with the sense-making dimension (Weick, 1995). Space does in fact constitute not only an irreducible shared element, but also a formidable vehicle for communication, for identification, for producing a sense of belonging, if tackled within some strategy for local development. Spatial images of a city, of its possible future development are often the best we have to orient ourselves, to connect up the parts of a city and a society and to get away from an image of mere moving fragments approaching each other. We certainly have to get away from the idea of any type of environmental determinism and return to a treatment of physical space in a less ideological manner, aware of the non material character of many important processes of urban transformation and of the strategic construct rather than the structural fact characteristic of all spatial representations.

The new demand for general type spatial planning is therefore basically tied much more to the problem of legitimating choices than of certifying rights; of making action possible rather than of imposing choices based on rational technical principles. It is rather a demand for reference frameworks to facilitate co-operation and agreement in unstable and highly fragmented situations. It must therefore be dealt with in strict relation to a strategy of consensus building.

From this viewpoint I do not believe that it is important today to formulate any ultimate definition of which tools are most suitable for tackling these tasks. It is important to encourage the experimentation of contexts that allow public discussion and debate of missions, priorities and tasks to be accomplished in a specific geographical area and that tackle problems of how to direct a set of public, private and third sector actors using instruments of representation, argument and persuasion (Majone, 1989, Forester 1999) once the ineffectiveness of imposing a line of action by law has been recognised.

General planning is therefore still called upon to offer an overall vision of the destiny of a city and an area but without any pretence of general control. It must aim at orienting the action of actors, not by making any abstract definitions of what is in the common interest, but by bringing the actors together to participate in the actual process of defining orientations so that they are bound by a recognition of specific priorities and areas of common interest. From this point of view, the overcrowding of decision-making arenas constitutes a resource rather than an obstacle, and positive consensus building around development prospects is an action that is aware of its constant instability, and is a continuous action precisely because of this. This implies a definitive shift of focus from the tool to the process.

What emerges from the most interesting experiences of strategic planning, from attempts at participation both formal and informal and at negotiated planning is the importance of building a policy discourse capable of orienting the multitude of actions that the formal authority of a plan will never be able to determine nor condition effectively.

The consensus building approaches of the American school (Innes and Booher, 1999), the experiences of the Urban Centers (Fareri, 1995), the most interesting cases of strategic planning (Healy et al, 1997; Calvaresi, 1997) and the more indirect strategies of the IBA at Emsher Park

(Kunzmann, 1995) clearly indicate that actors can only orient themselves by participating in the definition of orientations (Balducci, 1999) and that strategies and coalitions are inseparable terms (Mazza, 2000).

Certainly all the caution over the inability to fully structure social interaction in the planning process must be applied (Pierluigi Crosta 1999). It is nevertheless clear, however, that the new demand for planning opens up a field of experimentation and research into political institutions, forms and tools for strategy building capable of producing agreement between actors through the learning that takes place from participating in the definition of general orientations and these are actors who seldom lie on different hierarchical levels but who are often highly interdependent.

3.2 Participation at the local level: building effective local policies

Most problems of urban regeneration, requalification, and redevelopment can only be dealt with effectively through the overcoming of sectoral approaches, and the mobilisation of local actors from associations to citizens.

Participatory approaches have conquered their legitimation and credibility against the failure of traditional technocratic approaches to local problems.

It is so to deal with the creation of new public facilities and services for very different target groups from young to elder citizens or immigrants where the standardised approach has shown its ineffectiveness. It is necessary to re-think to local services policies as local development policies, building new, appropriate and local representation of needs and demands in an interactive process (Tosi 1994).

It is so for the implementation of programmes that try to overcome the decay of the metropolitan peripheries, where architectural physical projects have failed and only a patient work that try to integrate different sectors – from economic development to social support to physical and environmental rehabilitation – can promise better effects. A kind of work that cannot be imposed but must involve local actors and citizens.

It is so, quite ironically, also for the treatment of feasibility problems of great urban projects without any local rooting. Many projects cannot be implemented for the resistance to them of local people. But we could also say for the inability of promoters to take into account local needs and demands. These, it is worth to say, are not only critical conditions for the political feasibility of an urban project – a kind of feasibility that in its effects is just like economic and technical one- but also for the “commercial” success of the initiatives: local services, housing and jobs for local people are frequently very important conditions for the acceptability but also for the insertion of a new development in a local context. We should become used with the idea that it is a good thing that the Nimby Syndrome is everywhere. That in any place there are inhabitants that safeguard it, even in ways that look selfish. That any project must assume in it the reasons of local communities.

It is so to deal with problems posed by populations that live in conditions of poverty and privation, from immigrants to homeless. The policy of location with the intervention of the Police of public shelter for gypsies or homeless do not work, while a certain effectiveness has been shown by type of interventions that rely on neighbourhood associations, voluntary associations, parishes, intermediate subjects that can accompany these kind of actions over time.

The same approach is effective in the field of social housing, while big agencies are generally unable to find effective solutions for the poorest segment of the population.

It is so also for the realisation of local development policies: big firms that close down in metropolitan areas are superseded by a web of small firms that have a much stronger interaction with the local socio-economic context. A local development policy is not the marketing of particular sites and investment opportunities, it rather implies the capacity of involving an ample set of actors strengthening the interconnections between the business community and the local community for the production of joint projects.

4. Conclusions: overcoming the bewilderment and handle with care

There is therefore a double sense and use of participation: on the one hand it is the mean for building more effective policies because it allows a better probing of choices on the other hand it is a mean for reconstructing social connections contrasting the process of fragmentation.

From this second point of view we can define phenomena that invest the social life of cities in terms of bewilderment. The Italian word "spaesamento" (bewilderment) means to feel lost, outside one's territory or country. If the city loses its traits of community the effect upon the social actors is an effect of bewilderment. There is some closeness with the issue of globalisation. The effects of the spreading out of a sense of bewilderment among social actors are perceivable in the environment of urban policies: the rise of insecurity, nimby syndrome and difficulty in taking decisions, decrease in urban vitality, loss of quality of public space, increase of inequalities.

A recent survey conducted every year from an Italian Research Centre on a sample of population of Northern Italy (that is by now a unique great urban formation from Turin to Venice) show that there is a weakening in the value system if Italian population for all the relationships that have some kind of anchorage to the territory: the neighbourhood, the parishes, even the voluntary associations.

| In case of difficulty how much do you think you can count on: (percentage of those who have answered "much" or "very much") | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|
| | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
| Members of the family | 91,0 | 89,7 | 92,3 | 92.1 |
| Neighbours | 51,1 | 58,6 | 55,2 | 52.4 |
| Friends | 69,6 | 75,0 | 72,9 | 76.8 |
| People of the same town | 36,7 | 44,5 | 40,6 | 39.0 |
| The Parish | 54,8 | 59,4 | 56,9 | 51.9 |
| Voluntary associations | 55,8 | 71,5 | 72,1 | 67.6 |
| Municipal services | 35,9 | 35,6 | 34,5 | 33.2 |
| The State | 17,9 | 14,4 | 12,2 | 14.0 |

Source: 1998: Poster per Il Sole 24 Ore; 1999: Poster-Demetra per Il Sole 24 Ore; 2000: LaPoliS Università di Urbino per Il Sole 24 Ore; 2001: Poster - LaPoliS per il Sole - 24 Ore (base: 1504 cases)

To succeed in contrasting the bewilderment and the drifts that invest the city it is necessary to link the two levels that we have explored: the level of the construction of general orientation and the level of the concrete construction of local actions and projects. At both levels it is necessary to cope with the problem of sense-making: sense as sense of belonging; sense as construction of a design perceivable and perceived; sense as capacity to gather the forces of an urban community to address common problems recognised as priorities.

In participatory approaches we tend to underline that besides the direct results of the processes there are by-products that have been defined (Innes et al. 1994) as the production of an “intellectual, social and political capital”. What I want to suggest here is that this kind of capital - that is made of common information, networks of relationship and alliances – must not be seen only as a by-product of participatory activities to be used in the best way, but as a very important step in the direction of a common rediscovery of a public sphere.

If this is true it is very important to open a reflection about the fragility and the difficulties of participatory approaches experienced so far. This fragility requires to handle participation with care moving away either from a position that justify any kind of participation *per se* and from the opposite positions that pretend to wind it up for the many pitfalls posed on the path of its experimentation.

For the reasons I tried to expose we really need reflection and research to evaluate results and outcomes.

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