

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

COMPARING HABITATS

Reframing comparison in the “post- disciplinary” era

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Towards a redefinition of tools and methods

In recent decades, cities and territories have radically changed (Burdett, 2008; Buijs, Tan, & Tunas, 2010; Brenner, 2014); the ecological, societal and technological transition has opened-up an entirely new season of thinking in the field of urbanism (Secchi, 2011) entailing a necessary and deep revision of tools, categories and methods inherited from the past. Climate change (IPCC, 2018), the depletion of energy resources, growing migrations, the emergence of new forms of work and lifestyles, or the rising impact of digital technologies, are just some of the dynamics that are thoroughly transforming the ways in which our urbanized territories are rapidly developing and which upcoming generations of architects and urbanists will have to increasingly deal with. This novel ecological, energetic and socio-economic context calls for new alliances (Montuori, 2013) and a radical redefinition of the discipline of urbanism (Viganò, 2016) for which new knowhow -related to cross-scalar and cross-disciplinary research and practice- will increasingly represent a crucial asset to interpret change and trigger innovation.

A shift of this magnitude provides a wide framework for reflection within which a profound re-articulation of theoretical apparatuses, starting from those related to territorial analysis and description, seems urgent and compelling.

Comparing the “urban” in transition.

Today, within the radical transition concerning the urban domain, comparison is taking on an increasingly significant role, especially if linked to the growing necessity of relating different disciplines and scales to interpret and describe change. While cities become a “global” and increasingly multifaceted phenomenon, comparison represents an extremely valuable tool to, on the one hand, bring out broad and comprehensive dynamics with the aim of developing general and “inclusive” theories, and on the other, describe the uniqueness of the individual case to give a “sense of reality” to otherwise excessively abstract or oversimplified concepts (Bianchetti, 1994).

The UN statement that “68% of the world population will be urban by 2050” (UN DESA 2018), for example, would be unimaginable without the multiple chains of comparative operations establishing what a city is and what it is not, associating demographic parameters to specific area units, or stating which trends and dynamics are relevant according to specific perspectives. At the same time, the increasing number of variables contained in the term “urban”, the variety of spatial forms articulating different infrastructures, built morphologies, bio-environmental systems or socio-economic structures, increasingly challenge simplistic readings of reality and call for a renovated

approach to comparison, able to tackle oversimplified oppositions such as urban/rural, centre/periphery, nature/society (Viganò et al., 2018).

In brief, the challenges posed by the contemporary architectural and urban project, directly related to environmental and social equity/security, require a deep rethinking of technical knowledge and embedded traditions, and this beyond any principle of hierarchy or historical progress. More specifically, comparison seems more crucial than ever to question the distinction between what is considered “city” and what is not, and to review tools of description, classification, explanation and -very importantly- conceptualisation, as much in scientific (experimental and theoretical) as in professional practice. New principles of urbanisation, modes of use, codes and vocabularies, new cognitive and perceptive maps need to be deciphered and systematised. Behind the apparent confusion and the visual interweave, new relational structures lie concealed, whereas new ways of learning and experiencing space might already counter disorganization and chaos with a new qualitative order.

In this context, in academic and scientific research, and especially within the broad field of urban related studies, the interest in comparison has been slowly rising. Nonetheless, while more and more research projects are conceived as comparative ones, propose comparative exercises or even entrust the validation of their hypotheses to comparative intuitions, our feeling is that methodologies do not always rely on strong enough theoretical bases. Case study choices, the articulation between cartographical surveys, statistical data or photographic inquiries, for example, depend more on conventions, opportunism or personal expectations than on grounded methodological structures, carefully constructed and -more importantly- clearly transmittable to other researchers.

In order to make a proper distinction between routine and potential experimentation, between day-to-day practice and the construction of new knowledge, a consistent reflection on comparative methods seems thus urgent.

Such pressing “need for theory” is made even more compelling by the recent revolution in data creation and availability. New and increasingly refined data sources supporting decisions and strengthening accountability, call for transformative actions in methodology to respond to a radically new development agenda. The coincidence between availability of new information and a rising interest in comparison is a historic recurrence: this was the case in US and in Europe around the 1950s and 1960s in relation to the computational treatment of data, or after 1990, in relation to geopolitical conditions to access knowledge and information on a global scale. Today, in the era of the “big data turn” and of the proliferation of open access archives, comparative methods intensify and evolve even more rapidly while scientific training again needs to be profoundly updated and expanded to include new languages, new socio-geographical imaginaries, new apprehension of what is urban (i.e. real and virtual), techniques, and scales involved in the description and analysis of what is considered “urban”.

It's from reflections of this kind that the EPFL Habitat Research Center (<https://habitat.epfl.ch>), in the frame of its major objective of exploring the urban phenomena within its ecological, technological, and social transition, launched the International Phd Interdisciplinary Seminar *Comparing Habitats*, held in Morges (Suisse) the 12th-14th June 2017.

With the aspiration of discussing the new challenges of comparison as Scientific Method, its heuristic efficiency, and of sketching a first portrait of current research “positions” within

international PhD schools, the papers selected through an open call were discussed over three days. Coherently, the Seminar's opening session was conceived in terms of a comparative "dialogue" (Bianchetti, 1994) between three different perspectives on what - at present - can be considered the "frontier" of urbanization: *Countryside* (research led by Rem Koolhaas at AMO), *Horizontal Metropolis* (research led by Paola Viganò and Lab-U at EPFL) and *Territoire Frugal* (outcome of the research project FRUGAL, led by Béatrice Mariolle, Antoine Brès and Francis Beaucire in the frame of ANR Program "ville et bâtiment durable", with UMR Géographies-Cités et UMR Ausser). Besides highlighting original paths for new research, overlays and radical differences between the three research projects and their methodology, the dialogue among the different authors (Paola Viganò, Stephan Petermann, Béatrice Mariolle and Antoine Brès) essentially highlighted the strong necessity for new categories and analytical concepts (Brès et al., 2017), for novel interpretations and renovated approaches allowing us to expand our extremely limited apprehension of what is considered today "contemporary city". A selection of the discussion's most salient moments are available at the link below.

Comparison, a Tradition.

Our choice of debating on our comparative frames and tools today, motivated by present urban conditions and challenges, can't help but remind us that in comparison one can find the origin of urbanism as a discipline, as well as of the social sciences. A quick look at our history is then necessary to let us claim our scientific tradition – related to a relatively "young" interdisciplinary landscape.

The application of comparison as a scientific method for the understanding of social, geographical and civilizational phenomena, emerges with the association between *travel* and *knowledge*: Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (de Toqueville, 1835) has been considered – in this sense – a founding work for comparative studies, its purpose being the "explanation of social phenomena through the control of the conditions and causes of their variations" (Smelser 1976). In the comparison between the two nations France and America, both of which had been the theatre of a political revolution, Tocqueville did not define a methodology, nor did he develop a theory for his comparative observations, which were instead based on impressionistic and informally collected data. In spite of that, the epistemological consequences of Tocqueville's journey to America make us aware that his ambition exceeded that of the most common *Grand Tour*. Meanwhile, the *Grand Tour* itself, an initiatory experience for the wealthy classes, in the long term served as inspiring model for the development of "foreign studies" as an important stage of education in both the Human and Engineering Sciences. Before acting as a scientific methodology, comparison has been a social practice to access knowledge and, by that, to access social and professional distinction.

As Smelser has stated (1976), in continuity with Tocqueville's experience, Emile Durkheim put Sociology as a new science the purpose of which is, first of all, comparison (Durkheim 1893). In keeping with his position, a similar objective has also been - on several occasions - envisaged as the objective of Social Sciences *tout court*, among which Urbanism. Indeed, the emergence of Urbanism as a discipline did take shape thanks to the development of a dense network of international exchanges that, to a certain extent, has been summarized in the formula of the "Atlantic Crossing" (T. Rodgers 1988). We owe to the milestone book by Anthony Sutcliffe, *Toward the planned city*, published in 1981 in a series called

“Comparative studies in Social and Economic history”, the definition of “Planning as International Movement”. Sutcliffe demonstrates that the emergence of Planning as a discipline took shape thanks to the development of a dense network of international exchanges – exchanges of experts, of experiences, of information – producing a continuous dynamics of comparison. Specialized journals, technical bulletins, symposia, study tours and exhibitions were among the most powerful comparative devices, able to sound out the very notion of “City”, to consider new themes and new techniques of intervention.

The concept of “Planning as International Movement”, however, contains a double implication. From a political and historical point of view, international is actually used to mean transnational: according to Saunier and Ewen (Saunier et al., 2008), since the second half of the 19th century, in a context where cities have become both actors and products of globalization, municipalities have experienced a "transnational moment" that has led them to forge links with other sub-state entities, or even to conduct "diplomatic" policies independently of the foreign policy action of central governments.

From a socio-technical point of view, Urbanism as discipline moved from a mix of empiricism, technical experimentation and theory, towards the systematic conception of models. Some communicative formats were relevant to the shift from pragmatic exchange of experience to objective formulation of models. Let us recall here that the *Gross-Berlin* exhibition of 1911, through the comparison of the different projects submitted to the 1910 competition, served both to determine local socio-technical choices and to improve more general models, such as both a flexible adaptive approach and the metropolitan park system skeleton (Borsi 2015). In the frame of the International Town Planning Congress held in Vienna in 1926, Martin Wagner, chief architect of the city of Berlin, pronounced a fervent and merciless analysis of the difficulties of social housing policy in Vienna, in the light – point by point – of the successes of Frankfurt’s policies, contributing to the lasting opposition of the two as theoretical models (Wagner 1926).

The Functional City Theory must be considered as the most powerful concept issued from “Planning as an International Movement” that determined the transformation of many cities during the twentieth century. The Functional City had been consolidated through the comparison of a large number of different cities, representative of the different continents, through original comparative devices and protocols, through the elaboration of original visual map codes and through classificatory grids; all this work would result in a Manifesto, the *Charte d’Athènes*, and in a specific Comparative Tool to put it in practice – and to impress political representatives – the so-called “CIAM grid” (developed by the ASCORAL group in the fall of 1947). In order to simplify the analysis and understanding of urban planning in terms of the Athens Charter, each project debated at the Congress should be deconstructed through a grid where lines referring to the four functions (living, working, cultivating the body and the mind, and circulating), and columns referred to nine thematic classifications (environment, occupation of the land, constructed volume, equipment, ethic and aesthetic, economic and social influences, legislation, finance, etc.) opened to development and variations according to the focus of each different Congress (Mumford 2000). An amazing book edited by Van Es et al. (2014), which critically presents the original documents produced by the different CIAM groups for comparison, has the merit of comparing the preparatory congress, held in Berlin in 1930, to that of Athens. Sigfried Giedion then proposed the concept of “Comparative Urbanism” (*Vergleichend Städtebau*) to define the method and purpose of the Congress to come. As stated by S. Gorgiadis (in Van Es 2014), the decision to carry out a synchronic comparison, disregarding the potential

of a diachronic comparative analysis, had the side effect of reducing pressure from CIAM Marxist oriented members on using historical retrospect to *explain* what the city had become. We can add that synchronic comparison was clearly coherent with a general and gradual standardization (applied from the Frankfurt CIAM onwards) and with the need for models.

Symmetrically and in opposition to the Functional city, at the turn of the 21st century, the return of the comparative approach, related to urban and territorial issues, falls within the critical perspective of postcolonial studies, focusing on the differentiation and critical reconstruction of global/local oscillations. Here comparison expresses again its central position, as the formula of “Comparative Urbanism” testifies (McFarlane and Robinson, 2012). Nevertheless, the temptation to adopt a totally constructivist approach – or a culturalist one, according to Choay's terminology (Choay 1965) – seems to have quickly been abandoned in the context of the so-called “transition”, which, in its high problematic and urgent nature, seems to legitimise the commitment to new general precepts. In this sense, the recent, emerging debate about a new “chart” for urbanism must be interpreted in the perspective of a critical dialogue with the functionalist one: this is the case of the Quito Papers -(Un-Habitat, 2018), in explicit opposition with the Athens Charter- or in the path started by the Fondation Brailard Architectes and the EPFL Habitat center with their annual appointment of the “Journée Bernardo Secchi” – <https://www.epfl.ch/labs/lab-u/fr/page-144599-fr-html/page-147801-fr-html/> – in the form of a finer and more complex dialogue with the tradition of the modern movement.

Our short excursus in what we can consider the comparative fundamental nature of Urbanism, serves us as a frame that gives meaning to our present need in re-actualise comparison. Beyond the differences in style, in doctrine, or in ideology, comparison has been a substantial strategy of urbanism, with the essential aim to allow planners to conceive new projects, new plans, new visions. In the end, the concern about comparison is how to design projects, and how to make cities and the world better. The concern is about an ameliorative contribution to cities and society, and the need both of new descriptions and new explanations. The present *Contour* issue, which develops the main results of the previous seminar *Comparing Habitats*, acknowledges our belonging to Urbanism as a long term and evolutive international comparative movement. The structure of the present issue reflects three highlights for a comparative agenda: description of urban forms; a critique of models; conditions of cultural influence.

“Urban Form”

In recent decades, urbanization has evolved dramatically, blurring the city/countryside divide and producing urban forms and spaces with no association whatsoever with the city of the past. Vast portions of the territory located outside historic centres, often in areas previously classified as “rural,” have experienced urbanization processes, leading scholars to think in terms of “planetary urbanisation” (Brenner and Schmid, 2012). These processes have been, and still are, generating unprecedented “urbanized landscapes”, raising new questions and requiring the construction of radically new categories and references that urgently need to be reflected upon.

In the light of such profound modifications, this section had the objective -on one hand- of testing original descriptive-interpretative approaches able to feed and enrich the current

methodological debate on comparison and -on the other- of investigating emerging patterns and geographies in the urban sphere, suggested by the identification of regular dispositions and recurrences within an apparently chaotic milieu. Here, the comparative tool had the purpose of shaking off well-established preconceptions on the city and opening up to innovative ways of thinking and imagining its future.

“Urban Models”

Indeed the “model” oriented urban design approach attained its maximum maturity in the twentieth century. In the long wave of utopias that have arisen with the emergence of industrial society, the rich proliferation of models -from the Phalanstery to the Garden City, from the Linear City to the Cité Radieuse, from the cellular character of the neighbourhood unit to the horizontality of Broadacre City- accompanies the advent of mass society in a continuous and contradictory way. Contradictory, in the sense of the dual value of models, which are driven by objectives of criticism, redemption, and mitigation, but are inscribed in the rationality of reproducibility, optimization of resources and economy of the means. The crisis of an approach through the model that we can quickly associate with the crisis of functionalism, however, does not legitimise us from leaving them out of consideration. First of all, because a very high percentage of the cities built in the twentieth century stem from their application, in the same way knowledge of the models is essential to understand the real city, the imaginary which nourishes it, its successes or its shortcomings. Then, because the way in which we relate to the models is itself the bearer of new imaginaries, hypotheses, and expectations, which are capable of reactivating unknown potentiality in those very models. Thus, models as objects of study are far from constituting a stabilized matter.

“Cultural Influence”

Comparison becomes even more crucial in an era often defined by multiple postcolonialist situations. It emphasizes differences among cultural contexts in order to better understand various models of the urbanization process in both the global South and in the global North (Robinson 2006; Roy & Ong 2011; Jazeel & McFarlane 2007; McFarlane & Robinson 2012, Simone 2010) is central to this volume. By considering several case studies in the Middle East, East Africa, Latin and Central America, and Europe, dichotomies (“us and them” or “West and East”) and asymmetries between stakeholders (individuals or institutions) are pinpointed by the authors of the selected papers. This approach consisting in evaluating and ordering main categories of actors concerned, is fundamental in order to unveil the ideological background reflected in their topic. Firstly, it reflects a high concern for rethinking the history and agency of local populations involved in urban change in situations dominated mostly by Western imperialism. Secondly, it insists on the influence culture actually has on the production of urban forms and brings to light the role social sciences does play in the present urban debates. Finally, it questions the legitimacy of experts, including the space given to citizens’ participation, in the process of urbanization and reveals relations of power in which they may play a role in deconstructing the current situation or in taking part in the transformation of the same.

Elements of comparative methods in a global era.

All selected papers in this volume address the above sketched issues and relate to the development of urban forms and conditions as well as the evolution of the city’s knowledge and competences. They allow us to identify some potentials (and limits) in present-day comparative approaches (Robinson 2016a, 2016b, Ward 2008, 2010). They pinpoint what is now common to all, i.e. a practice of interdisciplinarity assumed without fear of endangering a disciplinary identity that is furthermore consciously pursued. We could define this “interdisciplinarity with no complexes”. This needs to be considered with particular attention: it has to be understood in the light of the growing complexity of the urban, and of the desire for a renewed openness, allowing us to decipher “emerging” relationships between territory and society. Only an extensive and interdisciplinary “gaze” can master with intelligence the multiplication of languages and forms of available data and knowledge, sketch relevant interrelationships, and develop transcriptions, that suit specific purposes (analysis, critique, diagnostic, design, etc.).

In the frame of education, the creation of new Masters of Advanced Studies such as, for example, the Master in Urbanism (a partnership between EPFL and the University of Geneva, <https://www.unige.ch/formcont/cours/masurbanisme>) or the Master in Critical Urbanism (based at the University of Basel, <https://criticalurbanisms.philhist.unibas.ch>) are producing a lively body of research where boundaries between the scientific and the social milieu begin to blur.

“Interdisciplinarity without complexes” reflects also what is happening today in the research context: the creation of new transdisciplinary institutions, transcending boundaries to better understand the complex interconnections within and across the

natural and social worlds, established within specific urban regions and research positions, where education, research and design objectives are intimately intertwined. Worthy of mention here, among others, Metrolab Brussels (<http://metrolab.brussels>), the Ecole Urbaine de Lyon (<https://ecoleurbainedelyon.universite-lyon.fr>), or, again, the EPFL Habitat Research Center. These interdisciplinary experiences are revitalizing research topics and methodologies from the edge of the academic world, in synergy with professional, political, and associative ones, at very different levels. They are doing so by testing well-known specific contexts through transdisciplinary “experiments”, having the aim of redefining automatisms and habits such as, for example, the long-lasting separation -in case study analyses- between nomothetic and idiographic approaches that call today for new syntheses and re-interpretations.

Where problems we seek to address are increasingly complex and not disciplinary in nature, institutions of this kind tend -in fact- towards “postdisciplinary” arrangements, where academia’s institutional structures are increasingly organized around themes or specific problems rather than around disciplines. Today this seems to be a more effective method of tackling “wicked” problems, those which are difficult to solve due to interconnectedness, contradictory information, or the number of actors involved.

In this frame, our use of the notion “Habitat”, identifying the field of application of the Comparative Approach, reflects the choice made by EPFL’s Habitat Research Center not to make cautious restrictions within the “lived fabric” and to open instead to a more inclusive and experimental terrain where interdisciplinary visions, strategies and projects within a rich academic milieu composed by architects, urbanists, civil and environmental engineers, urban ecologists and social scientists, suddenly become imaginable; by using the notion of “Habitat”, we know that cultural diversity and context are being stressed. From a methodological perspective, papers in this volume share common lines, already identified by scholars from Durkheim to today, namely: the criteria of scale; the distinction (and relation) between qualitative and quantitative methods; the inductive/deductive method.

SCALE AS CONTEXT AND TOOL

The papers collected in this issue deal with a broad range of scales to compare urban phenomena and processes. The choice of scale, nevertheless, depends on two different criteria, when dealing either with scale as a tool or scale as context. Scale as an analytical or descriptive tool, is determined in relation to the intrinsic characteristics of the object. Scale as context serves to develop a frame, “a point of view” either on what is generally a relatively established research object. In both cases, the relation between scale and object can be either “organic” and “provocative”, according to the level of disruption that interpretation is aiming at.

The local scale practised by Marika Rupeka in her paper is useful to investigate the inner functional structure of two functional cities, the industrial one of Eindhoven (The Netherlands) and the heavily residential new town, Milton Keynes (UK), both challenged by emerging mobility needs. Rupeka presents the social, economic or spatial configurations of inequality generated by the innovation process towards intelligent mobility services, the ‘Phileas’ bus-way infrastructure project (2000-2007) in Eindhoven and the ‘MK: Smart’ data creation and sharing system (2014-2016) in Milton Keynes. Her comparison of the two intelligent transport systems strengthens the difference in the citizens’ needs for using such services that highly reflects the particularity of both city organizational systems. The local scale is relevant in order to investigate the functional, social and symbolic transformation that are readable referring to the plan of the city.

Some works use a global scale as a tool for comparing the object of their study in the vein of functionalism or culturalism (Boas 1896; Radcliffe-Brown 1951), even if they don’t really make explicit reference to these scientific traditions. This is the case of the study developed by Luis Angel Flores and Jeroen Stevens which discusses the circulation of architecture and urban planning models from Europe to Latin and Central America. In their analyses they focus on the eurocentric regime of urbanization that has been translated into practices in Sao Paulo (Brazil) and Guadalajara (Mexico), where it produced different configurations of city centeredness, where iterative processes of vacancy and occupancy have been taking place, generating phenomena which the authors define as “spatial liminality”.

Proposing a new general classification – and theory, by way – of the Swiss “chalet“, Nerfin develops a comparative approach less attentive to the case study, but more structured by variables. Without considering stylistic criteria, but focusing drastically on material and constructive characters, Nerfin puts the conditions of technical production as the fundamental criteria to define a classification based on pre-industrial and industrial chalet, including the pre-fab (chalet-kit). Focusing on the very small scale of the assemblage detail, Nerfin demonstrates that urban scale (as a context) is totally relevant to apprehend the dissemination of the typology of chalet, making the chalet a particular case of the more general housing industrialization.

In a similar concern with the relation between technical conditions of production and cultural imaginaries, the case study headed by Giulia Scotto carefully apprehends the entangled political, economic, social and historic contexts. She examines the simultaneous development of two technologies, the railroad and the roadway respectively in Tanzania and Zambia during the African Cold War. By comparing the cultural, political and historical dimensions of infrastructures as products of power ideology instead of simply utilitarian

and neutral technological artefacts, she deciphers the multi scalarity and the political forces and cultural influences underlying such phenomena. Her analysis unveils social and spatial dynamics generated by infrastructure's materiality and technology and its impact on the built environment and societies concerned.

QUALITATIVE/QUANTITATIVE APPROACH

If the distinction between qualitative and quantitative approach could have corresponded in the past to the distinction – and opposition – between humanities and hard sciences, today it would be anachronistic to perpetuate such a simplistic debate. A qualitative and quantitative approach, in comparison, is not rigidly dedicated to the search for singularities versus general principles. The context of the multiplication of data, and of our capacity to interconnect the same through heterogeneous formalisation (mathematical, graphical, visual, mapping, discursive, etc.) leads us to new horizons of interpretation that, by the association of the two approaches, allow us to question historical categories, the fundamental paradigm and established classification.

A mainly quantitative approach, developed by Alessandro Porotto, serves to reinterpret the debates on the collective housing project and policies in the 1920s, by deconstructing a frontal and exclusive opposition - consolidated by the work of architectural historians to date - between the typology and urban forms of the bar and the court. Through precise and homogeneous re-drawings, and the extraction of quantitative - also homogeneous - parameters, the pioneering experiences of Vienna and Frankfurt are therefore confronted with the highest degree of impartiality. Moving far from the ideological discourse which placed them against each other in history, Porotto succeeds in demonstrating that these two models are complementary in the way theorized by Bohr about the double nature of atoms (wave and matter particle), and that they identify two extreme forms able to accommodate, between the two, a very high number of variables, hybridising their distinct characters.

Many authors of this volume have adopted qualitative methods. They used tools such as observation in situ; participant observation; implication of the scholar within the context of research (including access to data and transmission to a wider audience) tacking into account the status and position of the same (gender, age, origin, culture, education, etc.); interview, formal or informal discussion, lifestory, etc. ; documents – oral, written, visual, audio, material, media, archives, statistics – for a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the research object, embedded in a particular context. Andrin Uetz's work, for example, employed sound recordings to gain knowledge on the impact of vertical densification in Hong Kong. Through the analysis of everyday life's ephemeral traces, Hong Kong's neighbourhoods of *Mong Kok* and *Sai Ying Pun* are compared and understood through radically new and original perspectives, those related to the exclusive analysis of sound patterns. In-ear microphones, allowing the reproduction of “heard sounds”, helped the author to compare different spatial conditions through the actual experience of “listening in place” while providing the means for a “time considering” comparison of “intensity of activity” and public space usage.

Qualitative or semi-qualitative methodology developed by the authors emphasizes the singularity of their case while generating -by looking at causes and development process- a more comprehensive and general knowledge. Vanneste and Durand for example, by analysing very accurately specific and well situated forms of diffused urbanization, are able to build more general hypotheses on their long-term genesis and to propose strategies to guide their future development. Through a set of cartographic exercises and “deep mapping” operations, both comparative readings describe how processes of territorial transformation such as agricultural practices and “property division” have deeply influenced and characterized the shape of different City-Territories and thus defined urban form.

As the British anthropologist M. Strathern summed up: “to speak of generalities is to speak via specificities. And vice versa” (2002: xvii). The authors of this volume did not search for exemplarity and representativeness, they did not adopt a purely quantitative methodology based on the objective measurements, mathematical or numerical analysis of collected data in order to explain factors variations and identifying variables in an objectivist or universalist paradigm. In some cases, they may have combined different methodologies according to the specific topic they have developed.

The work by Valentin Bourdon is paradigmatic in this sense: by comparing a number of historical examples of collective spaces, it proposes a -methodologically- “hybrid” analysis. While proposing an architectural transcription of the commons theory, his work identifies on one hand -through an idiographic approach- the interest of specific formal solutions/architectural models and, on the other -through a nomothetic one- ideal conditions for their emergence. A complementary approach working on different levels and aiming at a “general theory”.

INDUCTIVE/DEDUCTIVE METHOD

The papers collected in this volume show that comparison defines, in most cases, either the motivation for a research project (to establish a comparison between objects or phenomena) or its final aim (to establish new methodologies or tools to compare), this in the frame of a multi case study research, or a single case study. But whatever the use, it usually has impact on more global theory, by identifying similarities and differences through a process that validates the quality of the description and generalizes an idea or a concept from specific research objects. In doing this, the comparative approach works by articulating the macro and micro levels, in a flurrying to and fro between theory and empirical evidences, with a particular attention to social structures and their anchorage to political and historical context. The new knowledge finally acquired on the objects, goes far beyond the frame of comparison.

Relating these wider heuristic implications of comparison, some papers are particularly relevant. Asma Mehan’s tests the categories of Post-Industrial, Post-Fordism, and Post-Modern, as theorized by historians of urbanism, and urban sociologists. Her research aims at responding to the following questions: are these concepts partially synonymous? Are they actually used, in the field of history and theory of urbanism, referring to the same cities? In her socio-architectural approach to the city, Mehan renews an interdisciplinarity that has a long tradition behind it, among other things by developing the variety of sources

- iconography, traces of narrative, press and publishing of political and militant texts, forms of event promotion, etc.

When comparison is more openly-design oriented, it can be manipulated as a heuristic device, where the comparison between two places is more successful in revealing individual particularities, than the portrait of a single place might be. In Marine Declève's paper, this is called the "mirror effect". The mirror effect can be used as an argumentative figure inside a narration process to convince public actors of the need to do something different from what has been done in the past, or to argue why a project currently being carried out does or does not meet the needs or desires of the inhabitants. Thanks to the "mirror dynamics", some elements to nurture new narratives emerge in an intermediate space, capable of contrasting the "standard recipes" circulating in the globalized world.

We are convinced that the comparative approach enables authors to fine-tune their understanding of the singular case and to develop a deep analysis on urban realities that goes far beyond simple intellectual analogies. Heuristics, this cognitive tool allows new perspectives, alternative standpoints and further explorations on the selected topics. As an approach that involves a change of perspective for researchers from their own cultural background, comparison also carries a reflective attitude which plays a significant role in formulating research hypothesis and eventually in developing a comprehensive knowledge. The tension between familiarity and exotism to the topic studied or to a particular context favours a critical thinking towards their own disciplines or culture. It also allows authors to distance themselves from a first-hand observation or early conceptualisation. The reflection initiated by Dorota Kozaczuk during her fieldwork in Jerusalem is a good example of such a change. Indeed, her paper scrutinizes the divergent visions of three groups of professionals in architecture and urban planning during an Urban Resilience Studio in Palestine in which she took part in 2011. Her participation makes her realize the interplay and tensions between administration and practitioners around the Al Addasseh master plan and the need to go beyond such dichotomies by proposing an alternative proposal.

Conclusions

Defining the unit of the comparison or questioning the boundaries (Fox & Gingrich 2002:14) is crucial for developing knowledge. In this volume, comparison refers to several disciplines, scales, geographies, historic periods (time), political systems, imaginaries, cultural contexts, cities, themes, urban typologies, infrastructures and social groups. They all share a common interest for crossing fields and scrutinizing urban and territorial transformations while emphasizing complex dynamics and renewal for interpretation in order to contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge from empirical observation. The comparison is then very productive even though it is only a starting point for reflection that may be overtaken. It usually nourishes regional knowledge and can also contribute to scientific conceptualisation and reasoning. But comparisons become relevant when they merge from a research question rather from purely methodological ones. They are significant and fertile when they indeed generate new research formulations focussed in a certain period of time (across time) and take into account local and regional interrelations.

Does this interdisciplinary approach based on comparisons need a new vocabulary for expressing rejuvenated analysis and interpretations of such phenomenon? Is comparison only a tool for describing, ordering and interpreting so-called realities or rather a theoretical framework for conceptualizing phenomenon (Candea 2019)? Could a comparative approach help to focus on social actors by scrutinizing individual or institutional discourses and practices, and on the dynamics of their related meaning to be transmitted to next generations (Fox and Gingrich 2002)? How might comparison help to unfold the complex urban realities often based on asymmetries between social groups and unveil relation of power, growing inequalities, and spatial segregation in studied societies?

With the present *Contour* volume, we aim at developing new avenues exploring tools, methods and concepts related to the discourses and the practices of comparison. We strongly believe that comparing is a common know-how that scholars in urban studies and architecture increasingly share with social scientists. Whether it is comparative thinking, a comparative tool or a comparative action, it implies a reflective approach towards known and unknown realities. It nevertheless contains a paradox: it encourages openness and cultural diversity in both the real world and academia while it may also create differences by ordering components of reality in categories in order to better grasp the operation of comparison. This aporia should lead us in critically reviewing our methodological tools and developing new interests for interdisciplinary and intercultural approach allowing us to overcome the very same.

POSITIONS

[Countryside/The Horizontal Metropolis: a comparative dialogue](#)

(video 84) 21:34 - 27:25

Marot (intro)

(video 86) 04:10 - 10:58

Discussion (2 researches in comparison)

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