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# Urban disorder and vitality

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**Abstract**

The concepts of order and disorder applied to urban and territorial issues involve complex definitions. *Why do cities, in spite of the effort made to give them order, even though from time to time this order has been codified in different ways, end up being untidy?* In the context in which the two concepts will be used in this paper it is not possible to imagine them as alternatives, but they are taken as dialectically constituting territorial reality. "Order" and "disorder" *oppose* each other but do not clash with each other. In the hectic organisation of urban and territorial reality one stimulates the other and each, in opposing, determines change. The inclination towards order (or tendency towards order) tends, on the one hand, to "repair" the disorder but, on the other, brings out the conditions for disorder to show itself again and materialise with its problems but with the vitality implicit in change. Change brings disorder but public commitment through institutions cannot but aspire to recover a level of order, hopefully, more advanced. Order and disorder are closely linked with each other, one producing the other in a circular process. The urban, precisely because of its constituent construction (social, productive and economic variability; clash between powers and options of models of society) cannot be stable, but the continuous recovery of "order" responds not only to functional needs, but also to ethical options: we should not consider all urban "order" as positive, compared with negative disorder; there are experiences of oppressive and coercive urban order. It is always disorder that determines better levels and quality of order. Though it may be the dynamic factor of every urban condition, we must remember that it always requires new order from which to start out again. Disorder, however it is identified, constitutes a permanent fact, inherent in the urban condition; it is neither the result of wrong planning (sometimes also this), nor of a perverse will, but rather of the dynamic mechanisms of the city itself.

**Keywords:** Alternation between order and disorder, Urban space organisation, Vitality

*Urban development*, the work of planning and organising the city and territory, is characterised by a strong vocation to *impose order*. When an urban planning instrument defines what, where, when and how it is possible to "realise" some change in the organisation of space it ends up modifying what exists and imposing a new kind of "order". We tend to think of "physical" order but actually, it is a case of order that has a variety of aspects, including the indications of "meaning" space organisation produces.

Urban development, giving order to settlement, is extremely ancient and arose with the first settlements, even though the discipline was codified in modern times:

from an activity without a code that responded to social, economic and life requirements and ones based on functionality and representation, to a discipline often based on self-determination.

In the cultural history of the discipline certain traits can be picked out in which an interest for functional order seemed to prevail, though in fact the attention for the city and territory that this activity has adopted is the overall one involving functionality but also social structure, co-habiting, power, culture, and sacred and profane rites. Each kind of urban order, in its divisions and construction, may have been the source of conflicts, oppression, liberation, marginalisation and exaltation (Indovina 2016).

The question that forces us to reflect is very simple: *why do cities, in spite of the effort made to give them order, even though from time to time this order has been codified in different ways, end up being untidy?*

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The concepts of order and disorder applied to urban and territorial issues involve complex definitions, and to understand them it is worth referring to some facts.

Cultivated land shows us a tidy territory, and it is immediately understood that this comes directly down from the organisation of agricultural production, from the techniques used and the social relations characterising farming work. The orography of the territory, too, with the crops compatible with the different heights above sea-level, serves the purpose of spatial design; its appearance, colours and scents change with the change of seasons or the change in production and technology adopted. Basically, there is a "strength", agricultural production, with very limited alternatives, giving particular spatial solutions. "Dry walls", which surround fields or enclosures and which we marvel at, are also a rational and reasonable solution for the use of stones unearthed by the plough; land reclamation gives substance to spatial construction. Just as canals and ditches serve the purpose of taking water where needed, while rows of trees consolidate their banks, and lanes and farm-roads aim at the movement of men, animals and machinery, depending on the need.

Spatial order in the country, often admired, is the result of a *need;* it satisfies that expressed by production which presents very limited alternatives. Change is not excluded (crop variation, agrarian science achievements, use of new technologies, etc.); the point may even be reached of building a new agrarian landscape with *order that is different.* Cultural movements linked with tradition sometimes oppose these changes, harming the intrinsic nature of the agrarian landscape, which is destined to change. *Needs* and reduced *alternatives* may be considered key categories in determining the agrarian landscape, but we are not dealing with two categories that could be imagined to be playing the same role in determining the urban landscape.

In the city it is not possible to pick out such a binding, decisive *need,* or, rather, there is a great number of highly diversified needs and they express inhomogeneous content and justification; not only, but they are needs that are not compelling like in the country, as each one is compatible with *various alternatives,* therefore with different models of urban organisation. The urban condition is characterised not by the absence of production but, rather, by the organisation of this production, by a greater presence of functions, greater unnaturalness of the context, the existence of functions integrated with each other and, at the same time, of functions that are antagonistic or incompatible, but above all by the high concentration of people with characteristics, projects, needs and desires that are different from each other. Differences that are also manifested as an expression of *power* (economic,

social, cultural, political, institutional, etc.) able to leave a footprint on urban organisation.

If each function were free to leave its own "footprint" on the urban territory, it is clear that the result could not but be a sort of marsh where footprints overlapped and depended on the weight of the bodies (the interested parties) creating them. Presumably, however, footprints have to follow rules (we might say the "plans" or any other instrument managing the territory), but it is only an assumption that rules can accurately steer the bodies and therefore the respective footprints. The doubt is not suggesting the fact that rules can be slack (this, too), or that bodies move deliberately opposing the rules (this, too), but the fact that the "needs" of the single bodies change over time in a process of interrelation between them, and that the possibilities offered account for the needs of the single body and the encounter of various bodies.

It should be pointed out once more that while for the country order is imposed by production, for the city, as well as production, the multiplicity of social subjects are important, as is the prominence of the service functions, events, needs, etc. that are projected onto the organisation of space. Urban space organisation requires a *spontaneous directive;* agricultural order, we might say, is *given,* while urban order has to be *constructed.* Urban order contemplates: the need to guarantee hygiene and the best exposition as regards the climatic situations of the place; the possibility of carrying out and developing productive and economic activities; "power" representation; the citizens' life needs; the intention to differentiate places by the presence of different social strata; the development and localisation of services; the need to avoid mixing functions little or not at all compatible with each other, and so on.

Contemplation that is not always consistent, not always progressive, and not always attentive to the general interest.

The history of the city teaches how changeable it can be, in its shape and organisation, and how the change is the fruit, mainly, of change in social structure, production organisation and power organisation itself. Urban space organisation appears as a "passive" outcome of these changes, not as being determined by a factor that imposes change. The dynamics (the change) of the city and its organisation have to take into account its "hard" part: the built city, its history and its works: each new order does not wipe out the past but fits into an existing context (hopefully, respecting it), perhaps giving it a purpose (from various points of view, including social) in the new reality. Change is at the same time destructive and protective; the present also has elements of the past and, fortunately, elements of the future (which we are not perhaps able to recognise).

Urban organisation actually undergoes the effects of continuous alternation between order and disorder. In the context in which the two concepts will be used in this paper it is not possible to imagine them as alternatives, but they are taken as dialectically constituting territorial reality. "Order" and "disorder" *oppose* each other but do not clash with each other. In the hectic organisation of urban and territorial reality one stimulates the other and each, in opposing, determines change. What we mean to say is that the inclination towards order (or tendency towards order) tends, on the one hand, to "repair" the disorder but, on the other, brings out the conditions for disorder to show itself again and materialise with its problems but with the vitality implicit in change.

Order and disorder are closely linked with each other, one producing the other in a circular process. They are like Siamese twins: one takes pains to find the most comfortable position for itself, but this does not mean it is comfortable for the other, too; the latter reacts and achieves a more comfortable position for itself but uncomfortable for the other. This metaphor might make clear how the dynamic relation between order and disorder is continuous, not linear and may never find a point of stability.

The dialectic of the Siamese twins applied to the relation order/disorder is easy to share, but in fact presents a large number of aporias and many consequences. A comfortable position for one of the children, as we said, risks being uncomfortable for the other, and when the former achieves a better position, it affects that of the other child. No position exists that meets the demands of both.

On the one hand, imposed order presupposes within itself a principle of stability; we could say that the enforcement of order does not have aims that are just immediate but also future ones, but, as has been seen, this claim appears to be contradicted by the character of the territorial processes that are by nature dynamic, featuring changes and movements not always predictable. The economic, social, demographic, cultural, technological and power mechanisms involving the city and territory are of such an *innovative* impact that they cannot but cause *change*, i.e. a challenge to the pre-existing order. But there is more, the irruption of change, namely disorder, should be taken as positive or at least *inevitable.*

If we were to assume that the *enforcement* of order were aimed at improving the organisation of the city and territory and ultimately at improving the living conditions of those inhabiting and "using" that territory, we would need to consider any challenge to order as a prospective worsening of those living conditions. But it does not seem to be like this, not only because disorder arises round those who have settled in the city or territory and use it, with the prospect of improving their condition, but

above all because the *inevitable innovation,* may, in general, be considered ameliorative.

Highly complex economic, social, political and cultural designs are projected onto the city and its transformations. It is impossible that the city be domesticated and dominated by a single interest, even when this appears as strong, and when it avails itself of the strength of economic and political power. The overall design always seems incoherent or, rather, is the outcome of compromises between different interests and strong points. But from these strengths, their compromise, their agreement or disagreement, from the conflicts, the city takes shape and gives itself organisation, a type of order. Order that seconds evolution but, at the same time, creates contradictions.

Fundamentally, urban order is not independent from the requirements of various kinds (economic, social, cultural and of life) that the city produces; but none of these needs tends to fully prevail, precisely due to the opposing dialectics of the various requirements; urban order is not the outcome of mediation between the various requirements but, rather, gives rise to a solution that includes spaces for the interests of each to be realised, whilst simultaneously leaving antagonistic spaces.

Whatever meaning we wish to give to these statements, we cannot ignore the fact that men and women occupy "space" and organise it according to material and intellectual needs. The reality that springs from it is neither *fortuitous* or *spontaneous*; its content is different in proportion to the growth of knowledge and the type of coexistence chosen (or imposed), to the regime regulating production relations, but also the phase of culture. What is seen around us, from the cities to the country, represents what has come down to our times from thousands of years of work on constructing, adapting, destroying, reconstructing, modifying and enlarging, to which the species has applied itself so as to overcome all obstacles that, on the one hand, "stepmother nature" has placed against the achievement of the welfare of the species and, on the other, power (economic, but not only) that has continued to hinder the achievement of freedom.

Each change, however, rapid or slow, does not wipe out the past organisation of space, but there are phenomena of continuous transformation and adaptability. The organisation of space is a continuous task of *conservation-destruction-innovation-construction*: what is preserved is not always appreciated; often what is destroyed produces criticism, regret and the quest for revival; innovation, though real, is presented not rarely as an illusion; what is built seldom gains general approval. It is certain, however, that a static state does not exist; were this manifest it would be the sign of a remoteness from the continuous flow of evolution and innovation.

The field of spatial order is not one of "rational" choices (depending on epochs) but rather of "political" choices. The city and territory are a field of tensions and conflicts; however much the species is civilised it remains divided by interests, often contrasting, that aspire to "appropriating" space, and spatial organisation that bears witness to their power (or absence of power). This is social "typology" that is projected onto the space: its conflictive-democratic or rather pacified-authoritarian features (or, more to the point, where the conflicts are repressed) find their configuration in space organisation (Fregolent and Savino 2013).

In modernity the instruments for giving order to space, apart from being refined, are a way of reducing *discretion,* namely the will to overcome, or more simply the achievement of the interests of one party to the detriment of those of the collectivity or of other single individuals. It is obvious that discretion is founded on power, and also in advanced democracies power (especially economic power) is not eliminated, but the "rules" that dictate space organisation, which should be valid for everyone, certainly put ties on or at least hinder the success of single powers. At least, this is their intention (doubts and criticisms may be put forward on the respective realisation, but everything depends on political will or weakness).

We mean to maintain that in order to achieve urban order (however defined) the existence of a set of rules is taken for granted, which indicate the ways in which the city is organised so as to enable its efficient and effective functioning, with the satisfaction of everyone or preferring some (this is a variable of politics). While it is obvious that these rules vary over time and in space, it should be emphasised that their application is a manifestation of politics or, if preferred, a way of *governing.* It seems misleading, in effect, to believe that the existence of "good rules" can guarantee space organisation coherent with the (abstract) aims of the said rules. The rules relating to space organisation have ambiguous features, they are both *perceptive* and *programmatic,* and this ambiguity can in no way be eliminated given the way they are applied. The guarantee of the results proves closely linked with the expression of a specific political will (an *intention)* and the management of transformation processes (another aspect of political will). But the ordered condition is only temporary; disorder tends to emerge from the tidy mesh.

When the variation (the urban dynamics) is complex, of considerable size and speed, this cannot but cause disorder (with respect to the previous order). In short, the characteristics of urban transformations that determine disorder are: *quantity,* i.e. the size of the changes compared with the size of the city; *speed,* i.e. transformation time is a very important feature; *density,* also understood as the concentration of change phenomena.

In recent times, with the establishment of liberalism also at the level of organisation of the territory, so that organised spaces may seem like a conflict between individuals (the other side of the coin is collaboration), it has not been possible to deny the existence of processes of exchange, integration, collaboration and competition, and conflicts between individual interests. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that stakeholders (very powerful groups) exist and that the struggle for space appropriation is not only interpretable as the result of "competition" between individuals but, rather, as a political clash between more or less codified interested parties, while social conflicts appear as the initiative of the social forces (economically the weakest) to defend the general interests (Belli 2016).

By this we do not mean to ignore the strength and importance of the individual and along this path the possibility of partial processes of self-organisation (well-tempered individualism can be good for space organisation, too), but just to emphasise once more that space organisation responds to requirements of a collective, social, functional and cultural nature, and that as such, space cannot but be organised according to collective (planned) political processes. And that if self-organisation processes go beyond aspects of little importance they determine, even if not intended for this purpose, breakdowns in the collective organisation of space.

As we have already said, disorder, as considered here, can take on different aspects but is nevertheless characterised by the "rupture" of an order that corresponds to a society's systems. It cannot be picked out as an *exclusively negative* element, for it actually represents positive distortions, too, of the systems set up, and can introduce elements of dynamism and innovation and translate social transformations into spatial terms also; in a certain sense it corresponds to the vitality of a specific urban condition. From this point of view it should not only be considered the establishment (against the collectivity) of specific, easily identified individual interests (often speculative on the economic plane, "degrading" on the social plane, and frustrating from a cultural standpoint) but, rather, a "composition" of many things, the expressions of the (precarious) *equilibrium* that society has achieved in a particular phase.

We thus need to think that the phenomena that encourage disorder belong both to the exogenous and the endogenous categories: new technology may require changes in the organisation of the city (namely: new order), but "requests" may be seen to emerge directly from the citizens and the organised social forces that require changes in urban order to improve their specific

urban life condition. The political nature of this demand places it on the terrain of the *comparison* and *strength relations.*

The city (and the territory) are no more than an exercise field for various options maintained by different forces, often with alternative objectives; it is indeed due to the presence of opposed forces that the city, in general, and up to now, has never completely responded to the interests of one party. Just as the Siamese twins seek but do not find a position that is comfortable for both, the city moves continuously between order and disorder, between ruptures and recomposition.

Perception of order and its advantages and of disorder and its disadvantages is not only not immediately clear, but can only be the outcome of a reflective process, which cannot but bypass individuals to take on the complete, complex urban society and its values. If it were true, as we have mentioned more than once previously, that (functional, aesthetic, social) order did not, in the past evolution of the human species, constitute a spontaneous event but the outcome of a *project,* then we would need to devote some thought to this. If urban dynamics, however defined, are on one side a challenge (partial and/or total) for this project, then, on the other side, they actually expect a new project at the same time.

One might ask what drives a collectivity to a sort of Sisyphean torment, namely to the continuous repetition of an action that is useless: to set up, work for, commit oneself to the achievement of urban order that is not lasting. One might maintain that this need is the only one compatible with the possibility of survival of the species, which has on the one hand to oppose the forces of nature that would like to blow it away, but *must,* on the other, fight the stimulus towards the disintegration of coexistence with a counter-stimulus consisting of rules, of norms and values that are not stable but continuously renewed, though ever present.

To design and achieve urban order is fundamentally an option in favour of coexistence. A project that constitutes an attempt, not always perfect, to respond both to demand expressed or implicit, not just of functions but also meaning. As can be observed, even though ideas and specific situations may drive us towards individualist exaltation that tends to be unbridled, the species has an *imprinting* that urges it towards coexistence; contemporary life, increasingly complex, effectively imposes greater and better regulation (in spite of different appearances), entrusting each individual or social group once more with full freedom in belonging to spheres previously regulated and taking on the need to regulate new, different spheres not considered before.

We have thus reached a crucial knot: *urban order design.* Design that will resist pressure from the "powers"

(wherever located) who would like to "subject" order to their own interests or points of view, to assert, on the contrary, principles of freedom, coexistence, solidarity and equality, though still leaving space for change (Nel. lo 2012).

It is possible to return to the dialectic of the Siamese twins: the movement of one of the two children stimulates the other to change its place; the intervention of a "third" party (in the case of the city, politics) may arrange the two children in such a way that each achieves a comfortable situation, even if it is known that it will be of brief duration as very soon they will move.

Planning is an instrument that in a "coercive" way defines urban order; generally, in its application it has to overcome obstacles of meaning that end up limiting its action, or to contrast the work of power groups that attempt to make it ineffective, or, again, keep account of the behaviour of citizens who evade its rules.

The statement that planning is the suitable instrument to give answers to the problems of the city and territory nowadays does not meet with much support. The prevalent cultural, ideological and professional tendencies assert the need for a drastic review of it, or even its effective elimination. On one side, it does not seem possible to oppose the request for a review and modernisation of planning systems to take changes in society into account while, on the other, we forget that attention to the changes in society and, therefore, the respective adaptation of the instrument of intervention, is a constituent element of planning itself (even though in practice this attention has not always been shown).

We are referring to *good planning,* which we would define as that which pays great attention to the collective interest and an improvement in the quality of life of inhabitants, and is organised using suitable instruments, having tackled the democratic encounter in its approach, taken into account processes underway and qualified and quantified the (negative and positive) effects of its action.

But good planning also finds obstacles ahead. The first is a certain "doubling" that characterises the attitude of the "citizen" and his "common sense" as regards the city. This "common sense" is loaded with positive expectations and requests: the territory is to be safeguarded, land consumption reduced, the landscape protected, hydrogeological reclamation to be carried out, the city must function, suburban decay must be eliminated, limits and rules for growth need to be introduced, and the environment must be healthy, etc.

Any plan seeking to realise these expectations and meet the requests expressed, would assert the "values" contained in them and should be welcomed with great approval and enthusiasm. But things are not like this. For every public decision on urban organisation

and reorganisation, for all regulatory action, each tie or limit imposed, opposition and differentiation with varying degrees of importance arise. These refusals do not have their origin in the defence of private and individual interests, which would be understandable, but are justified by collective action to protect the general interest. Considerable distrust has matured over time in any public decision or choice that may also generate "apathy" or indifference; the notable errors, programmatic inconsistency, not to mention the spread of corruption of public workers, explain this attitude, but it also originates in the prevalence of a political culture that denies public action true consistency and utility. It should also not be forgotten that at the moment in which the great options in principles turn into specific decisions, private interests tend to emerge. Subjects do not contest the great options, they would happily see them achieved, but possibly without harming their own interests. Political decision-making, and therefore planning, finds itself in the situation of being appealed to, but at the same time rejected. It may be stated that planning finds it enjoys generic consensus, but also equally strong opposition.

What has previously been observed as regards urban dynamics, the speed of change, and the increased complexity of the city and territory, challenges planning in itself, according to some (interest groups and scholars), or at least the current form of planning; what is criticised is the compulsory nature of the choice of plan.

The idea that society's dynamism is much more rapid and does not easily endure the ties of the plan does not justify denying the need for the plan; greater and better planning is actually required. The request put forward by various parties to respond to the dynamism of society is to develop a *flexible plan*; this request only apparently seems to side with the need for planning; it is actually the complete denial of any form of planning.

A flexible plan is effectively an antithesis, for it presupposes objectives that have not been defined or that may be continuously redefined according to needs; but planning, obviously, is such because it defines objectives and a strategy to achieve them. If we were to consider the plan process as formed of defined objectives and "policies" (specific public actions) suitable to enable these objectives to be achieved, in a highly dynamic situation with unforeseen changes, continuous reconsideration or updating of these policies—namely the means to achieve the objectives—would be necessary and useful. These are policies that could be considered flexible and modified, according to needs, to achieve *defined and unchanged objectives.* What is suggested, and would seem adequate to respond to many specific situations is, therefore, not a flexible plan but, rather, flexible instruments to achieve predefined objectives (an adjustment able to take into account environmental dynamics).

It is my personal experience that each action that is accomplished, even if well targeted, may determine unforeseen outcomes, some of which can assume a negative value, "perverse effects", not only negative in themselves but also contrary to all expectations and forecasts. Unforeseen effects, also when perverse, suggest a careful analysis of the mechanisms activated and the responses of the interested parties involved, and not the impossibility of public action. Unforeseen effects, moreover, can in some cases determine innovations.

It has been maintained that the conflict represents a positive element in that it expresses at the same time uneasiness and a request, provided actions exist and are put in place to solve such conflicts.

However, in the present historic phase the conflict appears also to show a selfish effect: *Not In My Back Yard* (or NIMBY). A work (an oil pipeline, a landfill, wind power station, street, refugee camp, etc.) deemed in some way necessary is not wanted on one's own territory, but preferred on "another" territory. What seems to prevail in these attitudes, very often justified, but not always, by the effects these structures could cause in the local situation, is a sort of local egoism, the child of a prevailing identity attitude that is extremely mean and utterly short-sighted.

Obstacles to improving and renewing means and processes of territorial planning are not thought to exist, provided improvements and renovation are able to increase the efficiency and public effectiveness on the management of urban and territorial transformations. It is not a case of stating an ideological position, but of the awareness that the organisation of the city and territory cannot but have a public/collective guide, able to improve the inhabitants' living conditions.

Disorder, however it is identified, constitutes a permanent fact, inherent in the urban condition; it is neither the result of wrong planning (sometimes also this), nor of a perverse will, but rather of the dynamic mechanisms of the city itself. Change brings disorder but public commitment through institutions cannot but aspire to recover a level of order, hopefully, more advanced. The urban, precisely because of its constituent construction (social, productive and economic variability; clash between powers and options of models of society) cannot be stable, but the continuous recovery of "order" responds not only to functional needs, but also to ethical options: only the "strongest" (from all points of view) know how to take advantage of disorder; the weakest usually pay a high price. But at the same time we should not consider all urban "order" as positive, compared with negative disorder; there are experiences of oppressive and coercive urban order.

It is disorder that breaks up all oppressive order, and it is always disorder that determines better levels and quality of order. Though it may be the dynamic factor of every urban condition, we must remember that it always requires new order from which to start out again.

**Competing interests**

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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