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Elderly, Young and Fragile People in Cities: Needs and Desires for Cities of Coexistence

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“The city as a place of civil friendship,” STEFANO ZAMAGNI



The idea of the city is constantly evolving: for Aristotle, the ideal city had to be able to be embraced with a glance from the top of a hill. Then, for many centuries, cities had a boundary that distinguished them from the countryside. In cities, home and workplace often coincided: everything was close by, everything was integrated. The explosion in size generated by the industrial revolution - and later by the evolution of means of transport - began to distinguish and theorise the separation of functional areas in cities. At the same time, typological research was enhanced for each building and each function.

Scientific research led to an increase in average life expectancy, and from the second half of the last century, population growth began to skyrocket in unprecedented ways. During the same period, there was talk of the “urbanised continuum” and hopes for the “city effect”. Then, in 1968, with the youth protests, the right to the city was strongly asserted. During those same years, Henri Lefebvre claimed

the “right to the city” as a right to freedom, sociality and living (Lefebvre, 1968 (1).

Today, talking about cities may seem inappropriate, and it is certainly inaccurate. We know very well that “city” means relationships between parts / design of empty space / coexistence: in other words, it means integration and a system of spaces for gathering and socialising. It is also clear that “urban” is anything but that (its true etymological root comes from “urbum” = plough, that which traces a furrow, and therefore separates): it connotes a territory cluttered with buildings, in other words, it expresses physical and social disintegration.

In contemporary times, both physical and numerical dimensions are elusive and indefinable (minimal or enormous); the expansion of territory is continuous. The distinction between those who reside permanently in one place and those who tend to be predominantly nomadic is also becoming

increasingly blurred. “Citizens” - those who have the same customs and share the same values, who belong to the same community - tend to become inhabitants, users, consumers. Functional logic becomes prevalent: however, by shifting the focus from the mere functionality of the urban environment to the well-being and liveability of public spaces, the way we conceive cities can be revolutionised (Gehl, 1971 (2). Cities can once again become places of encounter, creativity and inclusion, emphasising the importance of the human scale and promoting “slow city” models, where social interactions can develop in the space of sociality, on a human scale (Gehl, 2010 (3): public space can generate virtuous behaviour.

The successful slogan of the “five-minute city” (Maas, 2003 (4) dates back to the early 2000s and is based on at least half a century of research, projects and some experience: its roots lie in Rotterdam's Lijbaan, in post-war reconstruction. But if we want to stay closer to home, it is also worth remembering the Piano Quadro della Attrezzature (Master Plan for Facilities) project of the Municipality of Naples in the mid-1970s.

In the first two decades of this century, the five-minute city became a model for a few sporadic initiatives, but immediately after Covid it spread with extraordinary success. The logic of the five-minute city aims to reorganise the habitat not into separate parts but into interrelated networks in which every inhabitant is guaranteed access - leaving open alternatives and different choices - not only to primary services but above all to “places of social condensation”, points of identity and reference. In fact, the city of a few minutes aims to realise a true “right to the city” for everyone, coexisting, never separated for any economic, social or religious reason.

In our cities of the past, citizens bound by the same culture and religion needed churches and cathedrals. When there were also significant, clearly identified communities in cities, mosques or other places of worship were built. For some decades now, this issue has tended to be addressed by creating unified spaces that can be used at different times or in different contexts for different religions.

The prolongation of average life expectancy and the need to move away from one's place of origin, which, among other things, has led to the breakdown of families and, consequently, the loss of intergenerational solidarity, have created a need for facilities dedicated to the care of the elderly. Similarly, in the past, homes for workers in large industrial complexes were built, as were homes for university students. These separations are typical of functionalist logic, of providing individual answers to individual questions: therefore, there is a lack of a systemic and integrated vision. In the case of elderly people, who are considered more fragile, there are objectively verifiable conditions of existence that prevent them from living independently or playing a

fully active role in society, forcing them into isolation. In these cases, it is even more essential that, for the sake of their quality of life, not only is assistance guaranteed, but also opportunities for involvement are created, including through new intergenerational and, in a broader sense, intercultural exchanges.



A city of coexistence is a welcoming city, where young people, the elderly, the frail and people from different cultures can interact positively to the point of considering each other essential. The theme, therefore, is to intertwine these diversities in terms of coexistence rather than opposition: young/old, rich/poor, present/future, whatever the diversity may be. Because today's young people will be tomorrow's elderly.

How, then, do we think cities should transform themselves to accommodate the needs, abilities and behaviours aimed at the well-being and coexistence of all individuals? How can we respond to the goal of bringing together and connecting what is separated in space and time?

There are many studies on these issues: among them, the theory of the capabilities approach stands out as an interesting cultural reference point. It derives from the research of Amartya Sen (Sen, 1985 (5), 1999 (6) and developed by Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993 (7) as “capability ethics”. *The capability approach* is a perspective through which urban public space, understood as a resource available to citizens and all individuals, represents not an end but a means to pursue well-being. Better still, it is a tool through which the “real opportunities of each individual” to “use the city to increase their capabilities” are assessed. Therefore, we start from the physical “impediments” - but not only - that “limit its autonomous and free use by all”.

As architects, we deal with cities and the quality of living environments. At the heart of our interest are public spaces as resources towards which we can channel every design tool to make them truly available to all individuals and to promote the growth of well-being and the reduction of inequalities.

This broad reasoning helps to remind us that, although the focus here is on the theme of “the

elderly and young people”, “the frail and those from different cultures”, inequalities in the use of space are a function of a series of other internal factors such as gender, ethnicity, health and ability, or external factors (family, cultural, social and institutional conditions).

But what do we mean when we talk about cities here? As already mentioned, cities, especially in our contexts, have ancient roots: the spaces and buildings that constitute them have a lifespan that is not even comparable to that of their individual inhabitants. Cities have evolved, expressing the civilisations and cultures that have followed one another over the centuries, and in transforming themselves, they have almost never taken a transgenerational view into account. The city is “*civitas*” before it is “*urbs*”.

Since the second half of the last century, cities have been involved in progressive acceleration and unprecedented upheavals in their objectives. These changes are not only cultural, relational and technological:

- unprecedented demographic phenomena continue to accentuate, making Italy dimensionally irrelevant (today it is home to almost 0.8% of the world's population).
- thanks to the constant increase in average life expectancy, Italy is among the world leaders, just behind the absolute leader in terms of life expectancy. Today, the elderly prevail and birth rates are at an all-time low. At the same time, migration is and will continue to increase.

The city is holding out, but it needs to be transformed to respond to changing demands that are still provisional and subject to change. The transport revolution and the dominance of private transport have encouraged fragmentation and rendered the standards - a significant achievement in the 1960s - now inappropriate and obsolete.

The city is for everyone: its layout must also help to reduce inequalities. These inequalities stem from a failure to recognise the plurality of individual needs and characteristics and the way in which they use common spaces to improve their quality of life. We are talking about children, women, the elderly, foreigners, the frail and the disabled.

The spatial component of individual quality of life depends on the presence of places, services and activities, their distribution in space and the network they generate or are generated by. However, these criteria are not sufficient to define the quality of “living environments”: there is a contradiction between the quantity of resources available and the disparity in their use for the enhancement of the well-being of individuals and groups of inhabitants. Here are some starting points:

- Considering the interaction between cities and individuals (a “people-centred” approach) means moving beyond the traditional

quantitative logic of standards in favour of an assessment of individuals' actual possibilities for “increasing their well-being”.

- Analysing the physical and organisational conditions of the city that hinder autonomous and free use, mortifying the right to the city, which nevertheless remains to the advantage of the dominant groups.
- Encourage dialogue between the various parties and involve those with specific needs in a broad interaction between a plurality of individuals.
- Remove or reduce obstacles and create a favourable urban environment in which individuals' abilities can be promoted and their choice of valid alternatives maximised.

When we talk about the “elderly” population, i.e. those over the age of 75, we can think specifically about how urban space is used, mainly in terms of connectivity and places for socialising (social condensers): for example, consider the possibility of travelling on foot or by means of transport that allows (with a minimum walking distance) access to an urban centre where other social and collective spaces (schools, squares, etc.) are located.

In this case, we are talking about the five-minute city or the city of minutes that are needed... In recent years, this has been a recurring goal, but few cities are actually taking steps to implement it. In concrete terms, it means reorganising what already exists with a view to recognising or introducing networks of easily accessible “social condensation places”, perhaps supported by small-scale ecological mobility, but in any case linked by large-scale collective mobility systems in order to avoid restricted and closed-off areas.

When we talk about “young people”, the issue becomes more complex, as the assessment of the possibilities for using common resources and the analysis of the obstacles to the free and autonomous use of urban space require some clarification.



First and foremost is the issue of proximity, which primarily affects children, whose ability to use urban space can be partly compared to that of the elderly or people with motor disabilities.



For example, among the urban policies involving mobility, those that reverse the traditional car/pedestrian hierarchy in favour of pedestrians and cycle mobility (the *woonerf* model) are of interest. By working on mobility hubs, they encourage the creation of protected routes where people can move freely between stops, schools and sports activities, creating large safe islands open to all.

Globally, the average age today is just over 30. However, there are many differences: in Africa it is around 20, in Europe 44, in Italy 48, and just under 49 in Japan, the oldest country. Older people (over 65) account for about 10% of the world's population, less than 4% in Africa, over 20% in Europe, and 3 or 4 points more in Italy. On the other hand, young people account for a quarter of the world's population, almost a third in Africa, just over a sixth in Europe, and almost an eighth in Italy. People with disabilities account for about 15% of the world's population and 20% in Africa, the highest percentage. When elderly people with difficulties are also taken into account, the percentages in Europe and Italy are almost the same.

The percentage of elderly people is expected to increase significantly in the coming decades, especially in developing countries, due to increased life expectancy and declining birth rates. At the same time, other forecasts indicate sharp demographic declines across Europe by 2100, which will be particularly intense in Italy, where the population is expected to be around 35 million, with a high percentage of elderly people and the resulting economic challenges.

The removal of architectural barriers is now a mandatory standard, although it is still not widely respected. Some examples of micro-interventions aimed at ensuring safe passage for all through the use of alternative signage that allows people to recognise the route and obstacles (loges, acoustic signals, etc.) or the creation of rest areas along protected routes, with seats where people can rest

and children can play, especially in areas close to homes.

On the other hand, people with disabilities, including those who are in this situation only for a period of time or those who share the same problems for other reasons, also reach significant percentages in Western societies: therefore, the whole cannot be limited to allowing architectural barriers to be circumvented (dedicated routes and spaces), but must aim to organise itself so that they are effectively eliminated.

In 2020, Catania launched the "Multisensory Bio-Accessibility Charter", which aims to renew the paradigms of accessibility and liveability of confined living environments and the homes of vulnerable families. This "Charter" adopts seven general principles (equity in use / flexibility of use / simple and intuitive use / perceptible information / tolerance for error / low physical effort / space and size for the approach to use) and is based on multi-sensory perception through six indicators: visual / acoustic / olfactory / tactile / hydrometric / kinesthetic.

Living environments that are attentive to social inclusion and support for vulnerable people require multidimensional approaches aimed at responding to the needs of both the elderly and people with disabilities and those in conditions of socio-economic and cultural vulnerability. It is therefore also essential to integrate cultural diversity. The traditions and housing models of countries of origin - whether economically less developed contexts or similar or even more advanced ones - influence housing expectations and needs.

An inclusive design approach is based on the principles of universal design and accessibility, which aim to ensure usable and safe spaces for all. In recent decades, various countries have focused on reducing vehicle traffic and encouraging pedestrian and cycle mobility, including by promoting community activities and valuing different cultural identities, i.e. creating inclusive environments where diversity is recognised and valued.

The adoption of assistive technologies and smart solutions now makes it possible to create a living environment that is dynamic and responsive to the needs of different users. Technological tools that enable real-time monitoring and adaptation of spaces are essential for promoting well-being and social inclusion and achieving effective housing solutions for a diverse audience.

Everything should therefore encourage exchange and participation at every level, promoting virtuous actions through the involvement of young people (children and adolescents) and the elderly in micro-transformation, the creation of spaces and the shared management of neighbourhood services. This would allow easy access to "urban gardens", perhaps linked to school buildings whose facilities (library,

gym and sports areas, canteen and refreshment areas, auditorium and music areas, workshops, etc.) - designed to fit in with the guidelines introduced ten years ago in Italy - could be managed separately and be open to the public.

These possible actions, which have been successfully trialled in some cities, provide examples - though not exhaustive - that, at the neighbourhood level and in (alternative) mobility networks, facilitate certain city functions for users considered to be most disadvantaged (young people and the elderly). This is because the quality of public space affects the behaviour, social life, spirituality, safety, economy and well-being of those who live there.

A community that is aware of all this should allocate a greater share of its resources to raising the level of transformation of living environments and initiating wide-ranging policies that give rise to long-term urban projects based on the micro-actions identified above. Action on urban space must promote the quality of urban life for all individuals, without any discrimination, so that the city is not a place of inequality but, with respect for the dignity of the individual, promotes well-being and becomes a place where everyone can learn and develop their "urban capacity" in interaction with other individuals.

Finally, we must consider the irreversible process of ageing of our population: the latest ISTAT data show the progressive depopulation taking place in our country and predict that by 2050, people aged 65 and over could represent 34.5% of the total population. Furthermore, also by 2050, the ratio of individuals of working age (15-64 years) to those not of working age (0-14 and 65 years) will change from approximately three to two in 2022 to approximately one to one in 2050, with differences between the north and south.

It is therefore urgent to promote processes of openness and acceptance of the many young

migrants who arrive in our country after almost always painful journeys, removing them from clandestinity and integrating them into a process of building a free and open society capable of addressing the pressing problems of the future, first and foremost climate change and the catastrophic consequences that will make the excluded of the earth even poorer.

There are many "migrants" who come from these contexts, but also people who settle outside their country of origin (for work reasons, a desire to live in a different climate, or other reasons) who have a different culture or different habits. Cities must welcome diversity, embrace its positive aspects and enrich themselves by promoting processes of inclusion and cultural regeneration.

The project of change, of physical transformation of living environments, is crucial today and requires an attitude of listening, dialogue and open-mindedness, capable of opposing any separation - physical or cultural barriers - in order to create bonds, build relationships and hope for the future.

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