THE EUROPEAN CITY IN THE THOUGHT AND WORKS OF LEONARDO BENEVOLO

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Abstract
Compared to the importance of Leonardo Benevolo’s production and to his influence, the studies about this scholar are surprisingly few, at least in the Italian context: the paper thus aims at reconstructing the diffusion and circulation of some relevant ideas and perspectives proposed by this complex and multi-faceted figure of researcher, architect, planner, who worked across disciplinary boundaries in the last five decades; Benevolo obtained a degree in Architecture in 1946, and has since then devoted his work to the history of architecture, the history of the Italian and European city and the evolution of inhabited landscape, in particular in Italy. More than that, Benevolo’s many books have been extensively translated, discussed and used as teaching materials in many different countries, thus influencing the debate about the evolution of the city and the peculiar relationship between inhabited space and local societies.

Starting from this background, the paper aims at exploring the diffusion and influence of some crucial Benevolo’s books and ideas in the international debate, focusing the attention in particular on two main topics: his conception of the urban form, read in the organic connection between the architectural and the urban scale, and thus between architecture and urban planning; and secondly, the interpretation of the features and evolution characteristics of the European city, also read in their diffusion at the global scale. Benevolo does not propose an abstract reading of the European city in its formation, but rather puts forward precise readings of the origins of specific cities, in order to outline certain recurring elements such as continuity in physical, social and political terms; complexity, which also characterises public space and its articulations; another element which unites the cities is the way in which they are concentrated within an articulated space, defined by walls and by a marked difference between city and countryside. Lastly, cities share an ability to renew themselves within their perimeter, to grow on themselves - a feature which characterises the European city up to the late modernity.

Keywords: Leonardo Benevolo, urban form, European city
Introduction. The last author capable of reading both architecture and the city built environment: a perspective on an Italian tradition

Leonardo Benevolo belongs to a generation of Italian architects who, in the years of his intellectual coming of age, became familiar, in an almost natural way, with several European cultural benchmarks, mainly of Anglo-Saxon and French origin, pertaining to various disciplines: history, art history, urban studies, economics and geography.

Since the end of the Twenties, Italy has developed an open and curious attitude, even under the Fascist regime, showing interest in ideas circulating in other countries, experimental projects in the urban and architectural field and innovative takes on urban and territorial history (Melograni, 2008). This will to discover and embrace new topics was spurred on by a general awareness of Italy’s backwardness - historicist models and dated academic tradition were still going strong¹.

Those who trained in the first decades of the last century, in Italian Schools of Architecture and Academies of Fine Arts, thus received a unitary vision of art-related, urban and territorial knowledge, and have been led to cultivate a humanistic approach linked to history and philosophy.

The Seventies, and subsequent years, marked a crisis in this unitary structuring of knowledge. Some branches of research began to explore the concept of city in different and alternative forms, increasingly stressing a method of research and teaching which focused on specialist and sector-specific competences². We are here referring to at least three research traditions: firstly, the morphological analyses launched by Aldo Rossi and Carlo Aymonino, who shifted the attentions of architectural disciplines onto manufacture and onto morphology intended as study of the city form, and retrieved the concept of the architectural object as a starting point to rebuild the entire system. Second come the economic and territorial analyses which have drawn attention to economic systems and social processes, opening up a constant dialogue with economics, sociology and, subsequently, with public policy analysis. And finally, the model of historical and geographical research which has ever increasingly distanced itself from the possibility of a productive dialogue with the actual forms of architecture and landscape.

In this sense, we could say that Benevolo is the last author to truly maintain this aspiration towards unity and a synthetic reading of the urban phenomenon throughout all of his research and publication work. He has the ability to contextually read the forms of architecture and the characteristics of context and the built environment, the evolution of society and urban transformations within one look.

In his preface of the book I segni dell ‘uomo sulla terra. Una guida alla storia del territorio, published by the Mendrisio Academy of Architecture in 2001, Benevolo explains how his “patient research” resulted from the modern movement’s discovery of a new relationship between history and architectural planning, with a positive outcome in both fields, “in the

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¹ Merely as an example: from his earliest writings, Benevolo directly recalls an extraordinary variety of studies, from those carried out by Ashton on the Industrial Revolution, by Hammond on the living conditions of English cities, by Lavedan and Auzelle on urban history, by Hoskins on the English landscape, by Hitchcock and Giedion on the evolution of the history of architecture, by Pirenne on medieval cities, also finding room for the social philosophers, Rousseau, Marx and Engels.

² In order to reconstruct the transformations within Schools of Architecture in Italy, we will allow ourselves to suggest Granata E., Pacchi C., E’ possibile riformare le scuole di architettura in Italia?, in “Territorio”, n.49, 2009.
The research leading to (summarised in) this paper chooses some of Benevolo’s books as its main source, moving from a strong research hypothesis: Benevolo has worked throughout all his career on nothing else than one single book, written and re-written, modified, extended, revised in the different editions, and with different titles (especially published by Editori Laterza).

This choice very well reflects the specific features of the research style and the approach to reality that led this author throughout his work: history and, more specifically, history of architecture and city, is a tentative and temporary narration, written as it would be on a clay tablet, because judgements and hypotheses are transient, and there is always the need to note and to register in real time changes and innovations in the landscape, in the built environment and in the cultural field, because they change at a very fast pace, and because also our perspective on them changes.
In this sense, Benevolo is animated by a typical phenomenological sensitivity, which looks closely to the changes in the object of observation, and, at the same time, to the changes of the subject who observes. In this way we see the work in progress (as Benevolo likes to put it), that brought him to work again and again on the very same themes, through the correction of some judgements, the addition of new research hypotheses, finally opening up a dialogue with new sources and different voices, and broadening his view to include non European contexts. This approach characterised, for instance, the different editions of the Storia dell’architettura moderna, a book in which the attention to urban evolution and to the urban planning project is crucial, which was originally published in 1960 and many times updated since. A few years later, in 1963, Benevolo publishes Le origini dell’urbanistica moderna, in which he works upon some of the same themes (both books move from the cleavage opened up by the Industrial Revolution in the built environment and in its relationship with local societies): in the Preface, he explicitly acknowledges that “Una breve ricostruzione di queste vicende è già stata tentata nella Storia dell’architettura moderna edita anni fa da Laterza. Sono stato indotto a tornare sul discorso di allora non da un’esigenza dialettica forse prematura, ma alcune recenti esperienze che hanno reso urgente la definizione di un nuovo rapporto fra urbanistica e politica, quindi fra pianificazione spaziale e pianificazione socio-economica”.

This is the reason why we thought that trying to gather some of the recurring themes in a sort of (conceptual) map might be an interesting endeavour, useful in order to orientate the reader and the researcher.

Three turning points in the evolution of the European City

The European City is the most accomplished example of this capacity to come up with a narrative of urban history able to bring together disciplines and research perspectives and which attempts to tie together large-scale phenomena with the singularity and specificity of individual contexts. The city model which has affirmed itself over time is a typical product of European culture.

The historical city “contains a secret which is essential for us, namely, the only qualitative model which is still reachable by our democratic civilization”, “besides administering it and defending it, we can live in it, hope to learn it and perhaps try to reproduce it […] The alterations, if kept within certain limits, can guide us in to pinpoint the secret of its formation” (Benevolo, 2006, pp.4-5). These words shed light on the reasons behind all this going back and forth to the European historical city, the kind which developed between the Early Middle Ages and the modern age. Benevolo names the recurring invariables in his works: the aspiration to keep the historical and architectural interrogatives tied to civil and ethical instances of intervention on the contemporary city; the opportunity to explore different scales, to allow multiple competences and references to interact in a dialectical way from urban sociology to history of art, and from history to demography.

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3 Translated into English as History of Modern Architecture
4 Benevolo, Le origini dell’urbanistica moderna, Laterza, 1985 (ed. or. 1963), p. 10, “A short reconstruction of these events has been proposed in the History of Modern Architecture published by Laterza a few years ago. I have been led back on the same discourse not by a dialectic need, maybe too early, but by some recent experiences that made the definition of a new relationship between town planning and politics, therefore between spatial planning and socio-economic planning, urgent” (our own translation).
5 , our own translation
In just under two hundred pages, he proposes a unitary summary, clear, precise and easy to read, in which individual cases and cities are inserted into a single, coherent narration, in which “multiplicity is one of the constituent characteristics of specificity”. The idea which runs through all the research on the European city and which confers an organic structure to the text is that the constituent features of the European city that have their origin in the Middle Ages, are not defined a priori but are instead narrated through examples pertaining to individual cases.

The interpretative strategy adopted thus revolves around certain emergent characteristics, observing how these change in three key periods: the formation of the city in the Middle Ages in its distinction from the ancient world; the phase of formal “definition” of the city, in which cities change without altering their original nature; and, finally, the profound transformation of the last two hundred years, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and the involution of the traditional urban plan and alteration of the consolidated balance which this event represents.

These three historical periods make up three stand-alone narratives, each constituting a sort of “mise-en-scène” in which the author lingers on the transition period, in which a social, economic or cultural transformation also has a deep and revolutionary outcome on the form of the city, always striving to highlight the link between the elements and the causal nexus. Let’s focus on the three scenes.

**The rise of the Medieval city**

The narration of the birth of the European city in the Middle Ages has as a background the dissolution of the ancient world. Only by directly contrasting and comparing with ancient civilisation can Benevolo outline the features of the newly-formed city, attempting to pinpoint certain recurring elements despite the variety of forms and models.

The definition of historical periods necessarily requires the identification of moments of discontinuity, of turning points in the flow of events, and the rise of the European city makes no exception to this rule; conventionally Benevolo locates this rise in the last decades of the Western Roman Empire. It is precisely the eclipse of the ancient heritage that gives rise to the possibility of the birth of the new. And it is the mental distance from ancient models of perfection and order that will permit us to invent new manufactures and break the rules of the past. The strive for perfection in the urban form, based on great public transformations, is overcome and replaced by a familiarity with imperfection and a tolerance of irregularity, incompleteness and contrast- all traits which will stick as long-lasting characteristics of the European city. Or even, perhaps, become its defining feature.

Having said this, however, Benevolo does not propose an abstract reading of the European city in its formation, but rather puts forward precise readings of the origins of specific cities, such as Venice, Pisa, Bologna, Florence, Siena, Naples, but also Paris, Bruges, Lübeck and Novgorod. So from city to city, Benevolo outlines certain recurring elements despite the variety of forms and models such as continuity: roads are in fact organised in such a way as to form a unitary space, where it is always possible to find one’s bearings; the site is secure; political stability and collective government efficiency allow the formal definition of public and private spaces (naturally excluding perimeter walls) and single building fortifications to coincide perfectly with residential façades. Complexity also characterises public space, articulated as it is in squares, buildings, cathedrals and districts with specific functions. Another element which unites the cities is the way in which they are concentrated within an articulated space, defined by walls
and by a marked difference between city and countryside. Lastly, the cities share an ability to renew themselves within their perimeter, to grow on themselves - a feature which was preserved throughout the whole of the fourteenth century.

The many cities described by Benevolo make up various excerpts from a single narrative and are still today the network of the European city system, “a canvas of many differentiated centres was created, and it is still on this canvas that the present-day network of settlements in which we live is largely drawn. A good portion of the medieval centres survive today as local administrative units […] characterized by limited but not artificial autonomy and a real and living role in popular customs and imagination. The urban settings created in the Middle Ages would continue to exert a strong influence on cities which subsequently multiplied in size many times” (Benevolo L., 1995, p. 73).

The adjustment to the rules of perspective

At the heart of the narration of the baroque city is the transition from the perspective used in the Renaissance to its maximum expansion in seventeenth and eighteenth century cities. Benevolo dedicates a number of urban history monographs to the Renaissance (Benevolo 1969, 1981, 2000), as well as one of his most famous essays, La cattura dell’infinito (1991). In this case too, Benevolo puts forward an interpretation which reconstructs the economic, social and cultural reasons which combine to bring about the transformation of architecture and the form of cities. The most stimulating interpretation which the author proposes focuses on the transition from the closed and defined concept of space dominant in the Renaissance to a more open one, which transcends the urban scale of the Baroque period.

Medieval and Renaissance architecture does not drastically distance itself from Classical architecture: volumes are created to be perceived in their individuality, and if looked at from afar they take on the form of flat images which blend into the landscape. Even the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore, an enormous artefact in a good position and which can be seen miles away, is considered homogenous with the other natural elements.

Towards the end of the 16th Century, in fact, the balance of Renaissance culture is broken. The deliberation on the limits of physical space appear ever increasingly in both scientific and poetic literature. Questions begin to be asked on matters inherent to the idea of finite space. Copernicus’s treatise (1543) cast doubt upon the traditional astronomical hierarchy and Galileo’s Sidereus Nuncius (1619) burst it apart. In the new universe, space was a single infinite medium, not a characteristic of the bodies occupying it and differentiated according to their qualities. Architecture had to find its place in this unlimited universe and was forced to employ its tools, the perspective arrangement of recognizable elements, in order to capture the new notion of the infinite. In this context, outside the boundaries of Classical space, the planning of cities and territory was attempted anew and the inconsistency of visual culture became apparent” (Benevolo, 1995, p.126).

Throughout the 17th Century, the deliberation on the system of the world was really a discussion on God. Scientists gradually began to give some of God’s attributes, such as infiniteness and eternity, to the universe.

In the 1700s the reflection continues: Newton believes the space of the universe is infinite and traversable. Leibniz believes it is full, created by God once and for all, and adequate to his omnipotence.
Benevolo highlights the deep social impact of these theories, brought about by the transformation of the ruling classes who by now had interiorized those values, by the growth in economic resources destined for architectural and urban interventions, and by the development of scenographic and theatrical techniques.

“An artistic culture lost the certainty of its objectivity, it moved into the world of sentiment and morality, taking on the collection of values that science was eliminating from its domain. This basic change profoundly altered the balance of architectural choice” (Benevolo, 1995, p.125).

Perspective remains the fundamental way of representing reality, but loses its function of framing visible figures within a traditional hierarchical system and becomes a neutral geometric construction to be explored through the techniques of geometry. This new concept of space can be traced in certain urban elements: long, straight roads in which views of the vanishing points at the extremities are favourably appraised. This is the case in Rome with via Condotti, in Genova the via Nuova, in Palermo the continuation of the Cassero down to the sea, and in France, but also in the American grid design – we lose the sense of the end of the road, which seems to stretch out to infinity.

From the 1650s to the 1750s, this orientation becomes more and more influential: the dilation of perspective towards the representation of a limitless universe, in the political climate of European absolutism, influences the form of cities, new residences and gardens. With a touch of paradox. The dilation of perspective measurements to the limits of visual perception has a value which is twofold: the expectation that perspective rules be confirmed on the new scale is interweaved with the fear that said rules may be surpassed. By now, the scenographic medium permits us to make use of perspective to its highest degree, up to the point of losing its function. Such a dilated perspective no longer has anything to do with an orderly vision of the world which has been defined a priori.

The emergence of the Industrial city
The third ideal-typical turning point that frequently appears in Benevolo’s books coincides with the Industrial Revolution. In this case, much more than in the other two, a threshold in the socio-economic organisation is used as a significant turning point in the city building evolution, and this makes this third step a bit different from the other two. The impression is that in this case the overwhelming importance of the socio-economic transition overshadows the attention to the physical dimension that so typically characterizes Benevolo’s approach. This is particularly true in the synthesis that Benevolo proposes for the European City, while for instance in the History of Modern Architecture the picture tends to be more balanced. In The Origins of Modern Town Planning, again the main attention is on the social and economic transformations linked to the Industrial Revolution, particularly in England, but the attention to the physical dimension of this phenomenon emerges with stronger evidence.

The starting point of the discourse is once again set in the acknowledgement of a “complex system of reciprocal causality” (Benevolo, 1995, p.160) between different events: a number of them passes a critical threshold at the end of the Eighteenth Century, and this accounts for the relevant transformation which follows.

The factors that “had an impact on the architectural setting” can be traced back to four: the processes of the industrial revolution, the re-examination of the European cultural legacy; the challenge to the institutional mechanisms on which the coherence of architecture and urban
planning relied; the technical progress. As it is easy to see, the main focus here is one the macro transformations in the socio-economic and institutional settings rather than on some cultural dimension more strictly interwoven with architectural history as such.

The quick recall of the well known effects of the industrial revolution, firstly on the city in Britain, and then in the rest of Europe, is sketched through the words of a contemporary, significantly Charles Dickens, taken from A Tale of Two Cities (1859)⁶.

The second aspect, the re-examination of the European cultural legacy, focuses on different aspects, two of which are probably worth mentioning: the relationship with antiquities and the archaeological discoveries on the late Eighteenth Century (p. 162) and the shift from Classical to Neo-classical architecture, read in its constitutive relationship with the political revolutionary movements of that same century (p.163) “The buildingscape of late eighteenth century Europe, in which the contributions of the past found for the last time a measure of harmony and peace, no longer stood at the forefront of research and innovation. It became a coherent but generic background, where nothing more of importance would take place, as new experimentation had moved to other fields” (ibidem, p. 163).

The third point is examined in depth, because Benevolo fully acknowledges, here more than in other essays, the importance of institutional mechanisms, especially in regulating the shifting relationship between private and public space. From this point of view, the difference between the ancient city and the industrial city is clear-cut: “New legal ordinances regulated the spheres of private property and private initiative and established that public authorities could intervene only according to a fixed and accurately defined procedure…All the regulations, customs and other mechanisms that mediated between the individual and the state with regard to the construction and traditional management of the buildingscape were dismantled, all at once as in France, or else gradually as in England” (ibidem, p. 166).

The fourth and last aspect, technical progress, is once again read under the perspective of the effects on regulation of the emerging needs it causes in the infrastructural field, while for instance in the History of Modern Architecture the author declines the attention to technical progress in the building field along four different dimensions: the relationship between scientific progress and training for architects and engineers, the refining of traditional building techniques and systems, the innovations triggered by the use of new materials (iron, glass…), the role of technical progress in ordinary architecture.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the most famous example of the complete transformation that an Ancien Régime city underwent in Europe in order to be adapted to the emerging needs of the Industrial era, the case of Paris, and it goes back to the debate around Haussmann’s intentions and the results on the built environment of the city, but also on the understanding and the feelings of the contemporary intellectuals: here again, as in the book’s Introduction, Benevolo quotes the famous lines by Baudelaire “Le vieux Paris n’est plus (la forme d’une ville/Change plus vite, hélas! Que le cour d’un mortel);…” (ibidem, p. XVII).

Reading the physical features of the city in order to train architects and to speak to one’s time

⁶ Benevolo L., The European City, cit., p.160. This quotation, that so effectively condenses the conflicting impressions of contemporary observers, is used in many of Benevolo’s works, for instance in the History of Modern Architecture.
The three stories that we propose help us to highlight three aspects of Benevolo’s work that we think are worth mentioning.

The first one is the role of interpreter. Architect, urban planner, city historian, Benevolo proposes an interpretation of the European city able to connect history, social and economic transformations with the ability to read individual building and urban materials alike. To interpret therefore means to be able to capture – and to describe – relevant connections and linkages, the transition between different ages, within the variety of elements offered by history, with the awareness that every interpretation is tentative.

Secondly, there is the ability to design convincing and contextual narrations. The three turning points mentioned in this paper are approached very differently by Benevolo. Each tale shows its own coherence and rationality; Benevolo does not aim to build a single method of inquiry, to give just one representation of history, but he rather proposes convincing tales that are able to suggest to the reader the sense of complexity that emerges from the evolution of urban settlements.

Finally, Benevolo refines its interpretation over time. Benevolo throughout his long career as a scholar published so many essays that he has no paragon, at least in the Italian context. This scholarly production, that can be observed over the years, shows the ability of the author to change the course, to critically come back to his own ideas, to go more in depth in the analysis of some themes and to drop other aspects. In particular, we observed the loss of a sort of encyclopedic approach that characterized Benevolo in the Fifties (especially in some monographs) in this later text about The European City (written at the end of the Eighties, beginning of the Nineties), a much stronger synthesis and the attention paid to a smaller number of themes, but moving from the same research materials. The tale about the European city, through all these steps, comes to the bare bones, using a communication strategy that the critique of architectural history has frequently interpreted as an effort to disseminate and simplify. We think, on the contrary, that it deserves a second and more accurate reading and analysis.
References


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