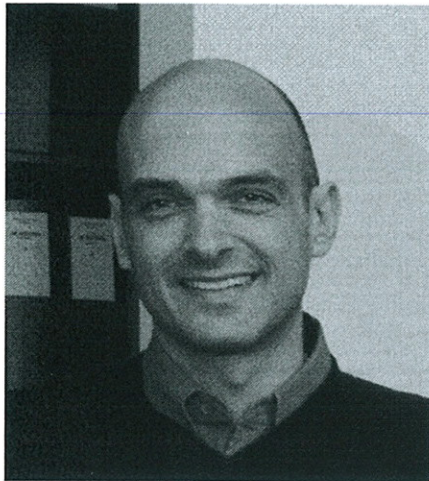


"It's inspiring when we learn and work with each other."

Interview

Right after arriving in Amsterdam and before giving a presentation at the COST TUD Exploratory Workshop on Urban Development and Mobility I get the opportunity to interview Antonio Borghi. At local level Borghi is a practicing architect in Milan, Italy. At a European level he is engaged with the Architects Council of Europe (ACE). "In the last 6 years I have been coordinating the Work Group Urban Issues of ACE, which is why I am invited at this COST TUD conference. My task within ACE is to track the developments of European urban policies and to try to promote the physical dimension, meaning the morphological and design aspect, as the creative synthesis between the complexity of a context and a building programme. Sustainable urban development includes economic, social and environmental issues but we should not forget the physical presence of urban fabrics and buildings, their cultural identity, how they affect interpersonal relationships, which are crucial to building a sustainable community."



Well Designed and Built

"Urban policies are the outcome of an iterative process between theory and practice and it is interesting to see how knowledge and visions from the research and professional world flow into the official documents of the European institutions and in several EU measures that affect the Urbact environment." In the book "Well Designed and Built" Borghi writes about projects and discussions which he took part in at European level on behalf of ACE, as a thematic expert of the Urbact Programme, as researcher at the Politecnico di Milano and at the Town Planning Institute of the Stuttgart University. "I tried to get hold and reflect on the milestones of the European urban policies discourse during the past 10 years, trying to understand why the role of the physical dimension was quite high in the declaration of principles and then quite disappointing in the outcomes. In my research I tried to give an overview as comprehensive as possible of all urban related matters, but at the end the subjects I have treated more deeply are those I know better from my professional background. In the book there is less about economic development and social policies and more about housing, which includes many urban development aspects and since years is quite high on the European agenda."

Have housing needs and design changed over the years?

In 2006 and 2007 I contributed to the Urbact Houses Network, which dealt with the management and renewal of large housing estates in new and old member states. It was a great experience to touch and feel the differences in buildings, which were constructed before WWII compared to the ones built in the '60s, or the more modern buildings, in the different countries. The styles may vary but the issues, challenges, requirements and proposed solutions have definitely turned out to be comparable. For instance I had the opportunity to visit many grande ensembles, which were necessary in the boom of the '60s and '70s when families with many children moved to the industrial cities. What became clear is that buildings from that time are different in terms of provision of space, services and technology. However success or failure of a housing complex is always both urban and design related. A good example is the Barbican in London. Today this grand ensemble, paramount example of Brutalism architecture from the '60s is a very cool place to live in London, although it was built in a perfect modernist style. Thanks to the diverse range of art, music, theatre, dance, film and educational events taking place at the Barbican centre the whole neighborhood has become a great place to live and it attracts people from other parts of London as well, making this quite strange and out of scale architectural object lively and friendly. This is an example of how the urban context is more important than the single project. Barbican would surely not have worked so well in another context, country or time. It's both a direct supply to a current demand and a matter of how to adapt to a radical "climate change".

And how does it work the other way around? How do housing policies affect urban policy?

You can have the greatest, most beautiful and innovative zero-energy housing complex in a fantastic natural landscape, but without public transport, economic activities and social services it will never be a sustainable project. People need more than a sustainable home; they need a sustainable built environment. Urban policies have to consider economic, social and environmental related factors as part of an integrated and holistic approach and think about how things change over time because cities keep growing and changing. In the neighborhood where I live in Milan you can find one of the most "disadvantaged" housing estates and next to it another one which is well maintained and fully functional. They have been built almost at the same time, with comparable design concept and prefabricated concrete slabs as parts of a large social housing project, but the property and management scheme made the difference. In one case it resulted in a rather run-down area, in the other to a sustainable community. Many factors play a role in determining the quality of a housing estate in relation to demand. Before undertaking any physical regeneration project a careful and interdisciplinary professional assessment is needed.

Building houses for an ageing population

Urban and housing issues are strongly affected by demographic and migration trends. Ageing population and ethnic minorities have become a major issue in most European countries. Europeans are becoming older so urban planning and housing projects should bare in mind specific needs, services and facilities for elderly. This does not mean that we have to build homes specifically and only for the elderly but

when building, bearing in mind the elderly, children and disabled people. People own and love their own things and growing old does not mean that you stop loving your own house. You have the right to stay in your house which is possible by creating houses which can be easily adaptable to your specific needs. Moreover people are going to live longer and play a very important role in society, supplying a lot of services that the welfare cannot afford anymore. Cities and buildings have to evolve accordingly.

What makes a place/neighborhood/city liveable?

This is the question we should always keep in mind and try to find a creative answer to. It is like asking ourselves: how are we going to be happy? Sustainable cities are not just a matter of CO2 emissions, they are the places where citizens like to live and are willing to engage in contributing to urban development. Just like every city, every person has different needs depending on his own background and current conditions. But there are many things that all citizens need: a home, embedded in a community and a cultural context to live in; a regular job and the perspective to be able to sustain his/her own family; a healthy environment with the possibility to enjoy the services everyone needs in a safe and comfortable way. All these needs were well described in the Bristol Accord on Sustainable Communities (2005). I appreciated very much the pragmatic approach of this document also because it is very clear that a Sustainable Community must be Well Designed and Built, which became the title of my book. It is crucial that, once the community stakeholders agree on a list of desired urban qualities, the capacity to coordinate actions to achieve them is there, because all these qualities are interconnected and inseparable. Sustainable urban development needs good governance and a long term integrated and holistic approach. If you are able to tackle all issues at the same time you will have the multiplier effect and start a virtuous circle, as we can see today in the cities like Copenhagen, Munich, Zurich, Barcelona, Helsinki, Stockholm etc. Economic development, social cohesion, environmental sensitiveness, cultural identity and good governance belong together.

What will urban policy in Europe look like in the future?

I hope there will be some sort of harmonization among different planning cultures - something which is already happening in architecture – so that we can understand each other better and speed up the cooperation we need to progress. Urban policy in Europe is a political discourse, which affects the national and regional levels of policies and this in its turn, affects Europe. I think it's important that European countries learn from each other. For example the Mediterranean countries can learn a lot on urban planning from the Nordic European countries and vice versa. There are many brilliant urban development policies in place in European cities: we just need to share them. This is also what "new" Member States expect, although they are very proud of their urban tradition. Local tradition should not be an excuse to replace borders we agreed to get rid of. It's inspiring when we learn and work with each other. It gives the sense that even within this economic crisis we can still get through it together.

Read more...

In the right column under 'See also' you can read a more extended version of the interview. In this full version you can find out more on:

- Web based housing indicators on European level and international level
- Improving neighborhoods
- Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities and how this, according to Borghi, will affect European towns.

By Elizabeth Winkel, EUKN

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