Smart Technologies, Back-to-the-Village Rhetoric, and Tactical Urbanism:
Post-COVID Planning Scenarios in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This viewpoint article is aimed at critically scrutinizing both institutional and bottom-up narratives about post-COVID planning scenarios in Italy. Through a critical multimedia discourse analysis, the article tries to deconstruct the most recurring narratives about the future of cities in Italy, particularly those interlacing smart city rhetoric with alternative models of settlements and "soft" planning micro-actions, in order to highlight both conflictual perspectives and new potential paths to follow for a more inclusive tech-led urban development.

KEYWORDS

1. INTRODUCTION

Italy was the first Western country to be heavily affected by Covid-19 after the first Chinese outbreak, particularly the northern regions which are traditionally more densely urbanized and interconnected in a wider network of global flows (Murgante et al., 2020). Apart from the consequences in terms of health and emergency management, mainstream discourses have been early monopolized by the need to reconsider the ways of moving, using, living and working in the cities, particularly those characterized by high levels of anthropic stress, pollution and wide commuting catchment areas (ie. Milan, one of the most affected cities in the country). As a result, several scholars, professionals, institutional actors, cultural associations and citizens have put a new emphasis about the urgency to completely transform urban planning models and practices.

On the one hand, the "back-to-the-village-movement" has been invoked as a privileged settlement model which should lead to the reconceptualization of the relation between urban centres and rural/periurban areas. Small towns and villages ("borghi" and "paesi" in Italian language) are the veritable pillars of the traditional urban settlement in Italy, although they have been increasingly abandoned over the years. This process of depopulation has been particularly harsh in the so-called "inner areas", the most marginalized ones according to a classification based on the travel distance from centers providing essential services, namely in the fields of education, health and transport. These areas are

at the core of a government-led strategy of territorial cohesion, the *National Strategy for Internal Areas*, launched in 2014 (Urso et al., 2019).

On the other hand, discourses about post-Covid development of bigger cities have been focused on practices of tactical urbanism, which includes a set of "soft" micro-actions at the neighborhood level in order to temporarily broaden bike and pedestrian routes. These proposals have been strongly supported both by some local governments and bottom-up associations or civic committees.

Both perspectives are strictly intertwined with smart technologies, insofar as small towns should be better equipped to support new forms of smart working and technology-driven services, while tactical urbanism should be integrated with tech infrastructures and software (e.g., infomobility apps) to increase its effectiveness in times of pandemics. Obviously, these are very hopeful viewpoints, since the levels of digital divide (both in terms of technological infrastructures and of socio-cultural digitalization) are still very high in the country.

Through a multimedia discourse analysis based on a variegated set of information sources, the research aims at deconstructing the main narratives linking new technologies and planning which have been recently shaping post-Covid planning scenarios in Italy. In so doing, the research aims at categorizing them according to their typology, the actors involved, and the practices/models which they are based on, in order to evaluate their aims, potentialities and critical aspects.

So, the article is organized as follows: the next section deals with the theoretical frame; the third briefly retraces both the history of urban settlement in Italy and the evolution of digitalization and smart models and practices in planning strategies; the fourth paragraph deals with the discourse analysis about post-Covid planning scenarios; the final section includes discussion and final considerations.

2. POST-COVID SMART AND TACTICAL (ANTI)URBANISM: POLICIES, PRACTICES AND RHETORIC

Over the last decades, several cities at the global scale have developed sustainable-oriented agendas through a variegated repertoire of strategies, policies and practices. Cities are regarded as the most appropriate "living workshops" to analyze the increasing interaction among ICT's, local sustainable development, bottom-up participation and urban planning (Certomà et al. 2015).

Among the numerous theoretical and operational paradigms, particularly two "mantras" have fostered discourses on urban planning, notably during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Embedded at the opposite poles of two urban planning visions, but at the same time paradoxically converging, the Smart city framework and, more recently, Tactical Urbanism have been transversally mobilized to envision new forms and functions of contemporary cities.

2.1. A New Smart Era, Towards a Growing Securization?

As far as smart urbanism is concerned, over the last years it has become a buzzy word in urban planning strategies at the global scale. Variously labelled also as "intelligent", "wired", "cyber", "sensient" city (Kitchin, 2014; Kelley, 2014), the first approach to smart city was a top-down one, entailing a vision of a government-driven and technology-enabled development (Giffinger et al. 2007, Caragliu et al., 2011). As Cohen puts it (2015), the most recent approach is a "citizen co-created" Smart City which should promote social inclusion through citizens' tech-mediated empowerment. Nevertheless, this last perspective too is based on a transversal and ubiquitous rhetoric, often exploited for branding exigencies (Söderström et al., 2014), insofar as not always technologies entail a bottom-up participatory democracy, ending up to foster new social and cultural polarizations (Aru et al., 2014). What is more, several EU smart cities experiences are supported by new forms of marketization triggered out by unprecedented assemblages of neo-liberal governance (Cardullo, Kitchin 2018).

As a matter of fact, strategic discourses about the (neoliberal) efficiency of smart urbanism often mobilize a top-down tech-mediated citizenship by incorporating an increasingly pervasive technocratic urban governance where citizens seem to be reduced to human sensors (Goodchild, 2007) or sensing

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