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CITIES OF THE WORLD, A WORLD OF SUBURBS.
TRANSFORMATIONS OF 'SETTLEMENTS RULES'
AND 'FORMS OF LIVING' IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN
AMERICA (AMONG GLOBALIZATION,
CARS AND TELEVISION)

MIASTA ŚWIATA, ŚWIAT PRZEDMIEŚĆ.
TRANSFORMACJA „ZASAD OSIEDLANIA SIĘ”
I „FORM ZAMIESZKANIA” WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ
AMERYCE ŁACIŃSKIEJ (WŚRÓD GLOBALIZACJI,
SAMOCHODÓW I TELEWIZJI)

Abstract

Beginning with definitions of the terms 'city' and 'suburbs', this article discusses the transformation of the urban settlement patterns, identifying the changes in the 'forms of living' and the cultural factors that have produced them, with particular reference to Latin America. Factors that are shared – also chronologically – with the Countries of the Mediterranean Europe (but not only) and involve cultural, social and economic globalized issues.

Keywords: city suburb forms of living

Streszczenie

Wychodząc od definicji terminów „miast” i „przedmieścia”, niniejszy artykuł omawia przemiany w zakresie wzorców osiedlania się, identyfikując zmiany „form zamieszkania” oraz czynniki kulturowe, które je spowodowały, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Ameryki Łacińskiej; czynniki, które obszary te mają wspólne – również w ujęciu chronologicznym – z państwami basenu Morza Śródziemnego (choć nie tylko) i obejmują kwestie natury kulturowej, społecznej i ekonomicznej w rzeczywistości globalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: formy zamieszkania na przedmieściach miast

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1. Introduction (A world of cities)

It is said that, during last decades and accentuating a process in fact began with the Industrial Revolution, the world has changed (and still is changing) and the population is concentrating more and more in the cities while the one that living in rural areas is decreasing.

According to the United Nations, in 2014, the proportion of the global population living in urban areas was 54%; breaking this down onto different continents and countries, the percentage of urban population is the following:

Europe → 74%

Poland → 61%

Germany → 75%

Southern Europe → 70%

Italy → 69%

Spain → 80%

Greece → 78%

North America → 82%

USA → 82%

Central America → 74%

Latin America → 84%

Argentina → 92%

Brazil → 86%

Chile → 90%

Paraguay → 60%

In 1950, the global rural population was 1.8 billion and the urban figure was 0.7 billion. In 2006, this proportion reached equilibrium (50%/50%).

If this trend continues, it is estimated that in 2050, the world population will 3.2 billion people in rural areas and 6.3 billion in urban areas.

30% of these will be living in the 600 largest urban centers and will produce more than 60% of world GDP (Source: UN).

However, why do statistics refer to 'urban areas' and not 'cities'?

2. City. What is it?

This is the most important question in the context of this research. What exactly are we referring to when we speak of cities?

Observing an aerial photo of the city center of Rome, we can all agree on whether or not this is a city. Or not?

Of course, I think so that we all agree that this is a city. Yet, to quote a great Italian urban planner, Marcello Vittorini, the city is a 'complex fact' [3]. This is true even more if we read its definitions.



III. 1. Rome city center from satellite (source: Google Maps)

According to the Collins on-line dictionary, a ‘city’ is:

1. any large town or populous place.

A ‘town’ is:

1. a densely populated urban area, typically smaller than a city and larger than a village, having some local powers of government and a fixed boundary.

But we are sure that the majority of the world population lives in cities (or town)?

3. A World of Suburbs

3.1. Definitions, birth and evolution of the suburbs

The majority of the World’s population now lives in urban areas with between 4,000 and 10,000 people per square kilometre [5]. An increasing proportion of this population lives in the so-called ‘urban sprawl’.

So, what is ‘the suburb’ – this strange form of settlement that has spread from the second half of the twentieth century?

Studies of suburbs are very numerous and the academic and geographical contexts in which they are explored are highly diverse. For the sake of simplicity, we should start from the definition of this word.

According to the Collins online dictionary, a ‘suburb’ is:

1. a residential district situated on the outskirts of a city or town¹.

When does the process of ‘mass suburbanisation’ begin and what causes it?

The suburbs and, more generally their peripheries, are in a broad sense, an invention of the modern city that was born with post-industrial urbanism.

The increase in wealth per head of population involves a global tendency to live in larger or more exclusive spaces. The greater or lesser availability of financial resources is strongly correlated with the availability of space for living. To summarise, simplifying greatly some social behaviors related to settlement models, we can now be considered ‘classic’ (and highly globalized) the following:

- the social class that has the resources (the ‘rich’) always chooses the more favourable living environment (according to their needs and tastes) – exclusive buildings in the city centers or large (or very large) suburban extensions where they build or buy their residences;
- the ‘middle class’ aspires to imitate the behaviors of the ‘rich’ and, when possible, chooses the environment in which to live apartments in the city centers or small or very small suburban extensions where buy its medium-sized houses;

¹ Also the definitions of ‘suburb’ in other languages are very interesting.

According to the dictionary of the Real Academia de Espana (RAE), in Spanish ‘*suburbio*’ is:

“Neighbourhood or population center located on the outskirts of a city and, generally, constitutes a depressed area”.

In the Italian language, according to the Treccani Dictionary, ‘*suburbio*’ is: “In urbanism, it is the complex of the built-up areas that surround an inhabited area, namely the area where the new buildings, which are the gradual expansion of the center itself, are spreading (usually it is synonym of the most popular ‘periphery’)”.

- the lower class can never freely choose the environment in which to live (but would obviously like to do so) and tends to live where it can – building complexes for social housing, informal settlements etc.

Among these classes, there is definitely a (not cultural) ‘permeability’ of information (by the contemporaneous mass media, television, internet etc.), but much less a ‘social mobility’ – that there is always, but is increasingly from top to bottom and much less towards the top².

Simply repeating what happened in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, when the newborn ‘middle class’ went on to establish itself in the new outlying neighbourhoods of the existing (historic) city, in the second half of the twentieth century, both in Latin America and in Mediterranean Europe, for a ‘emulative’ process, the middle class abandoned the city center to go to live in the low-density suburbs, chasing a ‘myth’ that, largely through the medium of television, began to spread in that period and was characterised by single-family houses with gardens, or, in urban areas of more recent demographic development, in exclusive buildings (towers, gated communities etc.).

Since the end of Second World War, cities have suffered profound transformation processes both in order to the morphological ‘rules’ of settlements and, especially, in ‘living’ models.

A transformation process that has transversely affected the whole world and that marks, with appropriate distinctions, the beginning a (one way) path towards the globalization.

So we can discuss the Suburb as place where the sense of community was lost?

Or, more simply, the Suburb as a lifestyle?

3.2. Suburbanisation dynamics: Latin America and Mediterranean Europe

Latin America presents the most extreme urban and cultural phenomena in terms of the concentration of wealth and the increase of poverty.

Since the end of Second World War, the big cities of Latin America have been characterised by the seriously high extent of social imbalances (extreme poverty versus extreme wealth), this has led to a downward spiral of physical and social degradation.

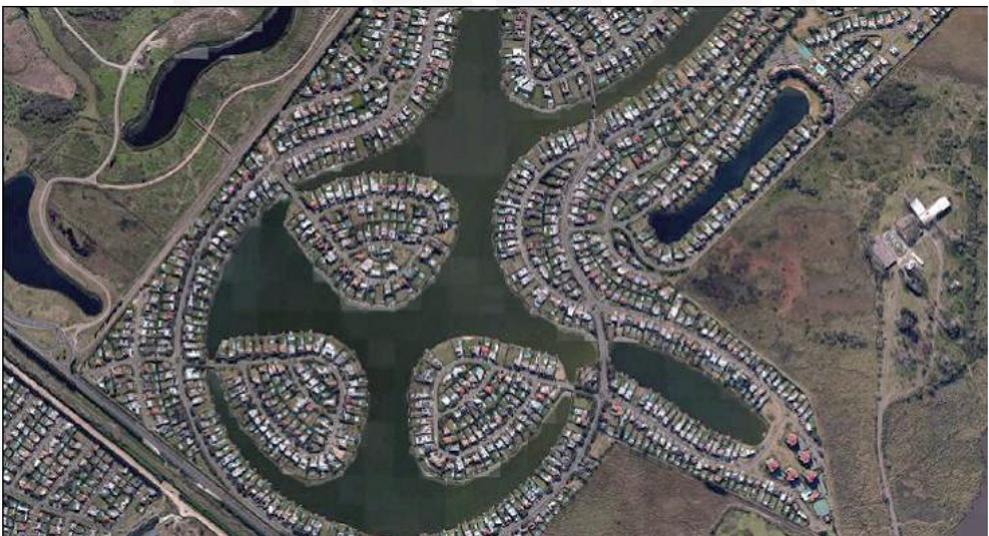
While in Europe the countryside is gradually becoming emptier, due the destruction of communications networks networks and hence the difficulty of reaching the work and consumption centers, in Latin America, the same process was motivated by the need to survive the severe economic crisis that affected practically the whole continent as a result of the profound changes in global political and socio-economic equilibriums – the non entry of almost all Latin American states into the war was the main cause of this.

Consequently, the most important Latin American cities - grew enormously – were (more or less) capable of accommodating these internal migratory waves. People who, as in many other parts of the world, was chasing the same dream: a decent home and a job.

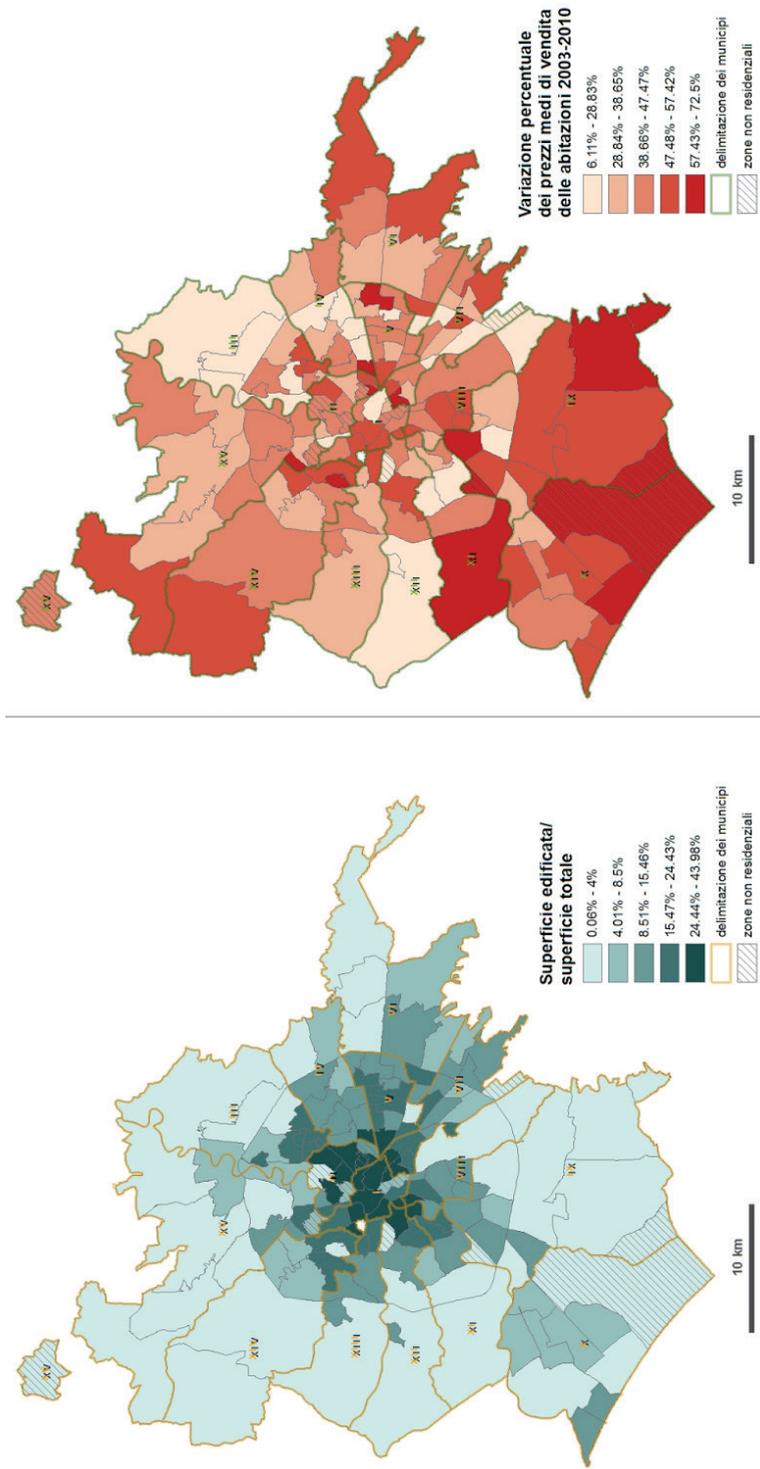
² Local or globalized economic crises affecting the economic level of the people in a negative way (respectively as the one in Argentina in 2002 or as the last that dating back to 2008, but that still is not completely outdated) are historically more frequent rather than large economic ‘booms’, that rarely go to involve the entire population but usually only a part of it – which is already normally capable of catalyze more financial resources.



III. 2a. Western suburbs of Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. Barrio privado 'Santa Barbara', Partido del Tigre, Buenos Aires (source: www.guiacountry.com – access: 11.10.2016)



III. 2b. Western suburbs of Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. Barrio privado 'Santa Barbara', Partido del Tigre, Buenos Aires (aerial view, source: Google Maps)



III. 3. Rome – building density and real estate values (source: mapparoma.blogspot.com – access: 11.10.2016)

The distribution of work and wealth has become increasingly complicated and is the main cause of the exponential growth of social exclusion and poverty levels – that still affect practically all the states of Latin America, where the proportion of the population that is in poverty or even of indigence increases with the same proportion of the spread of crime.



Ill. 4. San Salvador (El Salvador). Violence in the historic centre

From the urban studies perspective, historical centers and popular neighbourhoods of cities – which suffered (and in some cases, are still suffering) processes of physical and, therefore, social degradation – are the urban areas that are most involved in transformation of settlement patterns.

Historical centers, by their nature, are composed of a prevalence of ‘poor’ buildings, which, apparently, do not guarantee modern living comfort standards.

The main dynamics that affected historic city centers in the second half of the XX century, both in Latin America like in Europe, are as follows:

- abandonment by traditional inhabitants and economic activities;
- reduction of public service facilities (directly resulting from the decreasing population living in the historical center);
- degradation of buildings and public space;
- replacement of traditional inhabitants with new inhabitants (these are often immigrants who are attracted by the availability of low-cost housing);
- social degradation and lack of the sense of belonging (direct consequence of the substitution of traditional with new inhabitants that were in fact ‘forced’ to establish

themselves in the historical center, degraded, due to the lower cost of living. New inhabitants which, however, do not recognize themselves in the place which they live and which not cure as their own, up to turn it into a scenario for possible tensions between different national groups.



Ill. 5. Palermo (Italy), historic centre



Ill. 6. Montevideo (Uruguay), historic centre



Ill. 7. Rome (Italy), ‘Corviale’ social housing complex (1970)

On the other hand, social housing neighbourhoods (usually located in – popular – suburbs and created as arrogant ‘architectural experiments’) are characterised by: low quality constructions; frequent scarcity of public services; difficulty of access to and shortage of public transport.

The abandonment of the historical centers, the birth (and degradation) of the ‘modern’ popular neighborhoods and the spread of the suburbs are three closely linked aspects of the same, unsustainable, settlement culture.

From a socio-anthropological perspective, it may be concluded that this cultural transformation came just after the spread of television³.

The massive suburbanisation process (of North American tradition) just occurs when the television becomes (right away) the uncritical carrier of that precisely globalized cultural model. An historical phase of sensitive and progressive weakening of traditional cultural patterns but in the absence of new and just as powerful ones.

Over the same years, in fact, the public policies have decisively oriented to encourage the mass motorization and consequently the construction of roads and highways to the detriment of public transport, which since then has begun a slow decline – in the last twenty-five years

³ Television began its regular broadcasts in 1950 in Brazil (Rede Tupi), 1954 in Argentina (Channel 7), in 1956 in Uruguay (Canal 10), in, in 1957 in Chile (UCV Television), and so on for the other states of South America.

In Italy, television began in 1954, with the start of the regular broadcasts of RAI-TV.

favorite by the policies of liberalization which in fact have thrown into crisis or completely suppressed transport by rail, whether it be passenger or freight.

It is remarkable that the neo-liberal policies in the rail transport sector adopted by almost all the Latin American nations derive from the English model launched by the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in the 1980s and that they are behind the directives of the European Union on the liberalisation of the rail market.

In a similar context, this ‘new’ cultural living model finds fertile ground thanks to the gradual loss of importance of traditional agriculture, due to a short-sighted, and often simultaneously grandiloquent process of industrialization, which favoured the progressive abandonment of the countryside, which was already economically unprofitable, or, when possible, transforming the same in urbanisable area.

Phenomenon that is, unfortunately, still enduring in Latin America.

3.3. Comparisons: Buenos Aires and Rome

Comparing two big cities such as Buenos Aires and Rome – so far apart geographically, and, apparently, so different from each other – might seem like daring. However, this is not true.

Buenos Aires, capital of the Republic of Argentina, has just under three million inhabitants and a population density of 14,000 persons per square km.

Its metropolitan area has just under 13 million inhabitants, with a density which drops to just under 5,000 people per square km.

Rome, capital of the Italian Republic, has just under three million inhabitants and a population density of just over 2,000 inhabitants per square km.

Its metropolitan area has just under four and a half million inhabitants, with a density which drops to just over 800 inhabitants per square km⁴.

The parallel between these two great cities are founded in the strong connection due to the Italian emigration to Argentina and the obvious cultural correspondence that is established between them (as if more than the money the Italians emigrants had sent home even the ‘new’ settlement traditions and therefore the ‘how’ to do home and also cities, result of a exchange with other immigrant cultures).

In both capital cities, the earliest suburbs, far beyond the urban borders of the time, were born in order to provide housing for people who could not access houses in the central areas of the city.

Despite the two cities having very different stories, the last hundred years has seen them gradually share some of the same urban, social and economic phenomena.

Subsequently, since the 1960s in Italy and by the end of the 1970s in Argentina, settlement models totally breaking with the past, based on isolationism and indifference to public space – which is no more a ‘necessary’ exchange place for interpersonal relationships – begin to spread.

In that period thus we witness a massive, uncontrolled suburbanisation process that led over the years to register the same consequences: congested traffic, inefficient public transport, air pollution, reduction of green areas, difficulties in access to public services.

⁴ Source: ISTAT Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, Italia (2011); INDEC Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, Argentina (2011).

Buenos Aires and Rome, comparative chronology

Buenos Aires		Roma
Independence	1810–1816	
Mass immigration (1850–1900: large industries installation, refrigerating and metallurgica, in the south, and first workers periphery) Born peripheries (area Barracas – southeast)	1852	Emigration
	1861–1870	Unit of Italy – Rome Capital
	1865	First Civil Code
1850. Plan of Adolfo Sourdeaux 1853. Argentine Constitution 1853. First tramways 1857–1865. Western Railways, North and South	1873–1883	1873-1883 First Regulatory Plans (Viviani)
1869. First Census: 187,126 inhabitants 1869. Bateman directed the first construction of sewers and water supply	1870–1909	New quarters for employees (Esquilino y Prati) 1871 Census: 212.386 inhabitants
1880. Federalization of Buenos Aires, capital of the Republic 1894. Avenida de Mayo is inaugurated 1895. Second Census: 663,854 inhabitants 1897. Tramways were electrified	1900–1931	New neighborhood for workers (Testaccio)
Neutrality – Role of Argentina in the two wars mundiales (“granary of the world”) 1903. Circulate the first taxis 1910. The city celebrates the centenary of the May Revolution. Five exhibitions 1912. Universal Suffrage Act 1914. Third National Census: 1,575,814 inhabitants 1914. First subway line (line A) between Plaza de Mayo and Primera Junta 1915. National Commission of Economic Houses 1915. Guemes Gallery, first “skyscraper” of Buenos Aires 1928. Circulate the first buses 1930. Military coup 1932. First slum, “Villa Esperanza” 1932. Establishment of the Office of Urbanisation	1915–1918	First World War
		Crisis (second emigration)
	1922–1943	Fascism
	1931	1931 Regulatory Plan (M. Piacentini) 1931 census: 930,723 inhabitants
	1940–1945	Second World War

Buenos Aires		Roma
1935. Edificio Kavanagh. 1936. The Obelisk is built for the Celebration of the fourth centenary of the first foundation of Buenos Aires. 1938 River Plate Stadium. 1944. Building Code.	1942	New Civil Code (still in force)
1946. Juan Domingo Peron, president of Argentina. 1947. Nationalization of the railways. 1947. Fourth National Census: about three million people live in Buenos Aires (this number remains today). 1947. Opening of Airport "Aeroparque Jorge Newbery". 1949. Opening Ezeiza International Airport.	1942	National urban planning law
Horizontal property law	1949	
	1945–1960	Born the "modern" peripheries (legal and illegal)
First National television (Canal 7)	1954	First National television (RAI-TV)
1955 military coup. Peron's overthrow. Bombing of Plaza de Mayo. 1958. Call for elections. Arturo Frondizi, president of the Nation. 1958. Establishment of the Office of Regulatory Plan.	1955	Fiat produces the model "600" (the first Italian car of the era of mass mobility) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udhejTTiW0I
	1958–1962	Economic Boom http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpcZl3OUJyk&feature=related 1960. Rome Olympic Games 1961. Census: 2,187,682 inhabitants
Regulatory Plan for the City of Buenos Aires.	1962	Prg 1962 General Regulatory Plan (emergency housing, first plan for economic and popular Housing)
1966 military coup. Arturo Illia overthrow. 1968. Plan to eradicate slums. New models of asentamiento ("country club") 1968. Master Plan "Buenos Aires 2000".	1975–1995	Nuevos modelos de asentamiento (nuevas periferias, ilegales y legales)
Military dictatorship 1983. Call for elections. Raul Alfonsin, president of the Nation.	1976–1983	

Buenos Aires		Roma
1990–1991. Privatization of public services 1997. Environmental Urban Plan of the City of Buenos Aires	1990–2000	1990. World Cup UEFA (infrastructure works, refurbishment of the Olympic Stadium) 2000. Jubilee (infrastructure works and for the reception of pilgrims)
2002. New Urban Environmental Plan of the City of Buenos Aires	2002–2008	Prg General Regulatory Plan 2003–2008: new metropolitan centralities and urban growth projections (> 600,000 inhabitants)



Ill. 8. Buenos Aires, Autopista Teniente General Pablo Riccheri

The analogies in policy-making and cultures have certainly influenced the recent development of the two cities – which recorded from that period the more and more increase of the suburban population. In both cases, if at the beginning the process of suburbanization was in fact favored by real estate values, significantly lower than the compact city, in a short time this process became favored by the desire to live in the suburbs – imitating, as mentioned earlier, North American lifestyles that spread since the 1960s mainly through the new media of that time: the television.

And thereby causing the loss of the sense of city.

4. Globalisation?

Between the 1950s and 1960s, there occurred a singular and apparently inexplicable globalised transformation of the forms of urban settlements that led to the spread of suburbs.

The contemporary suburbs identify the vast area low density built that has inexorably surrounded the big cities around the world and has produced an urban-suburban-meturban mosaic with many missing pieces, urban fragments which in turn produce fragmentation with a higher land consumption.

Suburbs is now an unsolved and unfinished place, characterized by a lack of community services, central places and identities that leads to do appear similar the periphery of Santiago de Chile or Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro with those of Miami or Rome or Athens.

Unfortunately, sprawl and suburbanisation rely upon individual vehicular mobility which is unsustainable due to higher and higher environmental costs.

As discussed, the television seen as a sounding board of the North American myth, starts to spread the germs of the globalization after Second World War.

Subsequently, neoliberal policies (transport privatisation in, for example, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, and also in Europe) and some large urban projects (Olympics, world sports events and so on) with their load of speculation, corruption etc. (as occurred in Brazil, Italy, and Greece, for example) have aggravated the situation and have had a detrimental effect on the condition of the big cities.

Yet we are faced with many contradictions.

While in one part of the world, the suburbs are dying (such as in San Bernardino, California) due to the 2008 economic crisis (but, when the crisis will end, they will return to grow?), in other parts of the world (fewer developed?) the people continue to dream of living in a villa in the suburbs.

It is not easy task to convince this people that this dream is unsustainable.

To rediscover the sense of the city, we must first rediscover the sense of community.

The perspectives towards which to orient ourselves then are those of the “smart” city but even more towards the just and inclusive city. A city where “right to the city” means accessibility and is guaranteed to all (and not just a few).

In this way we will be able rediscover the sense of belonging to the places and overcome the individualism, having care and improving the local specificities in a global system of (world) cities.

Only then can we transform the city suburbs.

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