Small towns between Globalization and Sustainability

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I piccoli centri urbani rappresentano una frazione significativa della popolazione totale in molte regioni del mondo. Molti di questi centri hanno subito modifiche in seno alla loro economia e tipologia a causa della globalizzazione e dei cambiamenti economici del mondo avvenuti già nella metà del ventesimo secolo. L'economia locale indipendente delle piccole città, che è stata assorbita dall'economia globale, ha determinato la perdita delle identità locali e la loro stessa qualità di vita. In tale ragione risiede l'importanza di una progettazione urbana sostenibile - intesa come l'interazione tra economia, ambiente e benessere sociale – finalizzata a conservare i valori locali delle piccole città di fronte alla globalizzazione[i].

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[i]   A cura della redazione.

Introduction

The research aims to highlight the globalization effects on the small towns typology, and how could sustainable urban development affects the quality of live in small towns.

Small towns can be extraordinary places, towns that have their own identity and a sociable and enjoyable way of life for their inhabitants, places whose inhabitants think globally but act locally. Small towns can develop sustainable niches within regional, national and global economies. Small towns are urban places with no more than about 50.000 residents. Although they are challenged to find a place in the global economy, they have environmental, cultural and economic assets they can use in developing their sustainable futures.

Small towns account for a significant fraction of the total population in many regions of the world. In Europe as a whole, small towns are home to one fifth of the population. In some regions such as Central and Eastern Scotland, much of Scandinavia, Central and Southern Italy and Southern Ireland, at least half of the population lives in small towns. In the United States, the fastest-growing places in the country over the past two decades have been towns of between 10.000 and 50.000 inhabitants, which together account for just over 10 percent of the U.S. population. (Knox, Mayer, 2009, 11)

The Diversity of Small Towns

There is great variety in the history, morphology and economy of small towns in the developed countries of the world, though the great majority of them were established as traditional market towns. They have remained small in size because they were bypassed by the transportation systems and agglomeration economies of the industrial era. Many others grew initially as small manufacturing towns during the early industrial era, but did not have sufficient comparative advantages to remain competitive in the face of changing technologies and the logic of scale and agglomeration associated with the economies of the mid twentieth century, or with the globalization of the late twentieth century.

As a result, many small towns have experienced decades of economic and demographic stagnation. Outmigration has typically accounted, lacking in vision and leadership. When this happens, communities lose the capacity to understand and deal with the many internal and external influences on their well-being. With declining economies and limited capacity to manage change. Meanwhile, economic rationalization and globalization have led inexorably to a decline in locally owned businesses, with a consequent loss of local distinctiveness, character and sense of place.

Nevertheless, some small towns are attracting both population and investment. In most of the more highly urbanized regions of the developed world there has been a selective movement of both jobs and households away from metropolitan areas to small towns. That called "counter-urbanization which was a consequence of improvements since the 1970s to rural infrastructure, new communications networks, improved water supplies, and better television reception, thus making small towns and rural settings more attractive to both employers and individuals. This idea, in turn, is related to a second broad explanatory theme, corporate

reorganization and decentralization (Campbell 1996).

Market towns and hill towns that had previously been regarded as dull and restrictive have come to be seen as picturesque, peaceful and affordable by many of the key professionals whose employers have moved there. These towns, along with others whose combination of house prices, pace of life and physical attractiveness, have drawn in retired households, teleworkers, long-distance commuters and second-home owners, have become "gentrified" with upgraded residences, stores, cafes, and restaurants. While this has brought significant increases in the overall prosperity of towns, it has also brought problems of social inequality and environmental sustainability. It has also contributed to an increasing uniformity of appearance and experience, and an increasing emphasis on competitiveness and place marketing on the part of small towns.

Different kinds of small towns, in different settings, have different needs, challenges and opportunities. Their well-being is often critical, not only to their inhabitants, but also to the economic and social cohesion of metropolitan regions and deep rural areas. Yet they are very often neglected in national policy, slipping through the net between urban policies and policies for disadvantaged rural regions. For the past 20 years or more there has been a relative lack of research into small towns, with researchers attention being drawn more to the effects of globalization and technological change on large cities and city regions.

Table 1. Typology of small towns (Knox, Mayer, 2009, 13).

Growing small towns	Equity	• Housing affordability. • Land use pressures.
	Environment	• Environmental degradation. • Politics of growth and environmental quality. • Encroachment on cultural landscape.
	Economy	• Increasing service reliance. • Homogenization of retail sector. • Dependence on other communities for jobs.
	Culture & Community	• Threatened sense of place. • Commodified identity and culture. • Increasing community capacity.
Declining small towns	Equity	• Decline in public service provision
	Environment	• Neglect of cultural landscape • Vacant land use
	Economy	• Resource-based/old economy in decline • Lack of growth opportunities
	Culture & Community	• Vacant and abandoned housing • Diminishing tax base • Lack of animation in politics • Isolated indigent population • Social isolation • Ageing demographics

Nevertheless, as the effects of globalization have become increasingly imprinted on many small towns of every description, new movements have emerged to address the needs, challenges and opportunities of small-town communities. Many of these movements involve partnerships among local community groups, local businesses and local governments. They are often framed in terms of the sustainability of their community, with an emphasis on livability and quality of life. These movements and organizations, and their challenges and responses, are a recurring theme in this book. Our emphasis is on collaborative and

networked approaches, highlighting the best practices that are emerging in response to the challenges of globalization and structural economic change. Table 1. summarize the elements affecting the growing and declining of small towns (Simms *et al.* 2005).

Globalization and Small Town Development

Over the past three decades, people and places everywhere have been confronted with change on an unprecedented scale and at an extraordinary rate. Economic and cultural globalization has resulted in a "network society". Some cities have become "global cities", capturing key economic roles in the global economy. Small towns, on the other hand, have captured few of the benefits of globalization. They have not been immune, however, to many of the negative consequences of globalization. Global economic interdependence and reorganization have undermined and disrupted local economies and exposed them more than ever to external control. The social and cultural forces, associated with globalization, have overwritten local social and cultural practices and globalization has generated a world of restless landscapes, in which the more places change the more they seem to look alike and the less they are able to retain a distinctive sense of place (Ritzer 2007, 6).

Economic Displacement

Globalization has its own spatial logic. Some places are well situated to benefit from the new transnational, postindustrial, information economy, others less so. Small towns everywhere, however, face intensified challenges in maintaining economic viability as intense competition constantly modifies the variable geometry of commodity chains and consumer markets.

For some small towns, economic development has rested on the ability of business interests and public policymakers to attract investment from large, transnational corporations. Elsewhere, in the absence of such large-scale investment, local economic development has typically reflected structural shifts in the overall economy of the fast world, resulting in a proliferation of office parks, retail malls, supermarket and fast-food chains. Big superstores and chain retailers have been allowed to spread by planners, town councils, and governments desperate to sustain the local tax base. But the chains have become the economic equivalent of invasive species: voracious, indiscriminate and often antisocial. In small towns it does not take long for superstores, supermarkets and cloned shops to dominate the local economic ecosystem. Their big, centralized logistical operations, are driving the homogenization of business, shopping, eating, farming, food, landscape, environment and people's daily lives (Mahyer 1999).

Town centers that once filled with a thriving mix of independent butchers, newsagents, tobacconists, bars, book shops, greengrocers and family-owned general stores are fast being filled with standardized supermarket retailers, fast-food chains, mobile phone shops and the fashion outlets of global conglomerates. The homogenization of the retail environment in small towns has developed an index to identify "clone towns": which are places where the individuality of high street shops has been replaced by a monochrome strip of global and national chains. In contrast, a "home town" is a place that retains its individual character and is instantly recognizable and distinctive to the people who live there as well as those who visit. Places with a larger population size are more likely to be clone towns and places with a smaller population size, home towns. This is probably a reflection of the demographic profile necessary to trigger the interest of chain retailers (Simms *et al.*, 2005).

Quality of live and Livability

The experience of economic and demographic stagnation in small towns, along with the imprint of globalization and the pressures of counter-urbanization, has highlighted the question about the quality of life. From any perspective, quality of life is a complex, multifaceted concept. It is also a highly relative term: What would be considered a "livable" community in one part of the world might be unsatisfactory in another. This might be due to cultural differences or to different standards of living that alter expectations for urban design, transportation and other infrastructure and service provision. Nevertheless, the idea of quality of life remains a powerful one (Marcus, Francis, 1998, 92).

Livability is essentially about designing and managing the places where people choose to live and work and it can be understood as a key competitive element between cities in terms of attracting both people and businesses. At the same time, quality of life has

four overarching themes: environmental quality, the physical attributes of places, the functional effectiveness of places, social behavior and public safety in places. Livability depends upon three key interdependent spheres of social life (economy, social well-being and environment). The economy, which supplies jobs and income, is fundamental to residents' health (e.g., ability to meet basic needs of food, clothing and shelter), as well as higher order needs including education, health care, and recreation. At the same time, the economy should efficiently utilize raw materials drawn from the environment to ensure sufficient resources for current and future generations. Social well-being relies on justice: a social and spatial distribution of economic and environmental resources that is fair and systems of governance that are inclusive of all residents. The environment is the critical infrastructure that provides natural resources, the capacity for waste assimilation and links between people and the natural world (CLGD 2006, 15).

Small cities places and Community

Essential places for living can be divided into main categories: home as "first place", workplaces as "second places" and community places as "third place", which are informal gathering places that are the core settings of informal public life hosts the regular, voluntary, informal activities gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work. They are places for sitting, conversation or reading; places where there are regulars but where everyone is welcome, neutral ground that is easily accessible and open to all (Oldenburg 1999, 16).

Small Town Sustainability

Sustainability, like livability, is about the interdependent spheres of the economy, the environment and social well-being. This is often couched in terms of the "three Es" of sustainable development, referring to the environment, the economy and equity in society. It is a normative view that combines environmental sustainability with notions of economic growth and social justice. The difference between livability and sustainability is that the concept of sustainability involves a longer-term perspective. The definition of sustainable development from the *Brundtland Report*, which examined the issues at the international scale, is that sustainable development is «development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs» (WCED, 1987, 40). In fact, this is a relatively small part of the report's concept of sustainability, which extends to reviving economic growth; meeting essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water, and sanitation; ensuring a balance between population and resources; conserving and enhancing the resource base; reorienting technology and managing risk; merging the environment and economics in decision making; reorienting international economic relations (Rodwell 2009).

The complexities and ambiguities involved in the interdependencies among economy, the environment and social well-being within urban settings mean that the subject can be overwhelming and, for local planners and policymakers, this can lead to a kind of despairing inertia. Finding a balance between the three Es is not easy in practice because of various conflicts associated with relationships between them. In particular, providing economic opportunities for a wide range of people can often be in conflict with environmental protection. Never the less, growing calls for local solutions to seemingly intractable global problems mean that small town sustainability is increasingly seen as important issue for the future of small towns (Rodwell 2007).

Sustainability and Identity of People and Places

The key concept of improvement processes is identity. A large city or a small town is made up of physical objects that have their own history linked to the evolution of the relations between town and territory and to its economic and social transformations. But cities don't consist only of physical objects, they consist also of theirs inhabitants, of their way of interacting with the places, of perceiving them and identifying with them: it is necessary to be aware that any physical transformation leads to a reformulation of the mental maps of the inhabitants. Therefore, sustainability in small cities has to ensure that this reformulation is not laborious and does not create imbalances, and that identity of people and places is the main concept of any project to conserve the small cities quality of life (Ricci 2007).

Conclusion

Globalization affects small city in various negative and positive ways, but the main negative effect is losing the local identity of many small towns duo to modern economic deformation. Sustainability is more applicable in small town duo to its scale and less complicity in its urban problems. Small cities need more consideration as keys to solve many urban problems within their regions, and they need more attention to conserve their identity and cultural heritage against modernization and globalization.

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