A fresher approach to housing policy

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An urban policy that embraces the dynamic nature of interpersonal and intertemporal networks will thus privilege simple and stable rules

By DR CARMELO FERLITO / Pic By MUHD AMIN NAHARUL

WITH the advent of the new year, the debate on housing policy shows comforting signals. While at the beginning of its mandate, the Pakatan Harapan government seemed very much oriented in moving on the footsteps of its predecessor, emphasising on the direct involvement of the government in building affordable homes (it is well known as the "one million in 10 years" promise), a deeper engagement with the actual situation of the market forced the government to change direction.

The first signal of this change is that — for the right or the wrong reasons — the project of directly building one million affordable houses in 10 years seems to have been abandoned.

Most recently instead, Minister Zuraida Kamaruddin declared the intention to restructure PR1MA (1Malaysia Housing Programme) on the model of the Housing and Development Board of Singapore — it is an idea that does not encounter my favour, at least in the way in which it was presented, but it has to be welcomed at least from two perspectives: 1) it is clear that PR1MA, as we know, does not work, and 2) there is an attempt to move the housing policy debate to a different level.

These two signals — like the Home Ownership Campaign and a partial reduction in the threshold for home purchases by foreigners — probably indicate that the government grew in the awareness that the institutional level is the one where a public role can be played, rather than a direct involvement in the market process.

Whether such a change was driven by lack of funds for direct intervention or by an actual "conversion", it has to be taken as a great occasion for developing a fresher approach to housing policy.

I would say that we should start even with the vocabulary: I suggest to talk less about housing and land policy, and to shift to talking about urban and territory policies.

This shift suggests that a city — or a territory in general — should be looked at not simply like a set of bricks or physical resources; rather, cities and territories are complex networks of relationships, in which the human factor plays the decisive role.

Such a change in perspective can have tremendous consequences. First of all, when bricks and land are at the core of the analysis, the belief can arise that territories can be shaped and designed with a top-down process of central planning; this is because an emphasis on

the "hard" side of the matter is typically static and fails to appreciate the dynamic processes of change which become evident, instead, if we move our gaze toward the relationships between humans and the surrounding environment and the interpersonal networks which characterise different territorial frameworks.

A focus on networks and relationships allows us to see how urban and extra-urban territories are more likely the result of bottom-up processes of evolution and change over time. From this perspective, cultural factors are more important than bricks.

How is it possible to translate these considerations into a policy change? At the first sight, it may seem that the perspective I am proposing would even enlarge the role of government in the territorial space, having now to include not only the physical part — constructions, provision of shelters — but also the immaterial part, for the sake of a more holistic approach to the subject.

Instead, here I am proposing precisely the opposite. Recognising that cities and other territorial conglomerates are much more than land and bricks — in a nutshell, recognising complexity — is the prerequisite to realising that a centrally planned bottom-down approach is unable to embrace that complexity and therefore, a serious urban policy needs to be, first and foremost, humble.

An urban policy that embraces the dynamic and evolutionary nature of interpersonal and intertemporal networks constituting a territory will thus privilege simple, proscriptive (what must not be done) and stable rules, rather than complicated, prescriptive (what must be done) and unstable ones (like recently described in a paper by Stefano Moroni and Stefano Cozzolino).

Moreover, as again mentioned by Moroni and Cozzolino, "we should prefer relational rules, which are abstract and general, rather than directional rules, which are specific and particular".

Such a shift in the way in which rules are designed and conceived will be a way to privilege the spontaneous and evolutionary aspect of territories, which are, indeed, network communities before being collections of buildings. The institutional change I suggest may lead to the emergence of cities that are the result of the cultural networks characterising certain geographical realities, rather than the projection of elsewhere conceived housing projects.

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