

PUBLIC SPACE AS URBAN DEVICE FOR MULTICULTURAL CITIES

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Abstract

It's common to think that the digital experience, as the largest public place, (1996, John Perry Barlow's Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace) could replace the real space, deleting contacts with the outside world, mediated by the use of computer. However, movements like guerrilla gardening, occupy wall street, or to the manifestation of the Arab Spring, showed that the public space, even in its weak form, is still the place to develop the sense of place, the sense of lost identities, and where citizens reveal their will to get again these values. But this reconquer seems more complex, due to changed composition of the society, made by the phenomenon of migration and the resulting melting-pot of natives and immigrants in the same place.

In fact the numerous studies, which for many years have focused on describing the settlement practices of immigrants, all agree that the phenomenon of migration today is no longer to be considered contingent and marginal in our country but, rather, a structural factor.

If on the one hand, it is true that until now the public open space, where encounter is frequent or inevitable, has frequently been the setting for 'conflicts' arising from cultural and behavioural differences, initiating phenomena of exclusion and escape on the part of the native population or vice versa, on the other hand the most up-to-date and unconventional intercultural pedagogy, from which we learn that today the immigrant populations consider the public open space as a place where to indulge in recreational practices, which are essential in reformulating individual identities and restoring or building relations with others, whether immigrant or native.

The future scenario of intercultural cities, places in which diversity is a positive factor, a resource", is a reality that awaits the development of innovative and original urban policies on public open space, propulsive of different strategies and processes of architectural and urban design, necessary as much as those relating to policies regarding access to residence and school and socio-educational training..

Three case significant studies, three public spaces, a disused railway yard, a commercial building, a residential court, belonging to three different cities (Copenhagen, Los Angeles, Milan), show how it's possible to recreate, through the study of the new public forms within the cities, this real idea of community and social integration within the intercultural society and the fragmented urban realities.

Keywords: Social inclusion, public spaces, immigration

INTRODUCTION

Urban public spaces are too frequently and too quickly erased from the map. There is no doubt that, as demonstrated by numerous morphological studies on urban structures, mainly in Europe, the spatial figures of the compact city are turning into a fragmentation of the urban fabric, in which the public space tends to be trivialised and undermined in contrast with the privatisation of the land. Nevertheless, it can also be said that in recent years an increasingly widespread number of urban-planning experiences are confirming that this structural change has not brought about the total cancellation of the value of public space. This is true, in spite of its established spatial introversion, corresponding to places of trade and recreation, and the temporal heterogeneousness of the practices of use that are increasingly characterised by individualistic rather than collective principles.

The idea also that the collective dimension would be transferred entirely to digital platforms, as the largest public places, as John Perry Barlow declared in 1996 in his Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace, replacing material spaces and eliminating relations with the outside world, which are mediated by the use of computers, has only partly come to pass. Instead, digital platforms have made it possible to spread ideas and information and create new multicultural channels, thanks to the overcoming of spatial distances (Hannerz, 1996).

Confirming this are numerous examples of the 'valorisation of the public space', such as the Arab Spring demonstrations, of which Tahrir Square has become the symbol, the Turkish Gezi Park/Taksim Square protests or movements like Occupy Wall Street in Zuccotti Park. Protests and activism, though built and supported through digital communications, still inevitably depend on the physical, material places of urban space in order to truly exist; thus streets, squares and parks have been allocated as references, not only symbolic and useful for the visibility of the movements, but as places in which to develop important activities concerning the re-appropriation of the city and of the experience of being citizens of the world.

Simultaneously, movements such as guerrilla gardening, etc. have initiated a profound redefinition of the practices of use, with consequent repercussions on the strategies of design and composition of public space, involving more and more the work of designers, architects and urban planners, but also civil servants and citizens' associations.

The formal and purely self-referential component of urban projects has, in fact, given way to research based on strategies and tactics that are more conducive to allowing the development of multiple functions in time and space, through the active involvement of citizens in the construction of public places and increased attention to the themes of environmental and economic sustainability.

Even the vocabulary associated with these new areas or urban actions has changed. New nouns and adjectives have been adopted to describe their variety, such as 'pop-up', 'DIY (i.e. do-it-yourself) urbanism', spontaneous, temporary, informal etc., all very effective in describing the variety of spatial, material, participatory and diffusive character of the relative underlying design strategies.

IMMIGRATION, CITY AND PUBLIC SPACE

These new perspectives are even more interesting when applied to the transformation of public places in which the urban space is able to fulfill the fundamental role of social integration and help to redefine and resignify this collective asset that today appears to be the most fragile of the entire redevelopment process. This achievement, in fact, may be even more beneficial if we consider the changes taking place in the composition of society, heavily characterised by structural and consolidated phenomena of immigration and multi-ethnic coexistence within the

urban structures.

In the implementation of this new scenario, in fact, undoubtedly one of the most interesting urban laboratories is that of cities with a strong multi-ethnic character.

The future scenarios of intercultural cities, historically subject to migration flows, will have to involve the morphological reorganisation of built-up and open spaces in order to ensure an acceptable social structure, defined through urban policies that welcome multiculturalism as a resource, thus guaranteeing a high quality-of-life index. These subjects, in fact, are known to be key issues on the agenda of many governments in achieving high livability ratings for their cities and the well-being of their citizens. As is already the case in some countries, the OSCE is planning to replace the GDP of the individual countries with the so-called Better Life index, which would assess economic well-being on the basis of living conditions and quality of life: housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, governance, health, life satisfaction, safety and work/life balance.

It is obvious, in this regard, that different countries and regions also differ considerably both in their migration flow types and respective immigration policies. We need only to think of the differences between the United States and Europe, or how, within Europe, the many national histories have affected flows in time and in the subsequent management of emergency. It is well-known, for example, that European countries such as Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Germany and Austria have implemented precise policies of scattered-site housing in the urban structure, geared to cultural assimilation. A similar, but less systematic, approach has been adopted by countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece. Countries like Britain and the Netherlands, meanwhile, have tended to define specific ethnically-connoted areas aimed at social inclusion while maintaining diversity. Lastly, in France, while a similar ethnic connotation of the urban structure has been implemented, it has nevertheless coincided with a specific and systematic desire for cultural assimilation.

Despite these differences, it is important to note that today the numerous studies that for many years have focused on describing the settlement practices of immigrants within the urban fabric, all agree that the phenomenon of migration today can no longer be considered contingent and marginal but, rather, a structural factor. Statistics, in fact, confirm the tendency of the subjects towards greater stability and permanence, greater balance between the two genders, family reunification and the enlarging of these families with the birth of children who are forming the second generation of immigrants.

This change is confirmed by a difference in the use of the city and its spatial structures, which is less bound to temporary places of emergency (e.g. reception centres) and more to complex integration projects. In Italy, for example, policies on immigration, which regulate the management of flows, are being transformed into policies for immigration, which concern access to services, public participation and job placement. After the initial activity relating to the theme of welfare, in fact, over the years the number of activities dealing with housing, work and school placement has multiplied. This growing character of multi-ethnic stability within the city has led, therefore, to an intense and frequent use of both its open and closed public spaces.

According to the different origins of the inhabitants different ways of living in the city and sharing its spaces can be identified. The public space, in fact, generally shows to be more heavily frequented by immigrants than natives.

In Italy, for example, in cities such as Rome, Milan, Bologna, Naples, etc. stability in relation to housing and the migration project (Lucciarini, 2011) corresponds to an equal use of the public space from the point of view of time and habits on the part of family groups in Eastern Europe, while the situation within Chinese or North African communities is vastly different. Another

interesting difference is found among individual subjects, often women from Eastern Europe, whose use of the city is similar to that of their Italian peers, but is more widespread and dictated mainly by restrictive working and housing conditions.

Streets, squares and parks, therefore, are increasingly used as places of trade, meeting and recreation by immigrant populations. In the streets and squares, close to the places of residence and worship and the street-level commercial spaces, one can find a primary dimension of use of the urban space, immediate and real, as a resource and as a container of life.

An attempt to map the public places used by these new citizens should also take into account spaces related to mobility - stations, points of the arrival and departure of trains and buses, which often serve as a symbolic landmark of their initial access to the new urban setting. Likewise, small local public gardens or large city parks, but also river banks, are increasingly being used as a place of recreation, often daily and on Sundays.

In contrast to the locals, who tend to use these spaces in a discontinuous and inattentive fashion (although here again a reversal of this tendency is being seen), besides the practical dimension of use there is also a symbolic use associated with memory, relating to the images and experiences lived in the country of origin.

Attention to these components can help to define a spatial, temporal and symbolic complexity capable of enriching urban spaces rather than normalising them on the basis of standardised elements responding solely to the logic of security, law and order etc. This richness can be acquired as an added value of the profound transformation of the public space already underway, adopting the excellent results achieved in other areas of a scholastic and educational nature. Cultural diversity, rather than becoming a barrier and a hindrance in the construction of social relations, given the overlap of living spaces, may rather be an effective characteristic in the establishing of public space in which all citizens are active participants.

Therefore, extending our vision and, consequently, our projects to include these places will allow us to identify them as real opportunities for new forms of intercultural socialisation and mutual learning and teaching (Giusti, 2008).

Such spaces could become common collective spaces of the city, both for the immigrant population, by which today they are once again, and more intensively, being used, and the native population.

Unfortunately, up until today public open spaces, where the presence of others is the norm (i.e. where encounter with others is frequent and unavoidable), have often been the scene of 'conflict' arising from differences in cultural origin and habits, which have triggered principles of exclusion and withdrawal among the native population or vice versa.

The prospect of a new, 'normal' scenario of intercultural cities that are less conditioned by conventional assumptions, however, can only be possible through new urban-planning principles geared to the figure of the public open space (squares, parks, neighbourhood streets, etc.), as well as those relating to policies of access to residence and scholastic / socio-educational training.

This is confirmed by more advanced and unconventional intercultural education, which has shown that for immigrant populations today the public open space has become a place for indulging in leisure practices, essential in reformulating their individual identities and restoring or building relationships with others, whether immigrant or native.

Disciplines such as anthropology emphasise the need to become acquainted with places other than school, such as public open spaces, places where immigrants may activate an inner communication geared to reviving and remembering their own culture and discovering others and their acquired environment.

It is important that these multidisciplinary concepts, especially those of a pedagogic nature, are transferred, or, better still, work together in order to establish innovative and original urban policies on public open space and the consequent review of the strategies and processes of architectural and urban design. There can be no doubt, therefore, that there exists a disciplinary deficiency in urban policies, since they are deaf to the need to adopt longer available phenomena to the specific context, characterised by a widespread diffusion of the immigrant population, and to implement urban planning strategies that can help reformulate new types of open space as innovative actions in the initial construction of intercultural urban scenarios.

Clearly, in fact, we continue to operate habitually on the basis of urban emergency policies, mixing policies and, with regard specifically to the practice of the redevelopment of public open space characterised by an intensive use by immigrants, policies of the breakup of territoriality (Yiftachel), thus systematically producing phenomena of exclusion, even though it is acknowledged that the immigrant population (in Italy, for example) has never shown a particularly high concentration of the ethnic group to which these policies are directed.

Simultaneously, in an architectural and urban context, interventions carried out in this regard cannot help but refer to compositional strategies that are inadequate and geared to a standardised concept of urban furniture (Lanzani, 2003), confirming the deadlock in the definition of public space within the contemporary city, to which architectural design has for some time been striving to give new strategic perspectives that can be updated and thematised by observing new subjects and different uses in time and space, thus transforming them into meeting places for different cultures, rather than places for the seclusion and exclusion of a part of the population.

This urgent morphological reorganisation of urban structures defined by the existence of a multi-ethnic component appears even more necessary when we consider another contextual change that is taking place in European and extra-European cities alike, i.e. a reverse process of redensification.

The diffusion process associated with economic expansion and construction in the last decades, and in relation also to the economic crisis, appears to have stabilised. After a number of years we are now seeing a reversal of the expansion of the urban structure, due to a redensification process that is causing many governments, academics and investors to turn their attention to areas of dereliction and abandon. The recovery of these areas, which are often located in central districts or on the boundary between disparate urban contexts, must inevitably take into account the new social composition of the urban population involved, through the acquisition of new instruments and guidelines.

The urban fabric may be interpreted using an existing map of varying porosity - small, medium and large-scale - based on complex spatial gradients: space-related percolations that define movement from public, collective, semi-public, private space, etc. This porosity represents not merely a spatial but also a social condition. It is made up of the missing pieces in the urban fabric, which bring together different aspects of the same. In its various figurative connotations, therefore, the public open space may take advantage of this same characteristic of porosity by transforming it into a strategy of architectural and urban design (Viganò), thus gaining added value from the complex structure of the multicultural city, based on the presence of different ethnic groups.

CASE STUDIES: LOS ANGELS, COPENHAGEN , MILAN

The projects identified - Star Apartments in Los Angeles, Superkilen in Copenhagen and 4 Corti in

Milan - were realised in three very different contexts, from the point of view of location, scale size, spatial strategies, the composition of the groups of inhabitants involved, both immigrants and natives, and the urban and welfare policies of the individual countries. Despite this heterogeneity, which can be a methodologically effective way to represent a wider range of complex and organised strategies and identify in the final stage their the common elements.

The Star Apartments complex, designed in Los Angeles by Michael Maltzan, was completed in 2012. The complex is an interesting example of how public space can play an important role in an urban area in which the composition of the urban fabric is arranged into separate districts with clearly distinct ethnic connotations, inhabited mainly by citizens of Asian, African American and South American origin. An additional point of interest is the fact that Los Angeles is a city characterised by an urban fabric in which the traditional concept of collective place (which is typical, for example, of European cities) is totally alien to its construction.

On the basis of this, the strategy adopted by Malzan is built around the idea of defining a collective space that is interstitial, not independent but rather the product of other functions that play a major role in the project, such as residential and commercial spaces. This made it possible at a later stage, through a process based on contiguous spaces, to define it as perceived space, geared to and suitable for developing the desired social integration. The building, In fact, is characterised on the outside by a single architectural volume situated on the edge of the Skid Row district, on the site of an existing abandoned commercial building. The collective intermediate space is located above street level on the roof of the commercial building, which serves as a basis for the project. This horizontal plane is thus used as a common intermediate facility area separating the more urban part from the residential area, and provides both access to the apartments on the upper floors, created for persons in need, and spaces equipped for catering to the many parallel activities open to the multi-ethnic community.

This decision to not neutralise the cultural differences of the users but rather highlight them, also as a compositional strategy, prevents the figure of the collective space from being seen as a utopian ideal of collective unity (which has no part in the organised community), making it rather a recognisable place with a public and utility role. In this context the immigrants are acknowledged, in fact, not for having given up their own cultures, but for being actively expressive of their own desires within one single space designed for indulging in collective practices, thus activating a social curiosity that may later lead to a deeper involvement. (Malzan, 2013).

The height of the complex, which makes it stand out from the lower surrounding buildings, and its interstitial position, give it a perceptual visibility and iconic recognisability that identify it in the same way as urban monuments belonging to all and where all are received equally.

Unlike the other case studies, this result was not achieved through the involvement of the local residents and the active participation of the multiethnic community - an approach which, by contrast, was crucial both in the Superkilen project in Copenhagen and in that of 4 Corti in Milan.

Precisely for this purpose, in fact, the team of Superkilen planners includes a studio of visual artists, Superflex, which since 1993 has focused on using artistic processes as participatory tools to invite people to develop their interpersonal communications. The contribution of the studio, in fact, has been fundamental in planning the public space, as has that of the other components of the team, Big and Topotek1, architects and landscape designers respectively.

The name given to this urban renewal reversion project clearly identifies its character: in Danish kilen means 'wedge', an element that inserts itself and supports (Ciuffi, 2011), while 'super' indicates the size of intervention. The project, in fact, covers an area of 30,000 square meters and extends for 750 meters; located within the heart of the Nørrebro district, it has a

social reach that involves well over 50 ethnic groups rooted in the residential fabric around the project.

As in Los Angeles, here also the project is based on the recovery of an abandoned, interstitial and residual area, composed, within the irregular grid of the residential building fabric, of compact blocks which sharply define its border on both sides, interrupted only by a series of secondary roads set perpendicular to the area. The aim of the project, according to Bjarke Ingels, founding partner of the studio BIG, is to use social conflicts as the main ingredient of the architectural creation, rather than consider them as limits. Differences can be incorporated and integrated, not through compromise, but by channelling them into new ideas. This becomes the guideline that motivates every single choice in the project, from urban scale to architecture and design and right down to the furnishing accessories (Moller, 2013). In short, we may say that the multiethnic and multicultural composition of the district is reflected in the manifold character of the new urban space, whose definition as a park is certainly reductive.

The project is divided into 3 separate but interconnected areas, distinguished by the different colours used in the horizontal surface of the ground. The first area is the main entrance area, which is of a more urban character and is red; this is mainly dedicated to outdoor sporting activities. It was created as an extension of the Nørrebrohallen, the pre-existing sports building, on whose surface it rests both physically, through the continuation of the plastic covering, and symbolically, through the acquisition of its functional nature. The decision to give the entrance area a sporty, spatial and symbolic character is certainly fitting in the context of the construction of a new urban scenario. As Zigmunt Bauman points out, in fact, sport is one of the few institutions that work, as it is based on set rules that are necessary to the game itself, and does not, therefore, attach to multiculturalism any reason for restriction and conflict.

The intermediate area, meanwhile, is defined by a black ground surface. This is an area dedicated to leisure and reflection, with micro areas for children and spaces for reading and board games.

The last area is an actual park, in the traditional sense of the word. The grassy surface is characterised by a complex topography that enables the defining of areas that vary both in size and in visual and access permeability.

Multiplicity of a spatial, temporal and social character, therefore, which is not static or defined permanently but has a degree of undefinedness that, on the one hand, allows for great imagination in its application and, on the other, is neither generic nor anonymous in the connotation of the spatial distribution of surfaces or in the standardised character of the urban furniture. This latter element, in fact, which the inhabitants define through a set of objects representing the memory of their place of origin, is raised here from an accessory component to a symbolic component. Thus the many objects that dot the continuous surface of the new open space become in their singularity, rather than as a whole, a sort of contemporary monument symbolising the idea of a multicultural and peaceful Europe.

While the Copenhagen project succeeds in actively channelling the multi-ethnic presence towards the definition of unitary architectural and urban design, the last case study examined, 4 Corti in Milan, may be defined as almost totally participatory. This project, in fact, was designed by those working in the sector of assistance in a phase of experimentation that is still in progress.

This district, like many others in the urban area of Milan, was built between 1927 and 1929 to provide housing for the new working class. After the war, the district began to receive Italian immigrants from southern Italy, and since 1990 the same popular housing was assigned to stable families from countries outside Europe. The district and, in particular, the group of buildings

known as 4 Corti [TN: from casa di corte: popular housing built around a central courtyard] is characterised by the presence of a multicultural population and the increasingly urgent need to effectively find a place for new residents. Unlike in the previous cases described above, this critical situation is undoubtedly due to the sluggish immigration policies implemented in Italy and the tendency to address such housing issues in a fashion that is more spontaneous than systematic. Despite the fact that architectural design is based on the simple recovery of the functionality and safety of residential areas and relative technological systems, the work carried out in the open corti is very interesting and seems to renew the typical character of the original buildings. The project involved the recovery of areas located on the ground floor, facing onto the inner courtyard, transforming them into areas for the promotion of meeting and socialising activities. For this purpose two specific areas were identified. Space A is a place directly managed by co-operatives, where activities such as assemblies, meetings, courses, etc. are held, a place for giving voice to the district and offering guidance and initial advice on legal issues and convivial and cultural initiatives. Those in charge co-ordinate a process of involvement of the tenants and the local residents for the purpose of compiling a calendar of internal activities. Space B hosts these cultural and social activities, which are heavily geared to the multicultural integration of the district itself. (Menardi, 2012)

Once the stage of the restoration of the buildings was complete, these spaces became the centre of activities geared to developing the process of knowledge and support for the new tenants. The project carried out by the Onlus association ABCItalis, which for many years has been engaged in managing processes of participation, plans to involve future tenants in activities carried out in the restored communal areas, with the aim of triggering a mechanism of integration through best practices of coexistence designed to prevent phenomena of exclusion and encourage mutual exchange.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be argued that the category of multiplicity is that which best represents the qualities of this type of experience and may, therefore, be adopted as a characteristic feature of many contemporary public spaces. Multiplicity, in this sense, refers to the variety of users, both residents and non-residents, immigrants and natives, etc., who make use of urban spaces in less conventional ways, from the point of view of both time and space. Hence the category of multiplicity can be applied to spatial and temporal dimension, which means taking into account the different periods of time in which the space is used during the day, the months of the year, or based on a more long-term outlook, for the purpose of enhancing the design of the open space and landscape architecture, for example, influencing how the space itself is perceived and used. This is a temporal dimension that gives importance to the different desires of the individual, while valuing the collective space as a place where these desires can be fulfilled. R. Barthes defines this dimension as *idiorrhythmic*. Consequently, the spatial dimension must be able to effectively construct, through specific compositional strategies, places that are not merely containers of multiple functions but have a twofold, ambivalent character. It is not simply a question of making public spaces more flexible, in fact, but of seeking a balance - between the precise definition of the architectural, geometric, material, etc. figure and the undefinedness of the different contexts and functions, suggesting activities from which others may later be developed; between an architectural and proximity-based scale and a scale of collectivity; between interior and exterior, etc. These requisites not only translate into a rich and complex picture of the urban space, but may develop activities that involve thought, imagination and creativity, which draw on and develop a mental and spiritual dimension that feeds off its own

culture and memories.

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BIOGRAPHY

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