

ii inclusive interiors
#05

Urban Design Ecologies

Projects for City Environments

edited by
Madalina Ghibusi Federica Marchetti

ii inclusive interiors Peer Reviewed Book Series
#05 | **Urban Design Ecologies: Projects for City Environments**

A cura di / Edited by
Madalina Ghibusi Federica Marchetti

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ISBN 978-88-916-2707-0
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Maggioli Editore è un marchio di Maggioli S.p.A.
Azienda con sistema qualità certificato ISO 9001:2008
Maggioli Editore is part of Maggioli S.p.A.
ISO 9001:2008 Certified Company
47822 Santarcangelo di Romagna (RN) • Via del Carpino, 8
Tel. 0541/628111 • Fax 0541/622595
www.maggiolieditore.it
e-mail: clienti.editore@maggioli.it

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Complete catalogue on www.maggioli.it/university area

Il catalogo completo è disponibile su www.maggioli.it area università

Finito di stampare nel mese di Luglio 2018 nello stabilimento Maggioli S.p.A, Santarcangelo di Romagna (RN)

Printed in July 2018 in the plant Maggioli S.p.A, Santarcangelo di Romagna (RN)

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Policies for Spaces of Mutation Urban Activators as Time Traveler toward New Urban Scenarios

Federica Marchetti

New forms and uses of the city space are emerging to fill the lack of identity of the urban environment in contemporary metropolis. It seems that the answers to solve this crucial modern problem are more and more shared, collective and collaborative, especially when it is not easy to find an economic interest in the redevelopment of suburban areas or urban voids. In many cases the solution starts with a bottom-up approach, becoming a natural integration of different aspects like in the not planned urban centres, because the city is in itself relational: a relation between people, space, time, uses etc. These people actions are linked to contemporary needs, most of the time related to the simply and basic necessity to have experience of the urban space at the human being scale (Gehl 2013, 3).

Considering the characteristics of our age, this phenomenon reflects itself in the mutable conditions of its features according with the spatial aspect and its uses: “spatial development no longer produces an outcome that is static and permanent. Instead it produces something in a state of flux” (Bergevoet and van Tuijl 2016, 43). This kind of situations are taking place in different cities and locations, starting to be a global tendency, especially in Europe and United States. In these new practices, secondly but not for importance, there is the role that new digital instruments can gain and already have during the processes. The questions, at this point, appear clear: exactly, what kind of action can practice the City Governance to take advantage from it? How it could be managed and how could work during the time, considering its variable condition?

Actually, we do not have a precise and global codification of these interventions and the first policies related to them. It is a phenomenon that should be studied little by little, especially because the cases aren't all ascribable into a single procedure or way to take into action the new urban transformations. What appears constant is the fact that the uncertainty is regulated having different open solutions. The results, that will be presented in this essay, have the ability to show these new perspectives for the city space involving all the ingredients described. Moreover, all these examples have already produced testable proofs that can be used as basic information for future projects. Analysing the spatial solutions already realized and some urban policies in progress is possible to trace answers to the starting questions.

Taking Inspiration from Urban Hacking

Urban hacking is the first step, the term *hack*¹ comes from the digital language and it is related to a computer attack. These spontaneous events are not something negative or revolutionary, as the name could evoke.

The hack value of these instances is the connection between the particular space – its intended purpose and its history – and the revelatory transformation of the hack (...), the core of a truly successful hack in urban space involves, first, what the site means; second, how the hack appropriates the site; and third, how the hack transforms the site to communicate a message to a broad public. (Ratti and Claudel 2016, 1357)

An Urban Hack could be represented by a temporary use of the space, a pop-up installation, an event that shows new aspects for a specific place. All these actions and experiences are expressions of the needs and desires of the inhabitants for the city space. Especially thanks to the digital instruments, it is becoming easier to find these kind of situations, organized not just by single people but by communities, working as in a sort of continuous flash mob to improve the city spaces.

This first case does not imply active urban policies, it is just a spontaneous way of re-appropriation of the space by its inhabitants. At the same time, it can foster the definition of tools, guidelines and open instruments to

1 – The term *hack*, in computer programming, means an illegal or unauthorized access to a computer, document, file or network. The 'hacker' is the hacking expert and use his skills to adapt a computer system to his needs. The journalist Randolph Ryan defined the word in an article, appeared on the Boston Globe in 1993, as a planned and organized action (in many cases with funny implications), but not disruptive.

take into consideration this public initiative, improving the public domain and informing architects and designers for the definition of urban design strategies. These experiences prefigure scenarios, as a sort of time travel toward a new vision for the city space and represent a way to reveal new possibilities to live the city. A crucial starting point to redefine something that could be changed according to people needs, business interests and territorial necessities. From informal situations, they could become a designed practice that involve experts – architects, urban designers, planners etc.. Then, it will be the City and its inhabitants to declare if the operation satisfies their desires and improve the city liveability. Otherwise a new design strategy could be re-set up and tested, reaching a more appropriate solution.

The role of the urban policy should be properly to transform the spontaneous actions into legal and planned interventions interpreted by architects and designers. The collaboration between designers, municipalities and people is defined by the kind of information and data that can be collected thanks to these new tools for the design brief. These operations imply the perspective that design strategy has to involve other inputs and consider more relations and interactions with the pre-existence situation.

Shifting Architecture beyond expert culture would require us to love, or at least tolerate, complexity and contradiction by denying architectural expertise a privileged status in the discourse of making. This dislocation does not in any way diminish expert responsibility (...). Even as we explore a move beyond expert culture, we affirm the power of architecture to make substantial contributions to the messy vitality of everyday life in service of the promise of lives well lived. (Schneekloth and Shibley 2000, 130)

Considering single and isolated cases that can describe these situations, there is the example of Mierīgi, an urban action by the collective Fine Young Urbanists in collaboration with the City of Riga. Defining an urban set, they displayed how you can change the people experience in a street adding colours, working on the street section, defining a new cycle path and new seats for the inhabitants. Mierīgi is a mock-up in 1:1 scale, the pre-figuration of an urban transformation that could become fixed in a second time. This kind of interventions represent the instable particle that urban policy program could manage working on its presence and mutation during the time in the urban space. At the same time, the urban policy can fix values to obtain a good urban practice, potentially replicable in the city environment. “Smart norms, protocols, procedures and considerations could develop which limit access or deny

urban participation to stakeholders, if they are developed conceptually, democratically and empirically unexamined, without priority attention being paid to investigating project ‘failures’” (Griffith 2016, 31).

What should prevent the possibilities to replay this isolated case in the urban environment? Which kind of tools the City can use? Urban policies should be able to manage larger situations that consider this approach and, in some cases, it is already happening. At present, there are some examples starting to act toward this direction. They are emerging in the last years and for this reason they have a certain dose of unpredictability in their results and possible evolutions. More the interest of different players is addressed toward them, more the numbers and the possible urban solutions will become larger. The importance of the actors is related to their skills and, according to this, architects and designers continue in their work with more awareness of what inhabitants, city governance and investors want and need. In particular, it is the interest of the City, expressed by new polices, that defines the role and the weight of the actors involved. In these first cases, urban policies are set up after the examination of what informally happens in the city. In particular the policies concern places not suitable for private business interests, but attractive for the need of common public spaces of the inhabitants. Considering the good opportunities that this approach brings to the urban space, what does it prevent to regulate it in a befitting way? Governance and designers involved in the city transformation should have the responsibility to propose this kind of solutions in specific places, identified as appropriate for social, economic and environmental aspects.

Pilot Policy Programs

For this kind of operations, a *pilot* becomes a necessary instrument to test and experiment new form of urban policies linked with this emerging condition. It is the tool to manage the future development of the space and its use, passing from the totally unstable particle that rise from urban hacking, guerrilla actions or similar situations, to a process that can continue, fluid, during the time, working on a shared framework between people, designers, city governance and other stakeholders. According with “place-making” (Seamon 1996, 5), urban policies could manage “a very basic planning framework (...), rather than a masterplan. Incremental occupation mobilises demand and creates ‘a narrative and personality for the place’” (Bishop and Williams 2012, 188).

Setting up procedures, best practice and *light rules*, is the task that the City Governance could embrace in order to legalize something that in



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many cases is spontaneous. It is a process that can be regulated thanks to online and offline instruments. In particular, online tools could be suitable to manage big quantity of requests, they can connect a large number of people, designers and stakeholders and can represent an easy way to inform all the actors about the possibility that the Municipality has decided to put into practise. In these cases, the urban policy defines the new relations and give guidelines to improve the city liveability, for example: the kind of city space that should be improved (urban voids into squares or playgrounds, unused sidewalks into new vibrant public spaces etc.), the identification of possible new actors and businesses, the surrounding uses that could attract people, the pre-existing communities of the area to involve etc.

Reaching this description and starting from a Situationist experience,² we find the case of the program *Pavement to Park* proposed by the City of San Francisco.³ Activated as an informal operation coming from the Parking Day, a festival – born, organized and diffused thanks to the web – where people transform parking lots in urban spaces suitable for their needs, now Pavement to Park counts more than 50 points in the city. From an informal event, it is become an official way to revitalize the city, because the City has formalized the idea to test, prototype and built new designed proposals for the urban space in a continuous state of project validation together with architects and people. A form of lean, easy and fast acknowledging by the governance that actually has added the possibility to work on the definition of new plazas and collective spaces. The City proposes, in a specific website, the procedure to start a project and in a second online page the possible uses suggested by the inhabitants. In this case, prototyping is an important instrument because can be “the point of departure for future stable programmes” (Haydn, Temel 2006, 72).

2 – The program Pavement to Park has its roots in the Parking Day festivals: informal events where people actively propose new uses to reinterpret the city parking lots. This free and not programmed approach to the city space transformation remembers the situations proposed by the Situationist Movement during the late '50s and s'60s of the last century. Especially in Guy Debord works (*The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 and previously *The Naked City* in 1957), the urban space reflects a personal narration during the time. According with this concept, people urban actions in San Francisco can be seen as subjective and temporary interpretation of the city.

3 – The City of San Francisco proposed five pilot examples of parking lots reinterpretations (parklets) in 2010. Now a larger program is set up in order to satisfy a series of issues: reimagining the potential of the city streets, encouraging non-motorized transportations, enhancing pedestrian safety and activities, to foster neighbourhood interactions and support local businesses. Source: <http://www.pavementtoparks.org/> (January 2018).

Similar principles regulate the *Freezones*⁴ in the park of Delft University of Technology (the Netherlands), a program thought and put into action by the TU Delft. In this case the framework is already defined: in the Mekel Park we find the presence of specific areas technically ready to be used by students to organize small events, parties, common activities. Electricity, water and space: then it is up to people to live the place, using imagination and creativity. This University initiative could be an interesting example also for the governance of the city especially for unused spaces or abandoned green areas: it could give new opportunities for the people to have experience of the city space and define by themselves new uses and activities. The basic supports for the urban transformation should be regulated by specific urban policies that can legalize the accessibility to the areas, manage the relations between the actors involved, establish the benchmarks to reach. In order to transform and give quality to the city space, policies should guarantee a pattern of possible relationships and all the norms, trying to maintain a light approach considering the bottom-up nature of this kind of processes. The successful results of these projects come from their easy and fast execution, especially when we relate them to other complex and longer urban transformations. It is very simple to colonize other spots, areas and neighbourhoods of the urban centres due of their dimensions and adaptability considering the specific occasion.

In a third example – the *Superilles*⁵ in Barcelona, a program by the City Governance – the urban morphology of the Cerdà Plan, already works as a natural framework for new possibilities. Superilles Pilot re-sets up new collective spaces inside its structure, working on the mobility system of the city and on the street redefinition thanks to the collaboration between governance, architects and people. The process uses instruments online and offline in the definition of the urban uses of the city spaces. Recognizing

4 – Freezones is a program that the TUDelft starts in 2014. The areas of the program are simply marked on the ground: students and academic staff can reserve a spot for a specific event or activity using the university web site. Freezones is part of the project for a Living Campus that inspires and facilitates encounters. Thanks to a series of operations, the University Campus is transformed into a place where people can have a larger pattern of activities to do together, not only the ones related to work or study. For detailed information: <https://www.freezone weblog.tudelft.nl/freezonesoncampus/> (January 2018).

5 – It is a program set up by the City of Barcelona for the four-year period 2016-2019. The program (in Catal: “*Omplim de vida els carrers. La implantació de les Superilles a Barcelona*”) aims to transform the urban space and improve the city liveability starting from the regeneration of urban units (*Superilles*). The *Superilles* program bases its principles of interventions on the previous project for the period 2011-2015, the Plan for the Urban Mobility (2013 -2018), the Greenery and Biodiversity Plan and the Barcelona Climate Plan. Source: <http://www.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles/ca/> (January 2018).

and using pilot space in the urban tissue represents a legalized urban hacking that can put in relation the reasons of space and design together with the interests of people, city and investors. The regenerated spaces are located in specific spots but works as a system that can transform globally the urban environment, acting locally.

This kind of approaches, that we can study through the examples, are not rigid instruments linked to a inflexible vision of the city regulation, but – in a soft way – manage the complexity and the contradictions that are more and more typical considering the need of contemporary city spaces. We could consider them as light, lean, smart policies for their ability to embrace bottom-up reasons and taking advantage from new digital tools in order to be faster and appropriate according to specific situations. These policies have the capability to be facilitators for the urban environment. They highlight possibilities of transformation, actable just prefiguring pattern of relationship, networks, specific problems to solve, indicators etc.

Conclusion

All the situations described represent *urban activators* for the city that should be properly managed by urban policies. The term *activator* is used because they represent just a starting point for a longer process to increase step by step. These examples need an open way to organize their operating principles and, at the same time, need lighter and smarter policies related to their flexible nature. Considering the fact that the space uses are mutable during the time, it is important to intervene with an open-ended approach that can regulate the process in a not deterministic way. We should consider that this kind of projects aren't a fixed solution – especially in their first phase – but only one possibility: the most proper for the city and the people needs in a specific period of time. It is the constant relation and test of the results that define their adequacy. In this spectrum, the urban policies have an important role because mediate and moderate the relationship between all the actors involved. This is a very delicate and precise responsibility that only an instrument that come from the governance of the city can actuate and manage.

Codifying proper urban policies for these kind of urban projects means to support design proposals more related to the everyday city experience. These operations can improve the sense of identity, appropriation and common sense of the space by the inhabitants. This is possible because they take into consideration a series of aspects that just the citizens can know, giving a limit to possible failures. It is a possible way to includes people instances as part of the design brief to develop. Moreover, it is the



set of rules that can indicate the right markers to take into considerations. Mobility, open green areas, services, new digital opportunities etc. are just some general themes and indicators to consider according to local necessities. It is the policy that establishes the pattern of topics starting from good practices and citizens opinions, leaving open the possibility to add new alternatives and propositions.

At the same time, setting up a series of indicators, that define goals and benchmarks related to business and local market aspects, can define a clear vision of the context from an economic point of view. According to that, potential investors could take into account the opportunity to start a project in a specific urban area. In this way, these light policies can bring the proposal in line with the stakeholders interests and the market needs, gathering – in an easier way – all the right actors seated at the table. Moreover, the process becomes faster thanks to the new digital possibilities. Digital tools are constantly present in these experiences because of their capability to organize and put in relation great quantity of information, data and people. This is something that should be more and more used as a tool to manage and spread the policies values. Many problems could be prevented and many opportunities could be clearer thanks to this new filter. The best practices show that also a good communication of the chances has an important role to incentivize this kind of urban transformations and the web is a good medium to reach this goal.

In the end and according with this vision, the future of the city appears more shared, collective and collaborative between all the actors involved, but at the same time not confused and chaotic: a way to take advantage from the global participation that the instruments of contemporary society can give us, if they are used in a virtuous way.

Apparatus

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