

THE DESIGN FOR A WELCOMING CITY: URBAN SPACE AND VISITOR FLOW.

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Abstract

Cities can be interpreted as a complex environment characterized by a deep and a tangled stratification of tangible and intangible levels such as spaces, architectures, uses, human flows, social interactions and emotions (Lupi, 2013; Decandia, 2014). A survey, commissioned by Domus in 2018, besides showing Milan as one of the most vibrant and ‘desired’ metropolitan areas, emphasizes the presence of new current visitor fluxes toward the city not only for touristic reasons (Domus Forum 2018).

Symmetrically cities, integrated with new enabling technologies, multiply their knowledge possibilities in terms of reading, interpreting and the participation of the cultural asset.

In a such theoretical framework, the new *Visitor Space* in Milan has been crafted thanks to a scientific agreement between the *Politecnico di Milano* and the *Chamber of Commerce of Milano, Monza Brianza and Lodi*. As a real case history, it offers an accurate design project to welcome people in an environment where analog and digital components come together creating a multi-sensory experience. An informative place was born to favor knowledge; to share enjoyment and urban experiences, generating cultural values and different ways to perceive and live a city.

The central aspect of this essay is the design of a place of encounter among people. It puts in field both urban and cultural commons, not limiting them to the physical reality of the space. It understands them as actions and not as objects, while private and public dimensions are blurring away (Borch & Kornberger, 2015).

1. Brief Introduction

Cities can be interpreted as a complex environment characterized by a deep and a tangled stratification of tangible and intangible levels. They are an ever-changing composition of spaces, architectures, uses, human flows, social interactions and emotions (Lupi, 2013; Decandia, 2014). A survey, commissioned by Domus in Milan in 2018, besides showing Milan as one of the most vibrant and ‘desired’ metropolitan areas, emphasizes the presence of four main current migratory fluxes toward the city (Domus Forum 2018). A wide range of visitors interested in the city, not only for touristic reasons, has emerged.

Symmetrically cities, integrated with new enabling technologies, multiply their knowledge possibilities in terms of reading, interpreting and the participation of the cultural asset.

In a such theoretical framework, in paragraph 4, we present the new *Visitor Space* in Milan. Crafted thanks to a scientific agreement between the *Politecnico di Milano* and the *Chamber of Commerce of Milano, Monza Brianza and Lodi*, it offers a real case history; an accurate design project to welcome people in an environment where analog and digital components come together creating a multi-sensory experience. An informative place was born to favor knowledge; to share enjoyment and urban experiences, generating cultural values and different ways to perceive and live a city.

The central aspect of this essay is the design of a place of encounter among people. It puts in field both urban and cultural commons, not limiting them to the physical reality of the space. It understands them as actions and not as objects, while private and public dimensions are blurring away (Borch & Kornberger, 2015).

2. New ways of living and moving through and across vibrant urban spaces.

Cities can be seen as vibrant, living, and dense urban compositions that are always different. “*Cities are complex systems, with emerging qualities that cannot be reduced to static understandings or representations*” (Lupi, 2013). They are being intensively reshaped by unexpected dynamics. Taking on articulated connotations, their urban spaces are “*more mixed than pure, not so smooth and homogeneous as changing, harlequin, zebra-striped and in multiple, connected networks*” (Serres, 1993, p. 270).

A lot of disciplines argue that the idea of a city—and its urban spaces above all—is undergoing deep, irreversible changes. In the past, the city itself was considered the pivot

around which the entire territory was organized. It was a clear, delimited and circumscribed entity. Today, however, it has expanded into a myriad of spaces, difficult to enclose within a limit or a boundary (Decandia, 2014). The ancient physical hierarchies and dichotomies—center/edge, inside/outside, city/country, real/virtual, public/private—are less definite and seem to overlap, and blend with each other, becoming more and more difficult to understand and map out.

Increasingly fragmented and heterogeneous spatialities are emerging inside cities, activating several new fields of dialogue and occasions of encounter. They take into account not only their urban morphology and architectures, but all their vibrant and ever-changing networks of human and social flows (Bollati, 2014). Today, in particular, cities compete for liveliness and quality of life (Hall, 1998); (Richards & Palmer, 2007); (Morea, 2019).

In this regard, *The Future of Cities* was discussed during the first *Domusforum* that took place in Milan in 2018, emphasizing the complexity of cities in terms of architecture, economy, social sciences, and citizen emotions. The proposed analysis was based on a survey commissioned by *Domus* and executed by Nielsen, gathering and measuring consumer data. Besides showing Milan as one of the liveliest and most creative metropolitan areas, with high quality urban life and urban atmosphere, the research highlights the presence of four main current tourist migratory fluxes toward the city: A range of new Metropolis actors called *newcomer*, *traveler*, *globe trotter*, or *city user* (Domus Forum 2018).

A smooth, permeable, versatile, and flexible urban backbone allows metropolises like Milan to encourage new flows of ideas, content, and experiences that fuel and feed off each other, reciprocally. “*A great variety of new ways of living and inhabiting, of moving through and across space, often transcending administrative and political borders*” (Decandia, 2014, p. 3) is outlining new, less defined multiple city geographies (Serres, 1993); (Foucault, 1994); (Amin & Thrift, 2002); (Sassen, 2004).

As Branzi put it, “*A sort of invisible city is progressively replacing or putting into second place the physical, figurative one*” (Branzi, 2006, p. 12), and our visual viewpoint of the same city breaks into personal fragments and dynamic human grids. Relations between men and urban places are ever-changing. A polymorphous reality and a polyphonic interpretation of the city, with an extraordinary number of simultaneous dimensions, no longer takes shape based on points or objects, but rather on social relations, meanings, times, and ways of use. The multiplicity of the involved social interactions, information, people, and emotions holds an intense exchange with the surrounding architecture, drafting the tangible urban morphology.

The city is not a text that can be subjected to a single point of view, and our culture must grasp the sense of this new, absurd, elusive geography. Many interpretations of urban dynamics come to configure the urban place primarily as a “relational field”, describing the movement and life in a contemporary city as an entering-and-exiting of arbitrary juxtapositions of “urban interiors” that generate situations: Interactions between places, information, and people, gradually moving the focus from the single space, from the single moment, to the process of living in a public city (Bourriaud, 2002); (Branzi, 2006).

It should therefore be noted that the relationships at play and the processes that take shape in urban spaces (despite appearing as uniform flows) are not easily interpretable. Related behaviors often reveal heterogeneous purposes and multiple reasons. Those who move in the urban fabric, do so moved by different reasons.

3. An authentic exploration of the urban space belongs to us.

“We can no longer be satisfied with seeing only what can be seen, by gazing at a distance, but we need to get closer to things again; enter inside the territory; re-discover its variegated density and range of populations. A density that cannot be understood from afar, remaining in those towers from which we once believed we could learn about the world, but one that can only be grasped if we manage to immerse ourselves in the living body of its flesh so as to begin an authentic exploration of the urban landscape that belongs to us” (Decandia, 2014, p. 3).

An urban landscape is not only the physical result of different human interventions of remote or recent pasts that continue to last today. Factually, it consists of the methods of use, the meanings or the symbolic appropriation created by people who live, work, and visit that same urban space (Dal Pozzolo, 2001). It is simultaneously both a built environment and a social setting.

Urban space is the element that identifies the story of a community, whether it is seen as place of permanence (for locals or city users) or of transient nomadic presence (for visitors such as newcomers, travelers, globe trotters). It is an area that hosts a history—either a general one or many specific—that interacts with the actual daily life of that same area, creating a present synthesis of possible relationships between past and future. Urban spaces are not isolated entities but a complex system of places, activities, events, initiatives, and actions that occur at the edges between ephemeral—all that has a short life—and provisional—all that moves into the medium-long term (De Rosa & Mazzarello, 2019); (Fassi, 2012).

Adapting the definition of the concept of Place—as proposed by *Studio Azzurro*—to the urban context, we could assert that an urban space “*is also the appreciation of individual aspects that are each equally able to develop a dialogue with the complex forces of the global world. [...] Involvement with a place means vitalizing and caring about its landscape and culture but also generating an approach toward the place itself, a concept of public good that rekindles love, concern and respect*” (Cirifino, Giardina Papa, & Rosa, 2011, p. 25). Urban spaces form a mosaic of dynamics that reflects the roots and cultural orientations of the resident community, its new members, and the visitors who explore the city, extracting its identity and understanding both its memory and imagination (Trimarchi, 2019)

Therefore, a key question emerges: How can we facilitate and gradually bring out virtuous circles of cultural development and knowledge of the metropolitan territory and urban context we live in or are about to visit?

On the one hand, as locals, we would like to further explore the urban context we live in, letting ourselves be surprised by secret city spots or places we take for granted too often. On the other hand, as visitors, we have recently become more aware and sensitive to environmental sustainability, heterogeneous contexts, and to the cultural and socio-economic conditions of our destinations. A new desire to “see”—even thanks to new technologies—poses further questions about the sense of the places we live and visit, increasingly mixing the real and imaginary knowledge of a destination—the tangible and intangible experiences—looking for the spontaneity and authenticity of places.

Following this logic, the city and its urban spaces become a ‘place of the mind’ and not just a roster of places and attractions that are structured by tourist guides imposing a limited amount of ‘must-see’—buildings, artworks, specific environments—and forgetting about many others. The city is a personal collage of a multitude of tips, information, and suggestions offered by different sources such as book guides, web-sites, blogs, friends, locals, spontaneous encounters, and other tourist experiences. Although travel and culture professionals often tend to propose targeted and studied itineraries and formats of the visit experience, the role of the visitor has changed, as visitors now have the opportunity to be active protagonists and planners of their own experience. A personalized experience and the possibility of ‘feeling part of a place’ become components that are worthy of consideration when designing experiences (Bollati, Mastrantoni, Tolino, & Collina, forthcoming).

3. Exploring urban space inside an information and technology society.

According to Gartner (2010), people today access the Internet mainly through mobile technology, since today's visitors "*are now in large percentage digital natives, born and bred in virtual worlds*" (Amaro & Tornatora, 2019, p. 144). Whether we like it or not, technologies are becoming ever-present in our everyday life and they are gradually causing changes in daily habits. Mobile devices are changing the way people access information, city knowledge, urban contexts and events, habits, and culture. They enable visitors to connect with others, search data, and create personal and shareable content. Technological advances and digital transformations are deeply influencing our lives, impacting our habits and how we perceive our surroundings (Castells, 2000).

Moreover, the boundary between virtual and physical space is thinning and becoming more invisible. We live in different spaces and times simultaneously, and digital access to services is increasingly transforming into something more physical in order to allow a real exchange of experience and knowledge (Piccinno, 2019). For instance, today's mobile technology and location-based services—apart from providing additional information and directions—are an excellent new opportunity for cities and their cultural institutions to reach a wider audience (Proctor, 2011), enhancing traditional cultural consumption and supporting the visitor's tangible experience (Ceconello, 2012).

The first web-conveyed approach to and knowledge of a city has a greater impact on visitors' choices, and social networks allow direct easy access to useful information for their visit. However, travelers tend to rely more on information received from other visitors rather than that supplied by tour operators, given that direct experiences are considered as a guarantee of neutrality and truth of judgment, unconditioned by any particular interests. The experience of our peers and the word-of-mouth is perceived as more reliable than the professional advice given by those who provide the cultural offer (Caves, 2000).

Therefore, technological and mobile devices are able to support visitors during all the stages of their journey: Organization, arrival, activity planning, and return home, with regards to their demands, needs or wishes. "*Technology is therefore an inevitable challenge, but it also offers an extraordinary opportunity. It offers effective instruments that make it possible to gather, order, and display data in ways that were hitherto unknown*" (Cirifino, Giardina Papa, & Rosa, 2011, p. 24).

4. The specific case: A multimedia Living Room for visitors.

Thanks to an interdisciplinary scientific agreement between the *Politecnico di Milano* and the *Chamber of Commerce of Milano, Monza Brianza and Lodi*, the new *Visitor Space* in

Milan—a project designed to welcome people in an environment where analog and digital technologies come together creating a multi-sensory experience—was crafted.

In July 2018, the *Chamber of Commerce of Milano Monza Brianza Lodi*—owner of the venue in which the project is based—together with *Yes Milano*—the new Milan City Council brand dedicated to the promotion of the city and to the organization of events—asked the *Politecnico di Milano* to help design a new space for visitors, as the previous urban center was closed that same year.

The space—which opened in December 2018—is an emblematic and strategic space not only for the two involved Institutions but also for the city. It is located in a historical building in the city center, *Camera dei Notari* in *Palazzo Giureconsulti*. It is a welcoming and highly technological place, created by a team of experts inside the University, in collaboration with *CamerAnebbia*—a multimedia visual artist collective, operating in the field of interactive and sensitive spaces.

The project development and the *Action Research* process (Muratovski, 2010) included a meta-design work structured through data collection (both qualitative and quantitative), desk research, benchmarking, meetings, and co-design sessions through round tables. The project takes on a set of questions deriving from a trivial yet crucial assumption: At least once in our lives, each of us has been and will be a visitor. Hence: What needs do we have in a city we know nothing about yet? Which services do we use? Are there any aids that can promote our experience and increase our connection with the living spaces, usually taken for granted?

The first stage of the project identified one key need. Every time we move around a city for a while, we feel the need to stop and take a break. We need to take a breath along the way. That break, which is propaedeutic to the visit, allows us to recharge ourselves mentally, instrumentally, and physically. As visitors, we are continually invited to collect useful information to outline a personal experience of the city or use our personal devices to find our way in new contexts. Moreover, after long journeys, we feel the need of unwinding our tired bodies. These are the reasons that triggered our concept: An urban “Living Room” to welcome visitors and citizens in an environment where analog and digital technologies come together, creating a multi-sensory and cross-media experience. A place that favors knowledge, not in the sense of accumulated information but rather as one that presents a great cognitive and atmospheric kaleidoscope. It is an informative, engaging, and unexpected space designed to help discover Milan and the region of *Lombardia*, which have two different souls: one that fully expresses itself in the daytime, and one in the nighttime.

Fig. 4.1 An image of the space in the daytime.

During the day, visitors learn and release information in a mutual relationship of exchange with the domestic atmosphere and space. A warm environment with a strong visual character—equipped with tapestries and custom-made wooden furniture and design objects—welcomes the city guest.

Once inside, two touch-screens—similar to big mirrors—can be activated by the presence and touch of visitors, giving access to a hothouse of ideas and events in the city. On the left side of the room, there is a stylized map of Milan, suggesting frequently asked information and itineraries to follow. This map welcomes an analogical interaction through which visitors can propose their own sightseeing and cultural tours of the city. Underneath, lockers with appropriate technical equipment allow charging of personal devices. On the opposite side, there is the *stream machine*, which is a large interactive monitor. It looks like a hanging picture that welcomes the visitor with colorful changing patterns.

Fig. 4.2 An image of the interactive installation called *stream machine*.

Every visitor is invited to create endless personal combinations: After a brief questionnaire, visitors can send the created image directly to their own inbox, transforming it into a gift, a souvenir. This method allows the *Visitor Space* to track and develop the knowledge of people and their motivations and desires. Finally, this urban Living Room becomes a place that displays the world of Design. Independent publishing houses or *Design Magazines* offer books to read here. Design furniture gives character to the space in cyclically changing collaborations. The furnishing elements and their oversized narrative labels become a vehicle for the discovery of the world of Italian Design.

Moreover, the *Chamber of Commerce*, one of the main stakeholders, expressed a clear need from the start, from the very first meetings: The space should be experienced all day, 24 hours, even when the doors are closed and no staff is inside. This way, the space is able to show both its day and its night souls. Hidden projectors, to be activated solely during the night, transform the big windows in transparent walls: A real multimedia magic lantern. The projections are interactive. On the inner walls of the *Camera dei Notari*, the projections change simply with one touch. All one has to do is choose and touch the “theme” on the glass window. By doing so, never-before-seen multimedia content is activated.

Fig. 4.3 A concept visualization of the space in the nighttime.

By touching these words, the visitor changes the projection and, after a few minutes of video, can move on to the choice of a different theme. The narration begins. Decorations and videos come to life on the ceiling and vertical surfaces. For a first experimental experience, it was decided to offer a sensory immersion in three other places of interest inside the territory of Milan, Monza Brianza, and Lodi as well: One that can be easily visited—*Tempio dell'Incoronata in Lodi*—one that is inaccessible—*inside Villa Reale in Monza*—and one that is easily accessible but that is little known not only to tourists but to locals as well—*interior frescoes of Palazzo Giureconsulti*.

The windows and the perimeter of the space become access membranes. They attract the passers-by. Once again, they invite them to stop and want to 'see', investigate further, raising their eyes both physically and conceptually. The accessibility denoting this tiny space and its openness to the urban community should be understood as permeability: As the ability to 'enter a space' without hesitation and effort (Poot et Al. 2015).

Fig. 4.4 An image of the use of interactive window as a content access membrane.

Content comes out of the physical perimeters and meets the visitor with emotion. In this project, *Design* enhances *Technology*: It helps make it accessible and increases the value of the learning and emotional experience. It combines *Technology* (tools) with *Art* (language) and *Territory* (substance).

5. Perforating the skin of things.

The presented project suggests how *Design* can be a trigger of cultural city experiences, becoming a know-how provider and social engager. It also shows how *Digital technology* has become a strong support of the tourist experience, activating fields of dialogue with growing heterogeneous connotations. Digital reagent devices react to the visitor presence and elicit the reaction. They create dialogue, combine differences, and trigger memories, multiplying the levels of narrative urban space content.

The *Visitor Space* guides people toward the discovery of the city from a new point of view, multiplying the diopters. The area of the city of Milan presents itself—offering essential information for general orientation—through various events and activities. It aims at stimulating both the resident community and outside visitors toward the discovery of unknown approaches and views of the city. The *Visitor Space* suggests new relations

between the different points, attractions, and cultural places of the city map, rearranged in a great variety of possible ways, via reciprocal, non-symmetrical correlations.

Therefore, it invites to move beyond the apparent conventional picture of the city, widening the boundaries of our gaze: *“Perforating the skin of things, to see how things become things and the world becomes world”* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 49); *“leave aside everything that prevents us from seeing, all the passed-on ideas, the pre-constituted images that continue to encumber our visual field and capacity for understanding”* (quoted by Barenghi, Calvino 1992, p. 346). This space enables us to have a more complete, authentic, and spontaneous knowledge of the urban context, fostering mutual exchanges between citizens and visitors. By sharing common values, residents are preparing to share spaces and spend time together, overcoming the distinction between city host and guest.

The *Visitor Space* helps increase knowledge of the city and keeps it alive, triggering lively and meaningful processes of learning. Its multimedia and analogic content is not made of *‘finished stories’*, but relational and interactive ones. Visitors are offered the possibility to combine them according to personal preferences, creating their own expressive and urban adventures, using their own sensibilities, needs, tastes, and imagination within an environment that is not ready-made but offers a *“series of possibilities for action”* (Diodato, 2005, p. 57). During the experience, multimedia and analogic interfaces appeal not only to the intellect but also to the senses, *“to open up affective, vital relations with city places once more, and produce, energize, put into circulation, and socialize a collective intelligence to which the capacity to cultivate and take care of the different qualities of territories could once again be entrusted”* (Decandia, 2014, p. 4).

The multimedia language tells an urban story *“in a smooth, coherent, and absorbing way; but above all, it is the language through which we communicate today, capturing our imagination and expressing itself in new forms of behavior. It has led to the inevitable influence that the medium has exerted over us for years but, if inverted, allows us to potentially reconnect with a shared feeling, a vehicle for dialogue between different people from far and wide, in a way that has not happened for centuries. Its language has a certain similarity to the oral culture on which the characteristics of discursive thought were based on: Indeterminacy, repeatability, immediacy, simultaneousness, fragmentation, and connectivity”* (Cirifino, Giardina Papa, & Rosa, 2011, p. 24).

6. Conclusions.

The *Visitor Space* is characterized by an overlap and commixture of what we used to consider polarities: The boundaries between tangible and intangible, hardware and software, private and public are indeed thinning and blurring away (Borch & Kornberger,

2015). The case here analyzed occurs in an institutional—although private—space used for shared enjoyment, generating cultural values and different ways to perceive and live a city; a place of encounter between people. While the *Chamber of Commerce* is the owner of the space, the visitor is the owner of the personal cultural experience he brings inside it. However, the space consumption is public, open to all: Citizens and external visitors without any discrimination.

We could therefore conclude that the *Visitor Space* taken into account is neither private nor public: It is the *Chamber of Commerce*'s answer to a will to create a space with a cognitive advantage, while interacting with the territorial government.

The importance of public city spaces is increasingly recognized as a crucial feature by many different scholars. The theory of the commons, as this edited volume demonstrates, is aimed at rethinking some urban practices, especially where a failure on part of the market or state is found (Borch and Kornberg, 2016). The case study this chapter focuses on is, conversely, an exemplary case in which public value is provided by a partnership of public and private institutions. The project here presented and analyzed outlines a clear sharing of urban experiences; a case study in which the contexts of state and market learn from the teachings of experiences of urban commons, and implement a virtuous process of coproduction and co-appropriation, while maintaining a clear distinction from the notions of urban and cultural commons.

These urban and cultural commons are not limited to the physical reality of the space, but rather take on their meaning from practice. They are actions, not objects. The *Visitor Space* generates an exchange of cognitive flows with the local community and territory. These flows are directed toward specific cultural sites; they bring together and coagulate virtuous explorations that are 'softer' than congested mass experiences. This brings to different urban touchpoints where people can relate at different levels and at different times when experiencing the city.

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