

MICRO-PRACTICES OF URBAN REGENERATION

The city of personal projects

By Pierluigi Salvadeo and Chiara Lionello

Nowadays we are experiencing a strange condition, characterized by an unstable balance between an indiscriminate enthusiasm for technology – which is increasingly pervasive and able to provide our actions with extraordinary potentials, almost extrasensory in nature – and an innate need to follow the more typical material needs of our human nature. Everything is undeniably changing: our way of living and relating to space, whether public or private, our way of exchanging social relationships, our way of moving from one place to another, our working habits and even the ways we organize our spare time. In this new condition abstraction and concreteness seem to coexist as never before within the same perspective plane, tracing different and unusual existential perimeters. Such situation has been already framed by the French philosopher Paul Virilio, who argued thirty years ago that the new technologies of *real time* would have led mankind to a progressive loss of *real space*, revealing how technology was becoming part of us by reshaping our consciousness of the world, our reciprocal relationships and, in general, the space and time where our actions take place:

«Far sì che il corpo e la sua energia vitale si mettano al passo con le tecnologie della trasmissione istantanea, vuol dire abolire il classico distinguo fra interno ed esterno a vantaggio di un nuovo tipo di centralità, o meglio di iper centralità: quella del tempo, di un tempo 'presente' [...]»¹ (Virilio 1993).

In this present time, where everything looks like placed on the same level, we could recognize that the presence of architecture is not defined anymore by shape, materials and space, but rather by its ability to encourage relationships, or rather, networks of relationships, with a clear connection to everything that nowadays technologies allow us to do. All of this is produced going beyond the typical characteristics of space and embracing a broader context made up of “soglie e protocolli di accesso”² (Augé 2007) and of “spazi interconnessi e paesaggi instabili”³ (Palumbo 2012) always ready for possible negotiation and transformation, in line with the needs of people and more generally with the dynamic and vital balances of the living world. Nowadays, we perceive a large part of our everyday experiences through technology and connectivity has become the dominant mode that guides our relationship with the world, helping us to organize a large part of our everyday behaviors (Greenfield 2017). The politologist Parag Khanna argues that «la connettività è destino»⁴ and that «osservare il mondo attraverso la lente della connettività genera nuove visioni su come stiamo organizzando noi stessi in quanto specie»⁵ (Khanna 2016, 36). It seems that the difference between real and virtual, between an action that takes place into a precise place and one that happens in the *non-perimeter* of our smartphone, is becoming increasingly blurred. As a result, the separation between private and public spaces, between inner and outer dimensions, between real and virtual objects, but also between one time and another, or even between one place and another, is disappearing. Today we are more inclined to experience things rather than actually owning them. As

¹ Translated by the authors: “ensuring that the body and its vital energy follow the rhythm of instant transmission technologies means abolishing the classic distinction between the internal and external in favor of a new type of centrality, or rather hyper-centrality: that of time, of a 'present' time”.

² Translated by the authors: “thresholds and access protocols”.

³ Translated by the authors: “interconnected spaces and unstable landscapes”.

⁴ Translated by the authors: “connectivity is destiny”.

⁵ Translated by the authors: “observing the world through the lens of connectivity generates new perspectives on how we, as a species, are organizing ourselves”.

Jeremy Rifkin argues since several years «in una economia delle reti, è più facile che sia negoziato l'accesso a una proprietà fisica o intellettuale, piuttosto che venga scambiata la proprietà stessa»⁶ (Rifkin 2000, 7). Therefore, we can speak about a possession of goods without their actual ownership; in the same way we can talk about a possible use of the urban spaces and artefacts, which today is loaded with further possibilities due to the complex system of network connections in which we are diving. Practices of *appropriation* and *re-appropriation* that are expressed as forms of collaborative projects made up of a continuous sequence of conversations, proposals and actions, whose objective is making the places and spaces of our lives and daily actions as we would like them to be (Minervini 2016). This is a wider idea of project that goes beyond what architects are used to practice and that can be assigned to anyone who, more or less consciously, individually or collectively, decides to propose solutions and to produce a transformation on the inhabited world. It is in this way that each proposal and each project become part of a larger process of evaluation and experimentation. Acting as many small trajectories that each individual can use in his or her own way, recombining the parts, or, as Vito Campanelli argues, remixing and re-posting his or her own proposals in the Web, leaving open the possibility for others to rework the content, perpetuating the process of exchange and discussion (Campanelli 2011). This already happens on a daily basis when we collect images or information from Internet, when we edit them in some way and re-post them again, when we participate in debates by texting our opinion on social networks, when we *like* the contents we appreciate or when we do not share the content we *dislike* ... and much more.

Starting from this hypothesis, we would like to introduce a collection of projects whose ultimate objective is the proposal of multi-textual living expressions. These architectural spaces have been conceived as possible design interpretations of the contemporary complexity and of its positive chaos made up of multi-layered and performing (one might say *smart*) contents. These projects, in fact, have both a private and public dimension, they make possible individual and collective behaviors, they are both abstract and concrete. This dimension found expression into a recurrent feature of characterize them, despite their different geographical location and urban role: their plan is designed as an infrastructural and homogeneous surface without strict and recognizable functional divisions – resembling the *interface* of our smartphones – and provide different equipment or tools all over their extension for the users to set up their practices.

The first project is the *Rolex Learning Center* in Lausanne, designed by the Japanese practice SANAA in 2004 inside the *École Polytechnique Fédérale* campus. The original competition required to respect a complex functional program that envisaged the coexistence of two libraries (a scientific one and a multimedia one), a bookstore, over eight-hundred study stations, a six-hundred-seat amphitheater, study and teaching areas, laboratories, meeting places and administrative facilities, a restaurant and two cafeterias. SANAA interpreted the functional program imagining a multilayered platform where different activities could exist and flow into one another: the architects designed a sort of topographical platform where the hierarchy between served and servant spaces was erased. The learning center was rather conceived as an undulating rectangular double concrete slab that, ascending and descending, formed a series of arches and covered spaces on the outside and a mix of sloping surfaces on the inside, duplicating the inhabited surface available. This design choice created a sinuous movement of the ground, characterized by rises, clearings and dips, occasionally interrupted by patios and glazed elements of various

⁶ Translated by the authors: “in a network economy, it is easier to negotiate access to physical or intellectual property than to exchange the ownership itself”.

dimensions: in this way the areas for the different activities are separated and yet remain visually connected to one another and to the surrounding landscape. Lacking walls and contrasting colors and materials, the space looks like a cloud designed to be experienced rather than observed: the 60-cm-thick reinforced-concrete slab covered in grey moquette, in fact, reveals hidden electrical plugs all over its surface, making students able to place themselves wherever they want on the pavement that, rising and lowering, allows to isolate the different areas. In this project visitors are able to wander in search of their favorite clearing and to inhabit the building in many ways, *appropriating* its spaces according to their individual purposes. Architecture is designed as a way for triggering new practices among the people who pass through its spaces, giving them the possibility of choosing, each time, the place of their action and participating to the overall design process: they complete what architects started. A similar attitude can be recognized inside the *KAIT Workshop* building in Kanagawa, designed by Junya Ishigami in 2008. The architect was asked to design a space where students could collect and work together on different kind of practical projects, using machineries and tools. Ishigami interpreted the commission proposing a simple rectangular horizontal box surrounded by glass facades, whose complexity is given by the shape and distribution of the structuring pillars. In fact, the wide room has been designed as a network of three hundred and five vertical elements that create, according to their density and distribution, a multiple set of areas that might be used by researchers and students for placing different practical activities: the abstract plan of the space leave users free to concretely imagine possible uses and to participate in the everyday complement of the project. The space behaves as a forest where people can interact with the artificial nature, made of pillars, pieces of furniture, machineries and plants, playing with different effects of light and shadows according to the season and the daytime. It is interesting to notice that Ishigami carefully studied the section and orientation of each pillar, alongside its position and reciprocal relationships in space, in order to provide different possibilities for occupation. The design process resulted in 290 variations of a quadrilateral unit section ranging from 16mmx145mm for the thinnest tension member to 63mmx90mm for the thickest stress member. In this way, the pillars defined both the structural and the spatial configuration of the space describing, as Ishigami explained as “a multitude of places within the same space” (Ishigami 2013, 16). In such space, students become designers, since they can actively set up their microcosmos, establishing movable and temporary alliances with the materials they are provided with: spontaneously the space was organized to set up a pottery laboratory, a music room, offices, 3d printer areas, laundry areas. All of these areas are not permanent and perimetered, but are movable and ephemeral, recognizable because of the density of small-scale items that are concentrated there: they are self-built by the students who move plants, pieces of furniture and objects to set the environment in the way that they find more suitable for their temporary needs, changing it also according to the seasons and academic calendar.

Moving again to Europe we may find another declination of this design strategy in the project *8X8 Grid of Lighting Poles* realized by MAIO architects for a public square in Barcelona in 2014. Here the public space is conceived as an eternal unfinished platform that encourages appropriations and social engagement. This concept is reached by setting a regular grid of poles (lighting columns and vertical elements of the same height and diameter) that organizes the urban space and holds lighting and electrical systems. The grid is completed by a tensioned cable system that works as a temporary support for multiple elements, making possible different social expressions and answering to the maximum possible requirements with the minimum execution cost.

Its ambiguous character allows permanent mutability, becoming thus a performative social stage. We haven't built a square but designed the potential conditions that will allow its open definition in the future by means consensus and dissent. (Maio 2013)

Again, a further example of this design approach may be observed in the project of *Skandberg Square* in Tirana, completed in 2018 by the Belgium practice 51N4E. The design of the public open space is approached through a strategy that works critically on the existing features of the original square: a wild space whose size was not dominated by the buildings on the perimeter, often invaded by cars and spontaneous activities which, however disordered, gave a strong identity to the space. The architects explained that in doing this project they were inspired by the Moroccan square of *Jema el Fnaa*, a unique space whose spatiality is not defined by the buildings that surround it, but by the many activities of the people who live there and use it during the day and night. That is the most significant image of the square, the colorful humanity that inhabits it, appropriating of its spaces for temporary activities and practices. It is surprising to notice that no one describe the shape of the buildings that delimit this famous public square; the void is its most impactful quality. sometimes it is completely empty in the night while in the morning it starts to be populated by some groups that are coming here to sing. This square is able to completely change its function according to day and night. The project of Tirana embraces the same spatial concept in a radical way: the architects structured the gigantic void with a platform characterized by a gentle slope ascending towards the center; the flooring platform is again structured with a network of diffuse water sprouts that create a movable geography of water mirrors that changes over the day and night. In this way the square becomes a theater for various activities that derive from the different ways of crossing the water elaborated by the inhabitants. By enhancing spontaneous activities and interpretations, the project gives the square a sort of unity. The water mirrors generate, according to days and times, a changeable topography to live creatively, establishing privileged points of view on the built surroundings and re-proportioning the space. This example put time, actions, sensory experience, and everyday life rituals at the center of the project.

These projects are just some of the examples that may symbolize how the contemporary city has become a composite reality where all the different parts are simultaneously placed on a single perspective plane, like a vast plankton of different issues and things, forms and uses, places and environments, languages, images, scenes, do-it-yourself spatial directions, humanity and technology, from the smartphone to the car. An inhabited whole, a world whose freedom is both exhilarating and devastating at the same time. It is a coexistence of opposites that brings to mind the deafening title that the Vancouver-based Canadian writer, Douglas Coupland, chose at the beginning of the new millennium for his novel, *Life After God* (Coupland 2000) in which he describes a world where certainties no longer exist and where God disappears from people's lives. Together with God, any idea of transcendence is extinguished and there is not any ideal able to guide people's behavior. Diving into an indifferent universe, people live, work, meet people, love, die, fight, but always for temporary and partial success. A kind of new innocence invests the novel's protagonists, where everything only makes sense when considered within a broader panorama of experiences, without them to be aimed at a final or transcendent goal. Every action counts for what it is, without prejudice, placing man in a kind of new condition of virginity. It is the recovery of an absolute innocence and purity that could be defined as secular, not so much for the absence of God, but above all for the inclusive attitude of a non-selective generation that finds in things as in nature, in animals as in humans, in fiction as in real life, in virtual spaces as in tangible spaces, the answers to their existential but

partial questions. And all of this does not happen to generate confusion or lose a sense of morality, but rather to overcome hypocritical moralisms or false modesty. In our opinion, this idea can be glimpsed between the lines of Coupland's book: this moral and human upheaval cannot leave us indifferent, even if we are concerned with architecture. For us architects, the happy ending that the Modern Movement in Europe talked about at the beginning of the other century has disappeared. The old ethical trappings on which classical modernity was based have failed, since the critical tools that they proposed are useless today. It also failed that unified scenario prophesied by Le Corbusier, according to which certain rules applied to architecture were supposed to improve human living conditions simply by giving a more functional and pleasant form to inhabited space. Today, new connections of meaning and other types of sensitivity should give order to the project and reorganize its spaces. A different organization that cannot arise from a recomposition of architecture, but from a new and different cultural, civil and artistic attitude (Branzi 2006). A renewal that does not have to describe a unitary scenario or a strong metaphysics, as Coupland's book unscrupulously points out, but rather to give expression to a complexity made up of multilevel, inclusive and performing contents. The city today encompasses 'texts' of a different nature, belonging also to other fields, that take us, if necessary, out of architecture. A reality composed of different 'layers' placed on a single perspective plane, like multicoloured three-dimensional fractals. It is the end of the unity of the project, which opens up a different distribution of roles within the work chain from design to realization. The designer can no longer be the sole mediator between the universe of ideas and construction, but rather must be understood as part of a broader process of dialogue between concrete practices and design thinking. At the same time, we must overcome the old separation between creativity and production and imagining a new culture of relationships: in this shifting context the web seems to assume a particular role in triggering processes of confrontation and synergic use of skills. But beware, the city of the informational era is not the capital of technology; on the contrary, it is the territory of the human, with all its capacity to build relationships and connections (La Rocca 2010). Complex and participatory design processes, which inevitably lead to a different sensitivity towards the architectural artefacts and its spaces. Therefore, the architect should take a step back, and everyone might assume the designer's role, into a sort of horizontal redistribution of design responsibilities. This idea is well presented in the research project *Ikea Desobedients* (2012), developed by the studio Office for Political Innovation, whose head is the Spanish architect Andrés Jaque who has been recently nominated Director of the Advanced Architectural Design Program (AAD) at Columbia GSAPP in New York. The work, presented at Moma PS1, was a critical inquiry about the contemporary production of space: is space today produced by an implementation of the architectural statement or through the multiple actions and interactions of its inhabitants? In order to answer to this question, the project started with a survey of the New York population, aimed to reveal the variety of living patterns that may be found in the city. The analysis showed that the population of New York is composed by many heterogeneous groups of people that live together, acting as families even if they are composed of persons from various cultures, perspectives, relationships, habits and schedules. These multiple ways of living are often supported by a creative use of Ikea pieces of furniture, which are combined, arranged and interpreted in ways that are different from the original one. Jaque recognized that, even if the Swedish company still promotes a conformist and western-centered way of living, the contemporary society has gone further this model to invent new uses. The survey realized by the studio revealed that people use Ikea's items as raw material for building personal spaces and narratives, often remixing their original meaning: they use them as tools and not as objects. In this process every inhabitant acts as a designer, producing a sort of personal urbanism related to his/her

daily activities. In order to explain this research the studio presented at Moma PS1 a set of micro-architectures composed of free assemblages of Ikea items: the installations were conceived to not have recognizable functions but to enhance everyday interactions and interpretations by real citizens. Such practices have been activated during the exhibition's inauguration, where the inhabitants engaged in the survey have been invited to populate the set up and to just perform their everyday life with the collaboration of the audience.

What emerges from this work is a new creative condition that invests the personal sphere of individuals, like a kind of diffuse design attitude able to change the meaning of inhabited spaces, their use and sometimes even their name. The domestic private space is overlapped on the space where we entertain our relationships, even the more public ones, while, at the same time, the public space is used for personal practices, and each time everything is reorganized for new uses, even modifying its layout and image. It is a form of disintermediation of the architect's role which is blending in the one of the user who is now producing a subversion of the way of living, making it increasingly dilated and open, heterogeneous and inclusive: our gestures have changed, the sequence of our daily actions has changed, the way we relate to things and people has changed, the idea we have of our individuality has changed and consequently the concept of personal space in relation to public space has changed. In short, since our experience of places has been deeply transformed, also the size, shape and even aesthetic of space is not the same anymore. Spaces cannot be the same as before, at least in some of their aspects. This means that many of the spaces where we were traditionally used to carry out our activities will not have (and in many cases already do not have) a *raison d'être* in their usual conformation. This non-linear process is evidently very complex, but it has started, and, without interruption, it will increasingly involve every type of society and place, public and private, including domestic environments, even the most intimate ones, which we may insist on protecting from this true epochal tsunami. This situation was already prophesized in 1974 by the urban theorist Melvin M. Webber, within the article *Permissive Planning* (Webber 1974), where he developed the idea that urban planners should become more similar to enablers rather than controllers. Webber, who developed his thought about the cities of the future around the end of the 1960s, imagined that the era of telecommunications and mass mobility, especially the automobile, would radically change our idea of the aggregation spaces. For Webber, the concentric clusters of the ancient cities would be transformed into new types of *urban-associative areas*, introducing the idea of *community without proximity* (Webber 1964). Revisited in the light of our present-day cities, Webber's discourse still shows all its relevance, demonstrated by the infinite possible connections between people, between people and space and between space and time. A transversality that continuously modifies the use and meaning of the places where our social relations take place, to the point of involving the spaces of individuals' personal spheres. Here then, the city can be considered everywhere and in everything (Amin and Thrift 2001), in exteriors as in interiors, in actions as in things, in the urban as in the non-urban and probably in the real as in the virtual. Not only does the space itself change, in its geometries and perimeters, but what changes above all is our idea of space, the useful image we attribute to it in relation to our actions. This is an idea that has pervaded our societies for quite some time now and is perfectly connected to the concept of efficiency that underlies the Smart Cities, based on the close relationship between certain important factors represented by information and communication technologies, the governance strategies of services and spaces, and the

responsible and authentic involvement of people in the processes of use, to which new and different qualitative aspects of the spaces deputed to host the actions of the actors involved should correspond. It is like a kind of different constitutive process of architecture, which goes beyond the classical concept of building. We inhabit an architecture not only because of its spatial and material qualities, but also because of its ability to attract to itself a multiplicity of techniques, networks and immaterial platforms. The result of this process is a mix of overlapping and co-present spatialities, where it is always possible to build a new order and a different system of logical connections that allow us to expand our experiences beyond the usual physical limits. Our home is no longer just a domestic space, but also a place of immateriality, exchange and communication. And the same idea might be applied to public space, which can take on, in certain parts or at certain times, values and uses more in keeping with the personal sphere of the people who attend it. We could probably argue that one of the founding values of today's space, whether private or public, lies more in the weakness and indeterminacy of the scenarios and in their freedom to determine themselves in relation to the situations that arise from time to time. Physical space erodes in favour of new and different territories, which are heterogeneous, transversal, multidisciplinary, dispersed, introverted and sometimes immaterial. These dimensions may be all contained in architecture, but are difficult to describe with the classical formal codes of architecture itself. The most obvious consequence of all this is that the city, architecture and the objects of our everyday life can no longer be considered as universes that are synergetic and linked by historical processes; on the contrary, they may even represent conflicting systems that pursue sometimes even divergent goals. This gives rise to new types of spaces, perhaps not yet perfectly comprehensible or universally shared, but certainly with a strong dynamic and performative capacity where practices of use trace their shape and perimeters. We can therefore reasonably speak of micro-practices of urban regeneration, where, paraphrasing Andrea Branzi in his *Scritti Presocratici* (La Rocca 2010), we can trace in the proposals of the inhabitants and in their practices, partial solutions to be understood as strong fractions marked by acute weak connections.

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