

ii inclusive interiors
#05

Urban Design Ecologies

Projects for City Environments

edited by
Madalina Ghibusi Federica Marchetti

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#05 | **Urban Design Ecologies: Projects for City Environments**

A cura di / Edited by
Madalina Ghibusi Federica Marchetti

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A Multipurpose Co-Designed Experience of the City The Use of the Space in the Urban Environment

Federica Marchetti

In the traditional design, the program for an urban or architecture project is established considering the needs of the client – public or private – and the economic/marketing reasons. Generally, the program is fixed and stable according with the fact that “temporary activities are generally considered to signify a time of crisis or a failure to develop” (Bishop and William 2012, 19). At the same time our society is more and more fluid according with the sociological concept of “liquid modernity” devoted to Bauman. So, it seems very difficult to interpret, with a permanent use of the city space, the actual mutable needs of the people.

If we look at the past, and we consider the destination of the land use, during the last century we are passed from zoning to mixed use but the tendencies for program of new urban developments is always influenced by the reasons of the economic market. In most of the cases, streets and squares are inhabited just by commercial uses in specific hours/days of the week. Moreover, people tend to do public activities in private spaces (gyms, sporting centres, malls). As we can see, the situation produces a failure in terms of people engagement in the use of public domain and in many public spaces of the city we find a lack in terms of identity. This phenomenon, described in the last century literature from Richard Sennet to Marc Augè reveals a kind of urban condition that does not allow and foster the interaction between inhabitants and the space of the city. The situation appears very far from citizens habits and desires, as Jane Jacobs already described in her urban studies during the Sixties, because, as she said: “cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody” (Jacobs 1961, 238).

At the same time, many abandoned places – open spaces or old buildings – that apparently are unattractive for the real estate market, can have a hidden value for the local communities. Starting the re-use of these spaces by people, they reorganize informal programs of activities and re-give them a new life according to different occasions. This kind of use is not fixed and stable, but it changes considering people needs, special events, shared activities etc.: in a certain way, it seems that temporary is becoming the rule and not the exception; moreover, it seems that is an interesting way to solve identity lack in the public domain. In many cases, all these processes are related to the new possibilities that the digital world offer us (online communities, social media, open source and crowd-funding platforms). The new tools help the relation between people, designers, municipalities, other stakeholders etc. and support bottom-up processes to revitalize the city space: “the digital city enables, in fact demands, a compendium of different forms to reflect the multiple ways it can be imagined and experienced” (Hawley, Clift and O’Brien 2016, 3).

It seems that, from the bottom, there is a new motivation to be part of the public space, have a deeply experiences of the city and contribute to define it: from the “insurgent public space” (Hou 2010, 2), rose as a guerrilla practice in response to the lack of urban space uses, to the legal ones according with the Municipality. From the so-called Pop-up city that “serve as encouraging platform for innovative and inspirational activities to flourish” (Beekmans and de Boer 2014, 16) to the experimental projects financed by important brands. In particular, these last examples can represent the good downside in the general idea that spaces imposed by commercial companies are always a bad answer for the urban environment (Grunfeld 2013, 214).

These experiences can support our reflections and can produce the key answers to the questions: could temporary uses being the essence of an urban program? How? What kind of actors can involve? These temporary condition is really temporary? It can be the starting point to test uses that sometimes could became permanent? And, moreover, which kind of city they can produce?

Informal programs

The idea that our age was moving toward a society of experiences is rooted into the sixties and seventies period. In the work of Constant, we found the concept of the *Homo Ludens* as specified by Johan Huizinga expressed in his utopian city, New Babylon: “*Homo Ludens* himself will seek to transform, to recreate, those surroundings, that world, according to his new needs. The exploration and creation of the environment will

them happen to coincide because, in creating his domain to explore, *Homo Ludens* will apply himself to exploring his own creation” (Constant 1974, 62).

Actually, this phenomenon, from the frame of an anti-capitalist city, now is reality, it is not extraneous to market reasons and very influenced by the new digital culture because is linked to the concept of *prosumers*: city users “become active and themselves take part of the production” (Haydn and Temel 2006, 14). This term is strictly related to our modernity, coming from the mass use of internet and its large possibilities in terms of giving feedbacks and practicing customization. It seems that people want to find in the urban space what happens in the digital one: the possibility to say their own opinion and change the reality just with one click. In this case *Homo Ludens* and *Homo Oeconomicus*, conceptualized by Léon Walras, start to be more linked than ever, reviling all the contradictions of this relativist contemporary age of “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 1). Many informal programs that rise in our cities are linked with this change of mentality and the fact that, thanks to internet, the bottom-up organization of these process became easier. These cases start as a form of subculture and then becoming more and more attractive for all the city users.

An example of that is the Nomadic Community Garden in London. It is an informal operation by the local communities that started to re-use, in a productive way, an abandoned area of the city. People self-organize themselves in order to grow food, share knowledge, build relations. The activities are started with a form of auto-financing and using the crowd-funding platform *Spacehive*.¹ The initiative started from the idea to use the space for urban gardens, but in few time is become a space to every kind of leisure activities. The program is visible online, in their web and social pages; now is a Tripadvisor place to visit in London and the location where the annual Meeting of Style, an important festival for the street-art movement, takes place. This is an interesting example that can influence new relationship between people, city, municipality and other stakeholders. Indeed, this kind of processes could not just rise in informal ways if the players around the urban transformations try to set properly practices and include them in their strategies for the city. Actually, there are existing cases to analyze and take into consideration for the future development of this kind of approach.

1 – “Spacehive - Crowd funding for local project” is a web portal that connect people with project ideas for the public spaces to councils, companies and grant-makers in order to find funds for their realization. Refer to: <https://www.spacehive.com/about> (January 2018).

Co-designing the use of the space

The emerging informal situations inspire new form of “co-design”(Sanders and Stappers 2008, 6) and programs that helps the design process in the definition of the use of the space for abandoned urban fabrics or city spaces. This collective and creative way to find solutions for the city problems involves the inhabitants that become active players in the urban transformation process, since the beginning. People are not just the actors in a scenography built without them, but they can give starting inputs, useful for architects in the first phases of a project. This is a way to predict and/or take into action space uses related to the needs of the citizens. Collecting information and desires from the inhabitants means to have a new awareness of the place. It is not a new concept in the design field, but new technologies and media are increasing this possibility for the city requalification.

This is the case of *INStabile Portazza*,² when – at the end of 2014 and thanks to the local Social Street³ online community – a group of citizens decide to regenerate an ex abandoned civic center in the Bologna periphery. After a co-design process (200 people and 30 organization involved) they define the use of the space for the future centre: the CCH (community creative hub). Another interesting example but for the urban space is *Nevicata14*,⁴ a temporary project for Piazza Castello in Milan during the EXPO2015. The design process of the space involved the community thanks to its social media and web pages. This approach allowed the definitions of common rules for the people by the people. The creation of online groups around the problems of a specific site can bring new knowledge about what the city space needs and it can be used by architects and designers in the development of their project ideas. At the same time, it is also a way to establish shared conventions between citizens and other actors in order to increase the global awareness of the place, its potentiality, possible future utilizations and management of the activities. In general, creating new

2 – *INStabile Portazza* is a bottom-up process that involve citizens, associations (Ass. Architetti di Strada Ass. Pro.Muovo), Coop Adriatica and the City of Bologna. Source: www.instabileportazza.it (January 2018).

3 – Social Street is an online portal that support the creation of Facebook groups related to specific area of the cities. The aim is to create active community of citizens to debate and solve collective problems in the urban environment. Source: www.socialstreet.it (January 2018).

4 – *Nevicata14* is a project by the architecture practice Guidarini&Salvadeo and Interstellar Raccoons.



networks and relations makes more and more possible to find innovative or unexpected solution for the city environment. Moreover, these new opportunities can grow and change during the time with the certainty to have a direct feedback every time you need. This idea is present also in *El Campo de Cebada*,⁵ an unused space in Madrid that, after a first temporary installation, is become a place to experiment new forms of collaboration between people, administration and designers in the definition of the space uses. Starting from weekly assemblies, the list of suggested activities was voted online in a specific website. This process allowed the co-definition of uses and the possibilities for architects to give effective answers in terms of spatial proposals.

All the urban processes described have the capability to structure a program very flexible and variegated according to occasions, user necessities, city requirements etc. It is the combination between the bottom-up proposals and top-down regulations that creates a virtuous short circuit to animate the urban space. In order to arrive at this point, it is important the definition of the different roles between citizens, designers, governance and investors. In particular, these operations could be more and more attractive for the markets, if the process become optimized and starts to have measurable results.

Intercepting the economic interest

In the last years, this kind of approach is starting to attract investment from the private sector. Large companies decide to invest and promote temporary use of the space because are linked with program and activities that enrich their value as brands. The situation is interesting because is not just linked to commercial uses, as pop up stores related to their own business, but for leisure and cultural activities in themselves. Behind this situation there is a mix of new patronage and, moreover, the so called “native advertising” (Joel 2013): a form of promotion, born in the web, where the advertising experience follows the user experience in which it is placed. In fact, after the diffusion of internet and above all social networks, the traditional way to propose products and services became less and less. People started to use applications that block web advertisements and companies have understood that people – especially young generations – are annoyed by their usual ad. This phenomenon produced the rise of new forms of promotions that work more on the quality of the contents,

5 – *El Campo de Cebada* (English: Barley Field) is a project set up by the Madrid City Council in 2011. Supporting the value of temporality, the experiment has hosted the installation by the architecture collective Zuloark.





they are less direct on the product characteristics and more linked to the global positive values that it can bring. These forms of advertising can be articles, editorial works for the web, video or photo projects etc., in general the arguments are related to cultural, artistic or social aspects according with the company business, but without a specific description of their products. Most of the time involves good designers, contents creators, artists, creative people etc. more or less famous according with the necessity. What should prevent to see this online trend into the offline world? In a certain way, we can look at this possibility as a positive way to intersect the interests of the private companies and the needs of some kind of city spaces. These operations could bring new shapes, uses and activities that the public sector can not support and now are not suitable for other kind of investors.

It is the case of BMW Guggenheim and the basketball courtyard in Paris by the fashion label Pigalle, the creative directors Ill Studio and the international brand Nike. The BMW Guggenheim Lab was a mobile laboratory about urban life started as a co-initiative of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and the BMW. From 2011 to 2014, the Lab travelled to New York, Berlin, and Mumbai. It is a physical installation that temporary fills urban voids⁶ (Berlin, New York) or it is inserted in a city slum (Mumbai), but the lab is also an urban think tank, a community centre and a public gathering space to explore new ideas, experimentations, visions and projects for the city. Another example is the basketball courtyard Paris Duperré, by Pigalle and Nike, set in an urban gap of Paris in the 9th arrondissement. The project revitalizes an unused space of the city interlacing design, art, performance and sport. In this case it seems that the bottom-up rules, defined in the other one, are absorbed by administration and investors and the *Pop-up city* became top-down, but with more awareness in the goals to reach and in the people desires.

Bringing cultural and sports activities, events, shared uses in a new context where design and architecture are relevant, it is something that our cities needs. Intercepting the economic interests with a *quality oriented* approach could be a possible answer that mediate different necessities between all the actors involved in the process. Proper policies should be the guaranteeing for a correct predisposition of these relations in order to incentivize these operations and enrich them. Projects like the ones described could be considered as best practices toward this direction because of their capability

6 – The installation in Berlin and New York were designed by the Japanese group Atelier Bow-Wow. For the project in Mumbai, Atelier Bow-Wow collaborated with the local practice SDM Architects.

to do not be simply commercial space supported by a sponsor, but urban places with a certain quality in terms of forms and activities that propose.

Conclusion

This kind of programs reveal a city that it is already in action. It is a city that transforms itself thanks to a multidisciplinary approach, where architects, designers, municipalities, people and investors can have new relations between each other. In a book of 1999, the philosopher Pierre Lévy said that the biggest challenge for the architecture of the XXI century would have to leave behind the society of the spectacles to join a new era, using media to share knowledge (Lévy 1999, 31): the tools and examples described in this text, together with the new digital ability proposed, want to look at this chance.

Reaching this goal is possible thanks to the series of instruments: the engagement of the people and the co-design tool, the use of the web, the specific role of architects and designers in this kind of process, the investors that look at the urban space as a place where can interact with their customers through culture, arts, beauty and entertainments. The city produced is not perfect or ideal, but have the ability to be more adaptable considering inhabitants needs. It is a city that try to take the best from the new possibilities that contemporary age gives us.

In this general frame, the program becomes an element with a strong impact for the stages of the urban transformation. Thanks to its characteristics, it can evoke new possibilities for the space before the definition of a design strategy and has the ability to change according with the occasions proposed by bottom-up or top-down organizations. At the same time, the program is also a valid instrument to change the uses of the space during the time: a feature that meets the modern requirement of flexibility. This is a social and economic necessity that is reflected in the urban environment and a flexible program represents the right solution to manage it. This aspect has to be considered since the starting phase of the urban design strategy and, for this reason, it is important the collaboration between architects, designers, planners and all the actors that could be involved in the co-definition of the uses. Considering space and time as references, the activities are the flexible element in the program system that can satisfy the need of the inhabitants. Moreover, the results of this operations can be very relevant in terms of people engagement, liveability, place awareness, urban identity and *social innovation*. This approach allows a continuous improvement of the environment conditions because is an open process where the addition of new contributions to solve

new problems and necessities are always possible. According with this concept, the program reveals its *scalability*, that means: ability to grow and be replicable. “Emulation and inspiration also play a critical role in spreading an idea or a practice” (Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan 2010, 13), but usually it is not enough and other incentives arrive “through the provision of support and know-how from one to another in a more organic and adaptive kind of grow” (ibid.). In this way, the complexity of the contemporary urban environment can be seen from another point of view, where the numerous instances – correctly managed – can become elements of richness for the city. For this reason, the program become one of the tools to manage the difficulties and transform them in new opportunities for the city transformation.

It is not ordinary to reach this goal and only learning the lesson from the first practices, it is possible to sketch new scenarios for the future. What is important to consider are the motivations and the reasons that are behind these cases. They provide answers taking inspiration from what the society is expressing today. The strong link with people needs, experience and desires – in a sort of *user centered design* for the urban environment – is what allowed them to overcome difficulties where other approaches fail in terms of space uses and urban vitality. In particular, the program can be the way to materialized it and it represents a co-designed medium for the city experience where needs, knowledge and solutions are shared to reach together the best answer for the city space.

Apparatus

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