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#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**

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Madalina Ghibusi Federica Marchetti

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The Feed-back Policy
Strategies to Supply the Design Process

Gianfranco Orsenigo

Our cities are *full of voids*, a collection of abandoned areas that in the past hosted production plants, railway stations, military barracks, consortium offices, just to give some examples, which can be considered today an important heritage and opportunity for the future development of the surrounding contexts. In these places, transformations have often been braked for different reasons. On one hand, because these areas are *full* in terms of income potential, but there is no more space on the market for the traditional residential and commercial transformation operations, which in the past represented the driving force of real estate development. On the other hand, because they are *full* of elevated expectations by many entities, from public administrations to trade associations and groups of citizens, that consider them as an opportunity to increase the supply of goods and services for the community. All of this determines the uncertain and conflicting nature of their transformations, often making them places of abandonment.

Along with the crisis, that affected the western world in the last years, "it is hoped that this heritage will be back useful" (Indovina 2014, 411) through the elaboration of a series of urban regeneration projects that put in contact the design of spaces with the management of processes, imagine synergies between public and private, integrate urban policies and invest

in social quality and community innovation. What emerges is the need to change the design attitude, envisioning scenarios with a new different point of view on future transformations, which does not immediately advance solutions but reflects on the formulation of the right questions. This new attitude requires broader skills to understand all the components that influence the context, developing a collaborative approach in which the different individuals involved, starting from the professionals, share their knowledge and influence each other. The outcome is the design of an *open project*, capable of redefining itself according to the feedback received about the specific actions put in place during its application, able to seize the opportunities without being forced into predetermined timeline charts and to reinterpret creatively the procedural rules.

In this perspective, the application of policies can be useful, since it allows projects, developed as processes, to overcome their inertia and, when those policies act, to make otherwise intractable problems resolvable (Perrone 2014, 381). This can happen on one side thanks to the activation of interaction and participation processes, on the other subdividing the general intervention in smaller fragments capable of influencing the everyday life and making visible new lifestyles (Jegou and Manzini 2008, XX), displaying the urban regeneration program in a cultural process that starts directly from places (Hannerz 1992, XX).

Opening to policy allows to redirect the gaze towards actions and forms of social interaction aimed to treating public - or perceived as public - problems, evaluating the impacts that the expected and/or produced effects of the policy have on the urban regeneration process. It is interesting to observe experiences in which the interaction aims at elaborating a specific project rather than ruling on general issues. According to the interpretation of the policy, the experience of the Dessau development program Urban Cores – Landscape Zones will be observed, within the International Building Exhibition (IBA) Urban Redevelopment, Saxony-Anhalt 2010, trying to outline a design attitude capable of responding to extremely complex situations with a proactive and adaptive strategy.

Policy, public and stakeholders

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of some terms. Speaking of *policy*, among all the different definitions available, I am reffering to the one by Dunn, that describes the public policy as the set of actions, carried out by a group of individuals (stakeholders), in some way related to the solution of a collective problem, "an unrealized need, value or opportunity which (…) may be attained through public action" (Dunn

1981, 60). The *public*, as it is understood in this essay, is not to be taken as a datum or exclusively with reference to the property of an institution but it is the result of the recognition and taking charge of a certain situation, starting from its problems, carried out by a series of people who may or may not play institutional roles. A wider concept of public, that favours the perception of existing issues, seems to be more appropriate to the actual condition, that is characterized by a higher level of consciousness of the players about the necessity of defining new interaction models between institutions and social local subjects. This can be realized thanks to the application of *top-down* and *bottom-up* initiatives, capable of collecting wishes and overcoming conflicts, as it happened in the last century with the social movements of the seventies or the so-called NIMBY *Syndrome* since the eighties.

As *stakeholders*, that are active during the process, are meant to be those individuals – singular or collective – "that express a unitary and identifiable aim within the process itself" (Fareri 2009, 26). Always quoting Paolo Fareri, the goals can refer to the content of the policy or to the process, recalling the role that actors play in the process of participation. It is possible to schematically subdivide the whole of stakeholders in promoters, beneficiaries and facilitators, remembering that within a complex project-process, that is articulated in different moments and actions, a specific participant can play different roles. Actors become an active part of the process because they carry various types of interests: general ones, that involve the whole process, or specific ones, that are limited to only one or a few issues.

By participating to the project, stakeholders become available to share their economic, political, cognitive and sometimes also working resources and to accept eventual disequilibrium in this collaborative process.

The *Laboratory* of the International Building Exhibition (IBA) Urban Redevelopment, Saxony-Anhalt 2010[1]

The IBA Urban Redevelopment 2010 was born in 2002 from the will of the state government of Saxony-Anhalt to tackle the question of the shrinkage. This experience has faced unknown issues and decided to transform it in a cultural policy about the urban redevelopment. In a period of social change, that policy has outlined some paths of treating the recovery of areas that seem useful and meaningful for the contemporary

1 – Refer to www.open-iba.de and catalogue of exhibition (Oswalt 2010).

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brownfields. It looks like the best practice, for example, to the vacant railway yards in many Italian cities.[2] The exhibition has set the aim of tackling the specific situation of the shrinking cities and to respond with policy objectives. Shrinkage is taken on board as a challenge, as a starting point for an innovative approach in the design and planning of towns and cities under conditions of economic and demographic decline. The emergency of this challenge is shown by the political will to take it in a "courageous and proactive way" (Oswalt 2010, 25), adding to the institutional program of development Stadtumbau Ost, a cultural policy: the IBA2010 "Less Is Future".

The phenomenon of shrinkage is not new but what characterized the East Germany was the rapidity with which it has happened. Following the reunification of Germany, many territories, and especially those of the East, have had to face a process of radical social change: migrations as a result of deindustrialization, demographic change - aging of citizens and decreasing of income - associated with phenomena of suburbanisation that have determined the decrease of population with 20%, sometimes 30%, in ten years, leading to residential buildings being left empty, an over-extended infrastructure and abandoned industrial areas. The scale of the phenomenon transforms it by an economic and social issue in a shift of paradigm in terms of political, social and economic developments, which politics have to address.

The IBA2010 was understood by the government of Saxony-Anhalt as an instrument to react to the shift of paradigm, the *development without growth*, starting to speak about it, to conceptualize it for the design of it. The IBA2010, with the contribution of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation and the State Development Company SALEG, was thought as an *experimental laboratory*, more process than object-oriented, where various urban redevelopment tools would be tried and put to test. Right from the beginning the initiative had to face with two challenges. One, they take a step into an unknown issue without a clear question. The other was the fact that they were not equipped with a large financial budget. These challenges were assumed as the contemporary conditions. The choice

2 – AgriUrbana, the project design in the Architectural, Urban and Interior Design PhD program at Politecnico of Milan and described in this book, tries to reveal the possibility of these spaces if it is looked in an innovative glance.

was to focus more on the *software* of the cities, the cultural and social resources they already had, rather than building *lighthouse* architecture or infrastructure. In order to apply the program, the 19 communities were forced to develop a new specific conceptual image for the city based on their specific potentials: the history and its identifying characteristics. Citizen participation was a crucial element on one hand identifying the local talents, on the other to raise the awareness of the inhabitants on the theme. The results were 19 cities – 19 themes. The ideas were under constant review to ensure that a theme correctly captured the identity and potential of the town, whether and which urban stakeholders could endorse the vision and the methods embraced by the theme.

The IBA2010 could seem as an unusual urban policy. It worked like external elements able of reacting local contexts. Without it, it could not have been thinkable a strong cultural reaction to shrinkage by each city. Beyond traditional planning and architectural strategies, various methods and tools were used to stimulate innovation in the place-based development process, such as moderation, coaching, and networking. At the same time the dialogue between cities and towns, local end state administrators, companies and professionals involved was considered beneficial. A useful tool for this was the Urban Network Conference. Two conferences per year structured a platform for the exchange of experience among the towns. They served to provide information about the IBA process status in the respective cities and to present and criticize the project. At the same time, they were opportunities to exchange ideas within a wider framework. The tight scan of the times helped to constantly check the process, to make the corrections and adjustments needed, and to update priorities.

To synthesize, promoting an open-end approach based on interaction has two general benefits: the first one, more palpable, the processes of the cities are going on even after the exhibition closes; the second, more culturally, shows that the various "stakeholders can form themselves into an *investigating community*, capable of mutual and collective learning among co-protagonists" (Scalvi 2010, 6).

Urban Cores – Landscape Zone a pixeled process for Dessau-Roßlau

The city of Dessau, Dessau-Roßlau after the merge in 2007, was one of the nineteen cities of the IBA2010 exhibition. In 1989, Dessau was still one of the major industrial centre of the GDR. After reunification, the fused twin city struggled with the economic and demographic repercussion of deindustrialization. Dessau-Roßlau was and it is getting smaller. Demolitions on a scale never seen before have become necessary.

It was a long process before to recognise how old growth concepts would not prevail. New paths were taken over the course of the IBA2010 to be able to respond flexibly to change and to make the city fit for the future. Dessau-Roßlau participated to the IBA2010 under the theme Urban Cores – Landscape Zones, a spatial concept for remodelling the town. The task was to prevent a disordered perforation on the city caused by shrinkage. The concept is meant as a flexible, long-term strategy. It consists of two main goals: firstly, the stabilization of vital urban cores imagined stable during the shrinking process, secondly the implementation of new landscape zones, running through the urban cores instead of demolished constructions.

As being mentioned before, I do not wish to describe all the projects but highlight, through a few steps, how dealing with the policy issue can generate effects to feed the regeneration process.[3] I will focus more on the activation of the landscape zones. To face the shrinkage at the beginning of the new millennium, with the Bauhaus Dessau and the IBA Office, the town organized an interdisciplinary workshop with numerous participants. The workshop brought together economists, infrastructure and water waste specialists, citizens, urban planners, landscape planners etc. The discussion resulted in the start of an open process, that was intended to last for twenty to thirty years, to react flexible to changes, both in time and space.

Generating resources. Instead of a masterplan, they imagined to bring out the new landscape with a series of agreements. The city was symbolically reduced to pixels to bring the envisioned changes down to a manageable scale. The envisaged corridor of green areas can be recovered piece by piece, plot by plot, as it becomes available. But there was not a manageable number of holders. The ninety hectares of the potential corridor, from the railway station to the south of the city, were fragmented by about a thousand individual owners. It must be mentioned that a demolition consensus plan, set up with the three biggest players in the housing sector, had already failed because of the competition between them on the housing market. This is how the city started a meaningful and long effort on the property problem. Some of these properties were owned by bankrupt companies so the mayor of the city visited the bankers, showing them that there were not market conditions to find buyers and so he convinced them to sell back the properties, often for the symbolic price

3 – For an in-depth description of the project please refer http://verwaltung.dessau-rosslau.de.

of one euro. On the other hand, many owners were willing to exchange, demolition goods for properties in redeveloped areas. This meant that the city could get double resources reinforcing both the urban core and the landscape zones.

The administration by itself could not manage this complex process. So, they founded several topical workgroups for planning, land-use management and public relations, bringing together all the important protagonists of the city: from the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation and housing companies, university, savings bank and The Chamber of Industries and Commerce to private initiatives. The resources for demolition were from the European and federal state program while the citizens energies were urgent in order to activate the left spaces. The need to show in short time that conversion had taken place there and to promote involvement among the citizens suggested the organization of a claim "400 sq.m. of Dessau". Under the new term of *culturing*, the city offered to citizens, initiatives and third associations, the opportunity to take on sponsorship for a claimed area of land. Measuring 20 x 20 meters, these *Claims* have the manageable size and can be designed and maintained quite easily by citizens, families or groups. The administration encouraged people to own land, accept responsibility and upkeep spaces. Completed projects include a beekeeping garden, a pharmacy garden, a multicultural garden, an area for BMX bikers and a short rotation plantation for rapid-growing biomass. This form of citizen appropriation of newly created urban spaces produces new sites with an individual atmosphere and aesthetics. It is no longer the representative park but rather a new type of townscape that grows up out of the concrete action taken by participants and obtains its value from its design by a group.

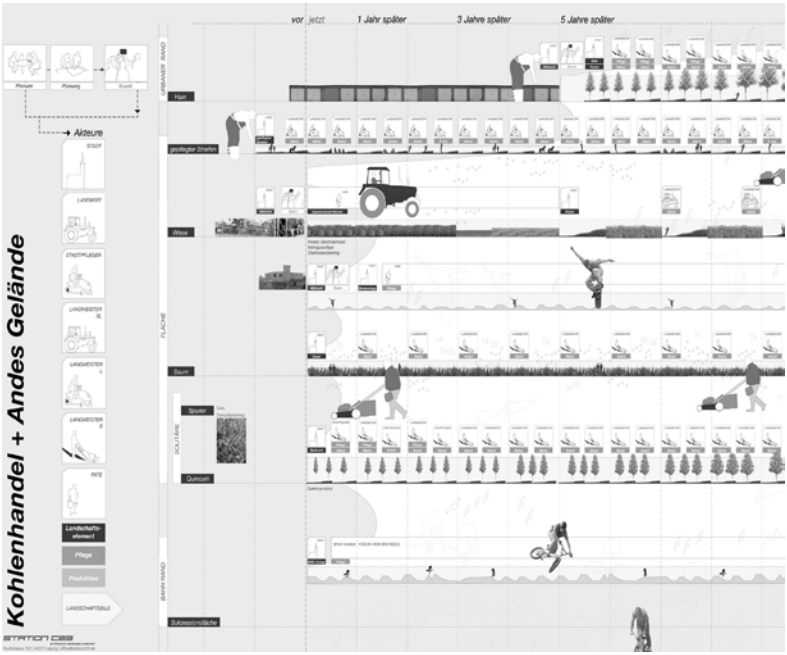
Mediation – Communicating urban redevelopment and improving negotiation skills. The *Claims* experience revealed the shrinkage question and at the same time the resources of the city. It showed also the fragility of a pixeled process. At the beginning a lot of emphasis was put on the claims with large-scale events in May and September, but all of these disappeared during the rest of the year. The objective was a general buzz about the theme of urban redevelopment as a reaction to the social change. The IBA Office in Dessau-Roßlau developed a global strategy of mediation using print media, radio and events that enabled gaining specific experience. Workshops, walks as performance, large billboards that have been artistically modified making visible the intervention of citizens became usual. It was also developed the *Read Thread* in order to show that each transformed fragment was a piece of a complex plan. A broad asphalt path was flanked by red arrows showing the way of the *Read Thread*. A

guideline and information system leading people along the green zones and the milestones of the redevelopment plan. It was an instrument to familiarize citizens with the physical and cultural transformation. In the Am Laipziger Tor district was opened a contact centre attempting to draw greater attention to the district about both the urban redevelopment (in the context of fear over the demolitions) and the socially aspects. The contact office ensured better networking and joint actions not only to encourage physical renovations but also to support fragile populations: youth, women, unemployed and seniors.

Innovation in actions through cooperation. The program raised up with the experience of the claims disclosed that a new kind of park was possible. It turned out that it was necessary to deepen the concept of which type of park it was needed and how to get it. The design and aesthetics of the new green zones were thoroughly debated in public. The final decision was in the favour of extensive landscapes using meadows that only need mowing once a year and that also allow biodiversity. With the support of the landscape office Station C23 it was carried out the concept-image of the *Landschaftszug Dessau*[4] (landscape stretch), a navigation tool (Langner 2014, 18), under the unpredictable conditions of the shrinkage. It serves as a framework for process-oriented development and selective interventions, which function as catalysts for development processes. In such interventions, individual measures or experiments allow one to observe, verify and evaluate their effect within a reasonably comprehensible context. How to design and maintain the green corridor requires a context-, process-, and dialogue-oriented practice. For the small scale, the more intensively managed part of the new landscape and the closest to inhabited neighbourhoods, the maintenance is carried out by the municipality. Where meadowlands join to form extensive areas, the farmers undertake large-scale maintenance. In addition, as mentioned before, the citizens are given the opportunity to occupy pieces of land by staking out a so-called claim, thereby contributing to the cultural and physical appropriation of the new open landscape. Alliances among citizens, politicians, housing companies, landscape architects, engineers, farmers, and others are constantly being initiated and stimulated through the rebuilding of the landscape stating the dynamic ecological and social processes.

As it was in the beginning intention, the process is still on-going and adapting itself to the actual conditions.

4 – Refer to www.stationC23.de and (Per and Mozas 2011).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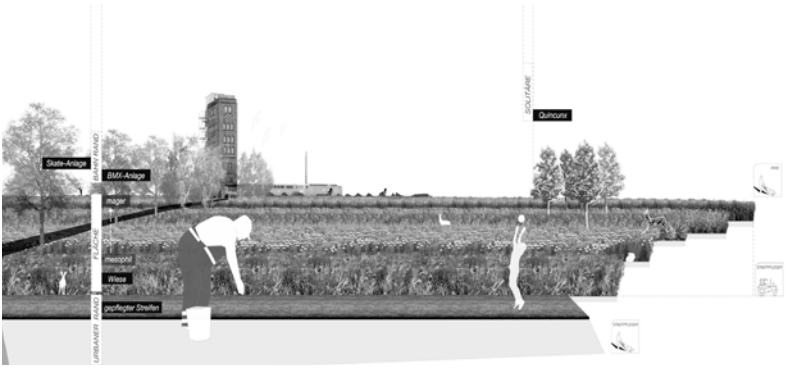
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The centrality of the Problem Setting and the role of a Policy Approach

The original aspects of this experience describe the efficacy of a design attitude that we can define as *mite* (meek) (Infussi 2007) in a period in which everyone designs as an individual and as a community member.

> I suggest calling progetto mite that practice of design able to presuppose the least number of aspects possible, among those that concern it. (...) The design activity orients and from meanings to existent energies that in this way can be recognized and liberated, constructs interactively the scenarios as principles to which it invites to adhere, it is destined to trigger processes, not automatically to conclude them, producing, first, criteria for evaluating indeterminate situations. (Infussi 2007, 68)

This is a necessary attitude to face the complexity and uncertainty of contemporary regenerations. The project becomes a process where it practices the disciplinary contaminations, sensible to common knowledge and to what society expresses out of the established paths. From a *primarily problem solving* approach we move to a *primarily problem setting* approach where the key moment of the design process more than the design of a solution, is the construction of the problem frame, through an *inter-active design* that orientates the treatment of complex issues. Once the framing objectives are fixed, possible trajectories can be identified along. This process is not a linear one but it remains adaptive and responsive "to be altered" by external factors. Time by time they use the opportunities and resources available at that moment, feeding and orientating the next steps.

In such situation the role of the design expert, or better of the design team, becomes central. The designer among stakeholders is not the isolated author of the project, but his roles are both to manage and feed the participation process and the advancement of the project contents.

> (the expert) is required to structure a process of intervention on the content, building frames of reference, interpreting the territories, triggering through the proposition of scenarios design forms based on social interaction, translating informal practices in the language of policies, supporting the consolidation of dimensions of management, approaching promoters to additional resources, promoting the dissemination and transferability of experiences, reinforcing links and networks of the local to the urban and beyond. (Fareri 2009, 203)

As a "policy activist" (Fareri 2009) the designer frames the *field of project* made by places and engages stakeholders. From the point of view of a policy, and through its tools, the *field of project* becomes a place of "common goods" growth (Pasqui and Rabaiotti 1999) and where the idea of *collective interest* as the related question is constantly re-articulated, in favour of the transformation of places.

Apparatus

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