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How can we plan better cities for all?

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Abstract

People have always built and will continue building cities as living spaces, and those who live in them have the right to demand places where they can meet each other, play, dream and relax. We recognize two important key concepts: what is an urban space and what is an urban place.Public life actually is a key factor in urban development to improve public space quality. To redesign urban places is also a key factor to develop a "city for all" that is inclusive, more livable, that promotes equal opportunities and is accessible to everyone.We believe that through a deeper understanding of people, we can identify and create more successful solutions for public places. Thus, we need to focus on three different design approaches that set the transformation of public spaces in better places to live and never under estimate the strategic power of planningbased on bottom-up and top-down initiatives.

Keywords: public places; inclusive city; bottom-up initiatives; masterplan; quality of public space.

some issues to consider for a good plan

There are some issues to consider every time we approach an urban plan or we re-design an area of the city: the quality of the spaces we reshape, the plural nature of the project, the specific value of that space, the liveliness of the area, the strategic role of public spaces in urban regeneration.

One of the most interesting topic currently under discussion within the world of planning concerns the quality of public space. That quality is aimed at having good urban places where all details are well-planned (in a people-oriented approach) and where all design choices contribute to improve the environmental sustainability of the city and to increase biodiversity. Good urban places are those where all people feel welcome and these spaces should promote the health, trust, inclusion and the well-being of citizens. It is important to take care of public spaces because people are influenced by the their decay or beauty. For instance, the "*Broken Windows Theory*" demonstrates that a failure to repair something quickly can lead to the impression that no one cares and can drive an area into decline. Good public spaces allow for social interactions both planned and spontaneous on sidewalks or at bus stops, in parks, at street fairs, urban plazas, outdoor concerts, and art installations.

The project of public spaces is a plural question because it embraces many different actors and it is a multidisciplinary environment that involves marketing experts, architects, economists, artists and the citizens too. Planning an intervention of an urban place is no longer solely seen as the responsibility of planners and their clients, be they public or private, but also an opportunity to involve all the stakeholders about that realm. The actors involved are many and users also have a significant part to play.

Planning a public space, including for those people who will occupy that space, is a way to ensure its truly usability and of rendering it rich in meaning. The identity factor has a key role in urban transformation to create

a more livable place that promotes equal opportunities and is accessible to everyone. The "*Manifesto for better public space*" [1] encourages people of all ages to play an active role in deciding how urban places should look like. The second point of the manifesto states that «*Public spaces are the "glue" that holds society together, the places where we meet different people, share experiences, and learn to trust one another. We must transform our parks, streets and squares into attractive, vibrant places that help to create sustainable communities*». So, urban places can create a sense of belonging amongst users that is unique in each site.

A successful public space is working when it attracts people to a vibrant everyday life. The presence of people in a space is an important indicator of safety because peoplecan feel if a space is safe before they use it. As such, removing barriers to participation in public spaces and enabling a wider range of people to enjoy them is a key to create thriving, safer, and more equitable communities. An attractive public space has to promote several social interactions and offer diverse opportunities to enjoy it as cafes, restaurants, playgrounds, many public seating and so on.

As public spaces are the most important areas of a district and they influence the quality of life, an integration of plans public/private, internal/external, buildings/free areas is needed in order to bring them to life while the work on the buildings is still going on. For this reason it no longer seems possible to tack on the question of the layout of public spaces at the end of the planning process, because this theme is a crucial one and has acquired a strategic importance in terms of urban development.

2. The key role of some public space in urban interventions

«*Cities are fundamentally about people and where people go and where people meet are at the core of what makes a city work. So even more important than buildings, in a city, are public spaces between them. And today some of the most important transformative changes are happening in these public spaces.*» said Amanda Burden at TEDx in Vancouver in 2014 [2].

Public space is made up of the spaces that shape our everyday experience in our neighborhoods, communities and historical city center, as sidewalks and public squares, parks and other green spaces, and spaces that are part of our transportation networks, including everything from streets and bike lanes to bus stops and rail stations.

Matthew Carmona [3], an architect, planner and researcher, defines the notion of public realm as «*an open and inclusive stage for social interaction, political action and cultural exchange*». Thus public spaces are the set of public life of which people are the shared denominator.Carmona always says [3] «*the public, in public space, is not a coherent and unified group, but instead a fragmented society of different socio-economic (and today, often cultural) groups, further divided by age and gender. Each part of this fragmented society will inevitably relate to public space in different complex ways*».

When we speak about public space we face with real complex places which have unique factors in every city: street corners, laneways, food trails, its urban scent and taste. Thus in every kind of urban intervention we should increase the lovability, and not just livability, of our cities by promoting and celebrating this uniqueness.

3. we suggest three approaches

Considering the issues of urban regeneration and the strategic role of public spaces in a city, we need to focus on three design approaches that set the transformation of urban spaces in better places to live: first, to remove every kind of barriers (not only the architectural ones) that can not contribute to a further city development; second, to re-think the relation between buildings and the city to plan better mobility changes that allow everyone to go everywhere and not only to access in some buildings; last, to consider people in their everyday life, with specific needs.

3.1 No limits for a real inclusion

Public spaces intersect with health, equity and inclusion, but how should be a really inclusive city? To be inclusive, a city has absolutely to be accessible to everyone, overcoming each kind of barriers and limits that preclude a real usability of spaces and a real participation of people. However, this qualification is not enough because today it is necessary to promote an user-friendly access to every opportunity and common goods that a city should provide. A park is only welcoming if it is easy to access and comfortable to spend time in. City barriers include those which inhibit people, with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairmentsto enjoy some public spaces in our cities. Regarding this point, the declaration of the European Institute for Design and Disability in 2004 [4] states that «*Design for All aims to enable all people to have equal opportunities to participate in every aspect of society. To achieve this, the built environment, everyday objects, services, culture and information – in short, everything that is designed and made by people to be used by people – must be accessible, convenient for everyone in society to use and responsive to evolving human diversity*». The city challenge is to do more efforts as possible to guarantee equal access to fundamental rights, improve the quality of life of its population and ensure that everybody – regardless of age, mobility or ability – has equal access to all the resources and pleasures cities have to offer.

Thus the participation of citizens to co-create public spaces is needed to let them share their needs, worries and visions. We need to be more open and perceptive and to do more bottom-up initiatives because civic engagement is a pilar of the process to change public life. Public space is the free space for everyone so it is difficult to share it and have the same wishes. That's why inclusion itself is a complex concept that is challenging urban planning.

We believe inclusion is whether an outcome, a process and a tool.Reducing barriers to participation is central to making people feel they are truly invited to be a part of the planning process. As an outcome, inclusion let people feel welcome, respected, safe, and accommodated, regardless of who they are, where they come from, their abilities, how old they are, or how they use the space [5]. As a deliberate process, inclusion requires understanding of context and lived experience, among many factors [5]. Thanks to that process we can recognize and respect the needs and values of people using the space and the assets present in a place, actively engaging and cultivating trust among participants, ultimately allowing all members of the community to shape, achieve, and sustain a common vision.As a tool, inclusion can help practitioners and communities reduce and eliminate inequities stemming from long-term systemic discrimination and other barriers [5]. At the end, inclusion has the power to create real change to foster social innovation and public life in urban places. The citizens' participation is fundamental also for a good maintenance of public spaces and this method is a way to let them be involved.

This way of city management is one of the keys for sustainable urban development but we know that to foster citizens' participation is long and complex.

3.2 Reshaping buildings and the city

We suggest a second approach to set urban interventions in a better way: to consider the link between buildings and public life that defines a city.

Public life is what happens in public spaces, on streets and in between buildings. Where people meet and where people go are at the core of a city, so even more important than buildings are the spaces in between them.

There is a strict link between life and forms because the way public spaces are designed influences public life and everyone's ability and the comfort of that place. For that reason when we want to plan better "cities for all", we have to consider the accessibility of both buildings and the space in between them. In a city, everyone should go everywhere without any limitations. To do so, when we are planning an intervention (both at urban or architectural scale), we need to pay attention to the external environment of the building and the whole context with its streets and lanes. There is a mutual beneficial relationship between people's quality of life and the built environment. So the built environment forms has to respond to people's needs to create beautiful, usable and smart spaces.

We envision how buildings can contribute to our public life aspirations, in terms of heigh, massing and scale, as well as functionally and interactions. Outdoor activities are influenced by a wide number of conditions. Physical environment is one of the factors and it depends on buildings and on the shape a place has. More than architecture is needed to develop social interactions, but design can encourage them.

Life between buildings [6] is not merely pedestrian traffic or recreational or social activities. Life between buildings comprises the entire spectrum of activities, which combine to make communal spaces in cities and residential areas meaningful and attractive. If given a choice between walking on a deserted or a lively street, most people in most situations will choose the lively street. If the choice is between sitting in a private backyard or in a semiprivate front yard with a view of the street, people will often choose the front of the house where there is more to see. There is a proverb that states «*people come, where people are*» and we can see that fact in public spaces too. For instance, if we put an high-quality public space for the outdoor activity near a new residential area, the pleasure of that activities can evolve. Public spaces need to have desirable conditions for necessary outdoor activities, recreational activities and social activities. To be able to move confidently, to take pleasure in spaces, buildings, and city life, and to meet and get together with other people, these are fundamental conditions for a good project today. Thus, public life needs a physical possibility for its existence.

The physical structure, both visually and functionally, supports the desired social structure of the area and it becomes the stage where daily unplanned activities happen.

3.3 Consider people in their human dimension

At some point in our lives we all need the city to be designed and equipped so that it is easy to get around in. Using a wheelchair, pushing a pram, walking around with the help of a rollator or a white stick or getting around on crutches puts special demands on the way urban space is designed and equipped. Thus, the third approach we suggest is to consider people in their very human dimension [7] and in their everyday life. An accessible city is not only that one is easier to enter and that is attractive for tourists. A "city for all" is a city where everyone can take part in urban life.

Thus when we approach an urban design we can't only focus on main squares and the historical city centers, but we have to consider also the network of street connections that allow citizens to go to and from work or

school, or services. And, at the end, we have to consider people with their different needs, not only as workers who need basic services to live but also as women and men with social needs.

To do that we need to be familiar with human senses, the way they work and the areas in which they operateare an important requirement for designing and dimensioning all forms of outdoor spaces and building layouts. People are the starting point in our work so we need to know their movements, interests, behavior and engagement in their surroundings. Planning better "cities for all" means to start counting what we care about (people!) and how people use a public space, how they walk across places, how they enjoy urban places. Climates and cultures are different in all countries but the human beings share similar behavior, so we can predict it. What are people's habits and routines? What do people do while they are stopping and staying? Why do they prefer to walk through a street instead of another one? To consider all these factors means we take into account human dimension as for the traffic. Urban life and the well-being of our citizens is nowadays an essential aspect.

Human movement is by nature limited to predominantly horizontal motion at a speed of approximately 5 kilometers per hour, and the sensory apparatus is finely adapted to this condition. A knowledge of the senses is a necessary requirement also in relation to understanding all other forms of direct communication and the human perception of spatial conditions and dimensions.Also distance is important for people and it depends on different cultures and on different kind of relationships we have with each other. Therefore the car-centered city and the pedestrian city have quite different sizes and dimensions. In the automobile city, signs and billboards must be very big and bold to be seen. Buildings are comparably large and poor in detail, since these cannot be seen in any case. Only on foot we have a meaningful opportunity to be at ease and able to take time to experience, pause, or become involved. Jan Gehl, Danish architect and urban design consultant, said that thanks to the combination of some principles (the presence of walls, the distance, the speed, the level and the orientation toward others) it is possible to establish the physical requirement for isolation or contact among people [6].

In addition to these principles, we can investigate human behavior by counting people walking and cycling, tallying age and gender, mapping how they spend time, making surveys about social dimension of public space, observing design-spatial interactions and evaluating spatial components. We can measure how the space invites different body postures, different activities, different ages and genders socializing, how many people move through, what mode of transportation they use and so on. Than, with this amount of data we could reason and make some questions about what we have studied (Whodidyousee/whodidn'tyousee? - Did you see anything unexpected? - What did you see that you want to know more about?…). This approach let us better know public space features, to promote its improvement with our plan.

4. we need a masterplan

Thus, how can we plan better "cities for all"?

Our aim is not only to plan livable city but lovable places where to live in.

The way we transform public spaces says if we are actually planning a "city for all", a real inclusive city that is people-oriented. Could we turn this challenge to our advantage?

Could we invent ways of managing public spaces that actually enhance the city? The answer is yes. We need to focus on some specific areas of the city approaching the plan with three attitudes that let us to better understand people's needs and then design public spaces in a tactical way.

We think we can plan better "cities for all" by acing with a design that transforms public spaces in a different way by putting people-first, so that both the product and the process of a masterplan are done in a different way.

We believe that through a deeper understanding of people, we can identify and create more successful solutions for citizens. The city belongs to everyone so the real potential of cities lies in policymakers, producers and people working and negotiating together. We believe great things happen when people get together and are imaginative about their shared spaces.The involvement of all stakeholders is crucial for the process itself.

We need to change our attitude from a dominant thinking about a strategic urban leadership focused on fixed masterplans and projects, to a strategic framework based on bottom-up and top-down initiatives. This approach doesn't give up on masterplans in general, a long term planning is needed anyway. It is not only a question of top-down or bottom-up initiatives because we need both. We have to find new solutions through experiments and participation, enabling an active listening and an ongoing monitoring of co-ordinated local actions. So that, combining feedbacks with forwards becomes a way to evolve and innovate the urban planning.

We believe we need to embrace the complexities and challenges of our urban landscape, we have to listen to and learn about our cities.

Thus, it is fundamental offering opportunities and activities to interact with our cities, encouraging initiatives to contribute to a positive change, taking action to make pur cities more livable and lovable, addressing better usage of underutilized public spaces.

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