

PLAYTIME

an action framework for public space in fragile urban contexts

Anna Moro, Grazia Concilio, Ilaria Tosoni, Talita Medina
Antonio Longo, Paolo Carli, Matteo Pettinaroli, Elena Acerbi



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This volume is the result of research commissioned by IGPDecaux from the Cities in Action Living Lab (CALL) research group at the Politecnico di Milano's Department of Architecture and Urban Studies. The stated goal was to draft a concept, **PLAYTIME**, for the regeneration of public space in contexts characterized by a severe lack of services, scarce attention towards collective space, social fragility and economic disadvantage. Such places are marked by the typical conditions of urban peripheries as well as certain neglected historic centers in Italy.

PLAYTIME outlines some guidelines for working in these places, promoting their transformation based on a method focusing on everyday practices and care. **PLAYTIME** is presented as a handbook for experimenting with the construction of public space precisely where public space seems not to exist.



IGPDecaux (www.igpdecaux.it) is a leading global external communications firm, the only one in Italy thanks to the broad scope of its commercial services, specific media skills and its continuous attention to innovation.



CALL (Cities in Action Living Lab, www.citiesinactionlivinglab.org) is a multidisciplinary RUFLab research group at DASTU, Politecnico di Milano; develops projects in the city and for the city, with a focus on open innovation dynamics and the mobilization of local energies and resources.

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Preface

by Alessandro Loro

In the first six months of 2018, the multinational JCDecaux (IGPDecaux is the company's Italian branch), a world leader in external communications, published the Trend Book "Cities: The New Deal", in which artists, innovators, scientists, and researchers were asked to reflect on the evolution of the city and, more broadly, on the future of most of humanity. In the words of the editor, this future consists of "the capacity of human beings to imagine better solutions for all that can satisfy the common good". In the preface, Jean-Charles Decaux, Co-CEO, wrote, "Our mission is to make the city more welcoming, more pleasant, more comfortable so that everyone can benefit from a better quality of life".

The IGPDecaux business model is based on enhanced advertisement and, as such, helps finance urban services, which, due to their very nature, can generate wide-ranging and diversified audiences, which can in turn engage the corporate communications market.

It is well-known that widespread and high quality of life in urban areas contributes to reducing inequality between different territorial contexts and that the existence of this condition influences the attractiveness and competitiveness of the city itself along with the businesses operating there.

The outskirts or urban peripheries, often but not necessarily coinciding with the most fragile areas of the city, can become places for social and economic regeneration and growth. These areas are the focus of

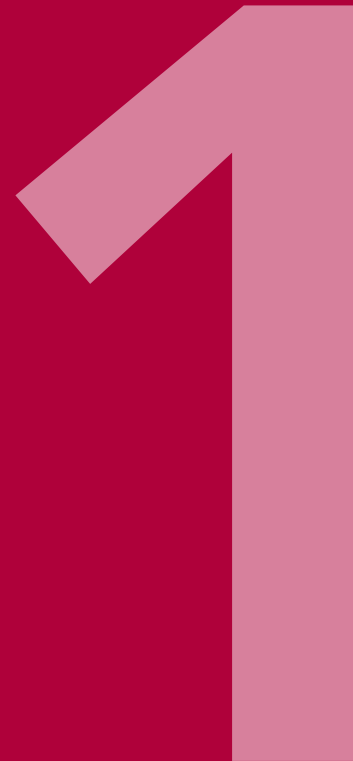
increasing commitment by local administrators, non-profit organizations, private foundations, and companies. For IGPDecaux, they are excellent opportunities for promoting inclusive governance, while at the same time enhancing its own business model, which has always been focused on useful public service.

In the words of Milan Mayor Giuseppe Sala, "Now more than ever, being in politics means focusing on the peripheral areas of the city. For far too long, urban development has only focused on small areas influenced by big investments and projects. This created discontinuity among neighborhoods that must be overcome if we do not want the city to become a place made up of areas with different development rates, with all the ramifications the urban planning and social levels".

In this light, IGPDecaux commissioned the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at Politecnico di Milano to draft public space regeneration guidelines that can be replicated in the most fragile areas of the city. The goal is to design a service that generates value and that is useable in any city, as well as to experiment with an open innovation approach that creates positive synergies among businesses, integrating new, urgent strategic skills.

Milan, 2 July 2019

Public space in fragile urban contexts, from research to action



There are far too many apparently abandoned and neglected public spaces. In some cases, these spaces have been designed by influential designers, but nevertheless fail to host activities, practices, uses, and life. Perhaps this is why the vitality of a public space seems to be a random outcome based on unforeseen circumstances or exogenous or endogenous resources rather than the result of urban planning strategy. If this is true in general, it is even more true when the public space is not located in the residential, commercial and brand-laden context that is the city center. Outside the city center abundant in places, ideas and resources, public space is likely to be key for initiating and supporting in-depth, long-lasting change. This section explores these topics in order to properly frame the **PLAYTIME** concept.

// Beyond the city center, beyond centrality //
// PLAYTIME: a strategy for transformation and care //
// Brand urbanism: a perspective to explore //



Piazzale Donne Partigiane, Milan (Italy)

Beyond the city center, beyond centrality //

Often, outside the commercial and administrative heart of the city, or the more diffuse large and small urban centralities, public space seems not to exist. This affirmation may not seem entirely true because, in reality, public space is not really lacking. It has often been purposely designed and appears excessive in quantity. But just as often, in these areas, public spaces appear uninhabited, poorly maintained, with little or no supervision therefore, when crossing or experiencing them in everyday life, they generate a sense of indifference, or even discomfort and danger. Public space outside the pulsing heart of the city is not lacking in quantity but in quality.

From a spatial point of view, the problems of “out of scale” and poorly dimensioned spaces along with their lack of maintenance, destabilize perception and generate detachment and the inability of users to feel welcome, to experience them as their own, to live in them. At times, this effect is amplified by the lawbreaking use of these areas based on individual, and not-commonly-shared, systems of rules.

Far from the commercial and administrative heart of the city, public space can also convey poverty, illegality and unemployment, low school attendance, and lack of social integration with the immediate surroundings. Here, streets, squares, gardens, parks, and open spaces do not function as public spaces. Here, “collective” life is limited to common spaces all too often tied to urban services (schools, markets, gymnasiums, churches...), which, when functioning, are protected from what is “outside” but never interacting with it.

These areas need systemic, long-lasting transformation. They are already marked by (too) many attempts at intervention lacking any real permanence. Here the transformation of public space requires an unconventional approach, also because the concept of public space as “common” and shared, therefore “also mine” inspiring supervision and care, is not understood or understandable. This is even truer when public space is a result of bad urban design, whether a park, or more commonly, a street space with its succession of hard, unwelcoming materials (roads, sidewalks, open areas, traffic roundabouts, parking lots, etc.).

Therefore, acting in contexts characterized by many layers of fragility (in life cycles, social relations, residential and work situations) means, first and foremost, developing awareness of the symbolic value that public space can take on and the role of public life in creating a sense of belonging and identity for communities and individuals who face great challenges (precarious work situations, difficult and uncomfortable living situations, widespread conflict and distrust in the ability of institutions to offer adequate solutions for daily problems). It is not by chance that these areas are often scenes of vandalism and improper use as a result of that kind of desperation that is manifested in destruction.

Working in these contexts therefore requires the creation of specific conditions so that these places can become foundational elements for creating identity in the minds of those using and inhabiting them. This individual or group identity can, in a positive, dynamic, and constructive dimension, enable the detection of needs and the improvement of resources, catalyzing existing energies.

In concrete terms, when considering opportunities for interventions in these contexts, the goal from the very start must be the appropriation of the transformations by residents, rooting new and more constructive uses. To do so, the work must unfold within a complex process that requires multi-level action; designing, creating meaning, accompanying physical transformation, interacting with and involving citizens (these elements are shared in the experience of designers as well as of public users).

Along with careful attention toward the inhabitants, here it is crucial to be able to intercept resources and energies that are already active on a local level. On the other hand, perhaps because of the exacerbation of some needs and contradictions, these areas distant from the city center demonstrate growing and promising capacity to look at themselves, to independently organize, and to promote insurgent action. People adopt and transform green space, cultivate urban gardens. Street artists become active. People initiate activities for shared services and solidarity endeavors. Here, more than in other areas, and now more than ever, public space has become a laboratory for innovation, for creating the city. The **PLAYTIME** strategy revolves around this opportunity/resource.

PLAYTIME: a strategy for transformation and care //

PLAYTIME outlines a way to design the transformation of urban spaces based on researching its use and care. More than anywhere else, in the deteriorating areas of the city, design cannot be the exclusive, albeit necessary, result of a visionary effort of transformation implemented by a subject who is more or less close to the specific context. Here, the project for public space is also necessarily a collective learning experience, that can plan while transforming and transform while planning: the project is based on the experimentation, or production, of space as a model for collective life, for the shared production of the city, for citizenry.

In this sense, **PLAYTIME** seeks to guarantee the activation of new uses and functions in public space as closely correlated with the production of spatial quality. A **PLAYTIME**-based project is born as an experiment that, over time, takes root as an innovative, durable and high-quality infrastructure for space. A **PLAYTIME**-based project aims to create a spatial transformation process that is also a way to foster that sense of belonging that makes citizens care for it themselves as a result.

In fact, **PLAYTIME** interprets the concept of citizen participation in the dynamics of the urban transformation to be driven by the idea of the collaborative protection and improvement of a common good, specifically public space. In this way, the project becomes a collective learning experience based on care and attention – for a garden, a public building, a recreational space, a series of amenities or a classroom.

PLAYTIME views the shared construction of public space as a mechanism for creating active citizenry, in other words the ability of citizens to organize in a multitude of ways, to mobilize resources and to act according to different approaches and strategies to protect rights and exercise power and responsibility, developing the common good and caring for it¹.

In addition to promoting a higher quality urban project, **PLAYTIME** also fosters creative models for the use of space, with special attention on the physical, cultural and social identities that define it and support its continuous evolution. Therefore, **PLAYTIME** helps people rethink and reinvent public space as the heart of the collectivity, reinforcing the connections and reciprocities between people and the spaces they share. **PLAYTIME** is not only a project for people but it is also a project with people who, by taking care of themselves, also take care of the city.

A **PLAYTIME** project is fully aware that the city is made up of the forces that inhabit it; it is an infrastructure for plural practices that continuously morph their forms and meanings²; it is a setting for practices that continuously interpret time and space. For this reason, **PLAYTIME** seeks to build the collective ability to interpret and care for space by conceiving the project as experimentation³.



Apple Store, Shanghai (China)

Brand urbanism: a perspective to explore //

It is a shared opinion that urban planning should not be subjected to the influence of any brand. The basic thinking is that a quality city must exist despite, and independently of, the availability of private interests. In alignment with this viewpoint, the concept of city/place branding has, for a long time and often exclusively, indicated a formula for the construction and communication of an identifying, distinctive image of a city or a place, in order to attract various subjects (visitors as well as investors)⁴. The widespread diffusion of city/place branding strategies is a powerful affirmation of the role of brands, which continue to gain more footing with city makers, the main actors in the transformation of cities. Often the involvement of brands in the dynamics of the transformation of a city, on any level and by any means, is based on a strong existing identity that primarily adds value to the brand. Identity and strong character in a context are important resources for a brand that should be integrated into the brand's value chain.

PLAYTIME has a different scenario in mind. Acknowledging the decreased attention of brands to urban contexts with weak and/or negative identities, **PLAYTIME** works to foster the integration of brands into city-making processes in such areas. Within this perspective, **PLAYTIME** allows them to consider the project as a tool for the knowledge of and interest in the context. These are contexts that, with very rare exceptions, are not very attractive to brands.

The **PLAYTIME** idea is that the process of (re)building the identity of a given context is not exclusively coherent with a brand identity, but is more an opportunity for

reciprocity between brand and city, made possible thanks to synergies between brands, citizens and local users⁵.

PLAYTIME rejects the idea that brands can propose a project that does not take into account the dynamics of a given context to reduce risks deriving from possible exclusive attention to private interests. At the same time it imagines a kind of branding action that can become a reciprocal pact between a brand and local subjects. The first guarantees an opportunity for transformation and change, while the latter contributes to the production of identity value. **PLAYTIME** considers such reciprocity a possible key for the transformation process.

PLAYTIME could therefore be a way to revamp the role of brands in the city, moving toward what has been recently defined by some as “brand urbanism”. From a perspective of product/service innovation, **PLAYTIME** allows brands to experiment with new roles in contexts that are different from the usual ones. Value is placed on the well-known capacity for catalyzing interests and resources to build new forms of interaction with the city that interpret synergy with the city within a new and captivating framework. The contribution that an ephemeral, playful, hyperbolic narrative (also, perhaps above all, linked to brands) can make to public space as added, high-quality value can thus be leveraged.

PLAYTIME is driven by a different vision that supersedes the concept of “corporate social responsibility” and traditional city/place urbanism in the direction of innovation, intercepting and radically revising ways of doing business in an urban context.

To this end, **PLAYTIME** is, on the one hand, a canvas for narrating transformation starting with the very first active transformative steps within a context, and, on the other, a framework for research and identity-building of projects that are suitable for a specific context, for its key actors and also for potential brands that can become drivers of the transformation instead of just mere funding partners.

¹ Moro G. (1998) *Manuale di cittadinanza attiva*, Carocci Editore - Roma.

² Pasqui G. (2018) *La città, i saperi, le pratiche*, Donzelli Editore - Roma.

³ Concilio G. (2016) Urban Living Labs: opportunities in and for planning. In: Concilio G., Rizzo F. (Eds.) *Human Smart Cities. Rethinking the interplay between Design and Planning*. Springer: 21-40.

⁴ Kemp E. Childers A (2012) Place branding: creating self-brand connections and brand advocacy. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*: 147-157.

⁵ Braun E., Kavaratzis M., Zenker S. (2013) My city – my brand: the different roles of residents in place branding. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 6(1): 18-28.

The PLAYTIME concept, requalification and care

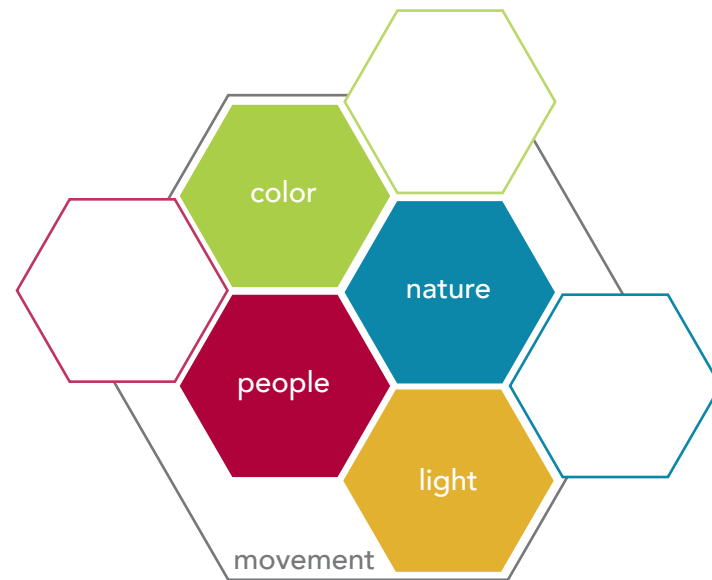


The **PLAYTIME** concept defines a series of guidelines for the regeneration of complex urban contexts to promote the rooting of the transformation and appropriation of new uses and the production of public space by users. It also promotes innovative planning and design of urban public space, of the materials used and the ways it is conceived and implemented.

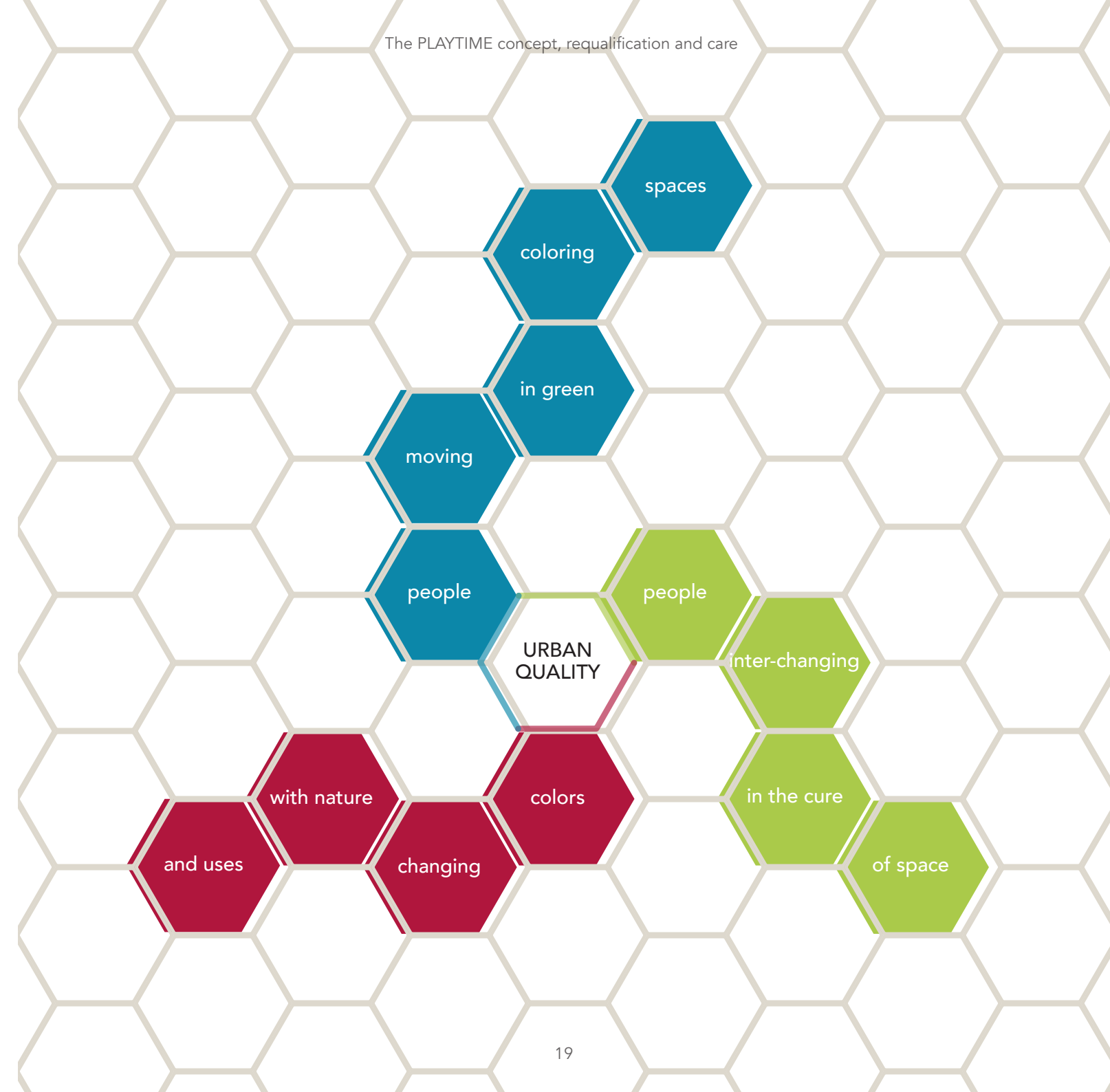
The concept takes βίος as its guiding principle, focusing on a theme, acknowledging and qualifying its different components and activating a process.

// βίος //
// Theme //
// Project components //
// Process //

βίος // The guiding principle for design strategy is the creation of the conditions for returning life to these areas. βίος (from the Greek) is understood as a factor and multiplier of vitality that intercepts all project components: materials, forms and use. βίος therefore embeds five characterizing elements: color, light, nature, people and movement. Urban space is transformed through the regenerative force produced by the synergic action of these design elements.



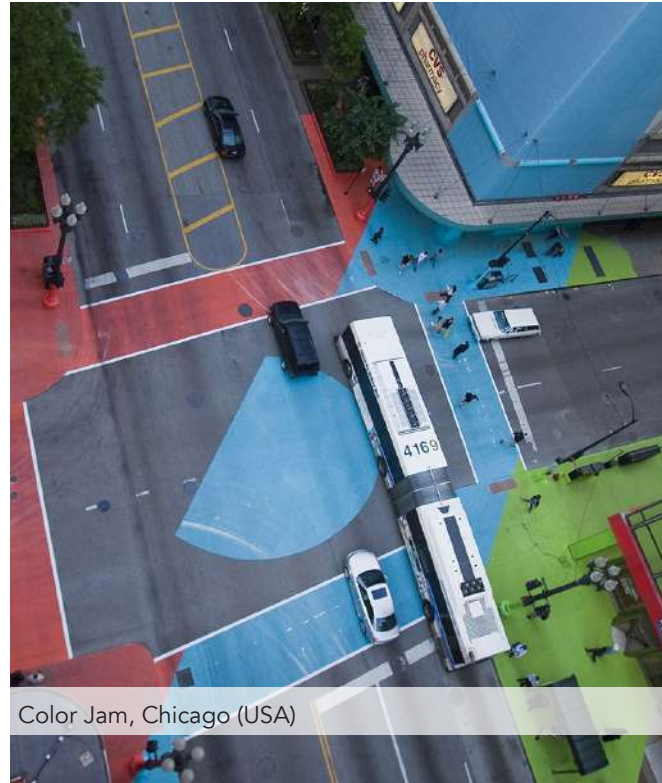
The PLAYTIME concept, requalification and care



color



The Gates, New York (USA)



Color Jam, Chicago (USA)



Pigalle Basketball, Paris (France)


 color

In the cities of muted and opaque colors generated by pollution and the passing of time, with the gray hues of their primary materials (cement and asphalt), **color** plays a role in activating energies, with direct beneficial impact on citizens. **Color** is variety and diversity, but also joy and happiness. **Color** is identity, recognition and character. **Color**, as opposed to pallor, is a sign of health. **Color** is the first line of defense, and refers to the biological dimension of life.

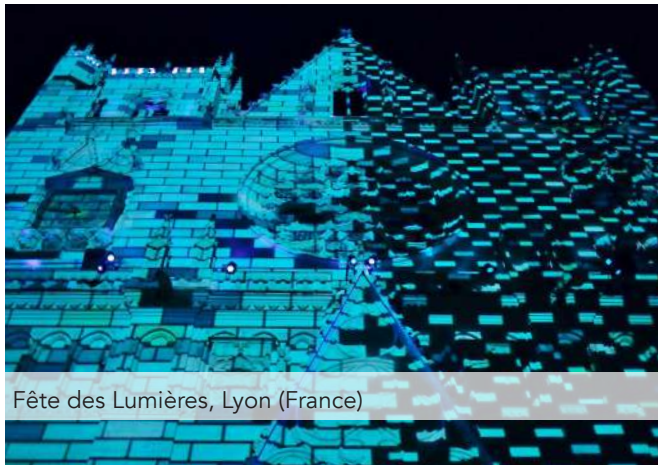
light



Les Jardins Mallet- Stevens, Croix (France)



Floating Umbrella Festival, Agueda (Portugal)



Fête des Lumières, Lyon (France)



Light Canopy, Glasgow (Scotland)



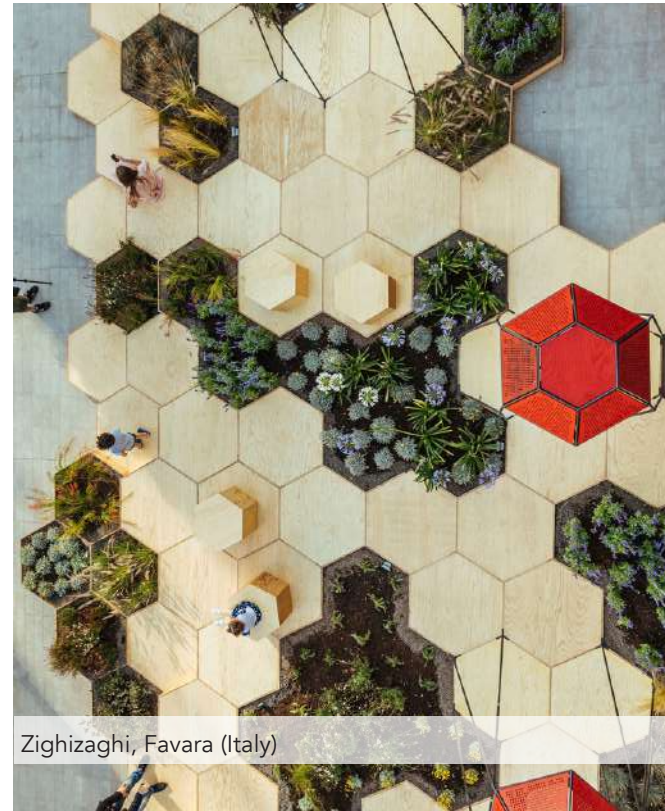
light

We are immersed in **light**. **Light** is the fluid in which the human experience unfolds. **Light** is the energy that activates and maintains every vital process. Light is associated with the basic functional mechanisms of ecological systems. **Light** is beginning, departure, awakening, perspective, vision. **Light** is a fundamental ingredient for health and well-being. **Light** marks the passage of time, rhythms and cycles. **Light** defines space and perceived form, differentiates places, marks limits.

nature



Cattedrale Vegetale, Val di Sella (Italy)



Zighizaghi, Favara (Italy)



Caixa Forum, Madrid (Spain)



nature

Contact with **nature** is a precious and indispensable resource for psychological and physical balance, especially in urban contexts where this bond has been devastated by human use. **Nature** is the resource that initiates restorative dynamics for deteriorated ecological systems in the city and reconciles individuals with their surrounding context. **Nature** is variety, hospitality and color. **Nature** is beauty, tactile and olfactory perception. It is an agent that collaborates, rather than conflicts, with human agency. **Nature** in the city restores the founding elements of life.

people



The Uni project, New York (USA)



Before I die wall, Savannah (USA)



Park(ing) Day, San Francisco (USA)


 people

People, citizens, communities, associations, groups, movements represent the largest active component of the city. **People** are the engine behind βίος. Without **people**, βίος would not be a necessary goal. **People** need quality βίος and vice-versa βίος needs **people** to become urban, to function in an urban context. **People** are the intelligence of the city; one could say its most profound smartness. **People** are the ultimate goal of any action in the city.


 movement

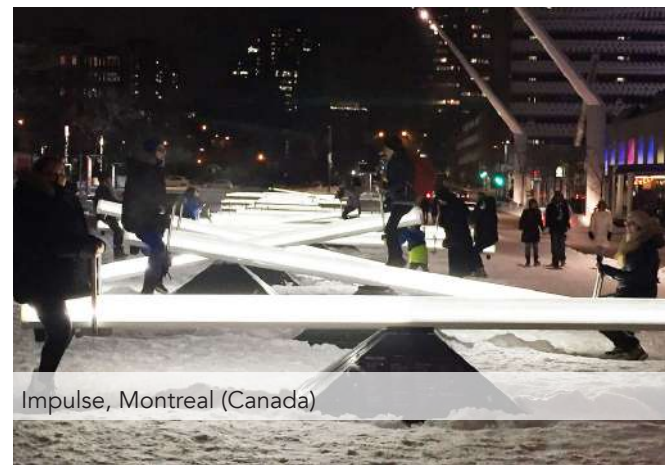

MiMuovo, Milan (Italy)



21 Balançoires, Montreal (Canada)



Miroir d'eau, Nice (France)



Impulse, Montreal (Canada)


 movement

Color, light, nature and people are connected by **movement**. **Movement** is closely bound to βίος: a vital ecosystem of flows and materials that interact and move, of relations that form. **Movement** is also intrinsically connected to the way in which people use the city: they move from one place to another, moving objects and things. **Movement** is at the heart of the relational structure of the urban system. **Movement** is restriction and freedom. Without **movement** there is no life in nature, there are no relations in human-made space. **Movement** is change.

Theme // The elements of βίος are aggregated and articulated by different methods and forms that are specifically characterized in a context starting from relations and interactions with people and places. Activation cannot be separated from the central, dynamic role of people who can mobilize existing energies within a context, and who become promoters of long-lasting participation in the creation of a project. According to the **PLAYTIME** strategy, their involvement begins in the initial startup phase, by identifying a theme around which βίος potential can be expressed. The identification of the theme, a common motivation or a shared narrative, reinforces collaboration with the local community and quickly drives available energies toward shared goals and concrete feasibility. The identification of the theme in **PLAYTIME** constitutes the tactical element in an action plan, the expedient for fusing different contributions and abilities. The goal is to make some dimensions of the problems more attainable and manageable by selecting and planning the contributions of the local community.

Project components // The approach presented here works with existing public space, and its physical, symbolic and experiential dimension. Starting from real places it references resources and relations, generates a complex living system, a network of spatial, functional and conceptual relations that can – through its “functioning” – initiate a gradual process of change that is respectful but regenerative of identity and practices, and radical in its approach to places, forms and materials. The approach identifies three fundamental design components and fields of action: experiments, catalyzers and infrastructure, which are recurring devices for action, organized differently and specifically in every different neighborhood and context. The three components, on different scales and levels, are functional to the primary purpose of a **PLAYTIME** project which is to re-establish connections, regenerate the meaning of place, and activate a process for caring of the regenerated space. Precise recognition of spatial resources is the starting point for defining a strategy for action.

○ experiments

Experiments are previews of imagined transformations, like laboratory simulations carried out within a context. They investigate places and verify hypotheses, gathering data from the context to map needs, desires, practices, behaviors, as well as to understand the state of mind of a specific context. They introduce disturbances; the entity and type of reaction reveal resources, fears, potential and opportunities for design.

Experiments are also the first tools for involving citizens, in the sense that proposed planning and implementation methods depend on levels of collaboration with local subjects. **Experiments** can have various dimensions and work on different scales. Small experiments are very local, situated in contained spaces for brief periods of time; they rarely have any permanence in space. Big experiments are different; they are not irreversible but can deposit some permanent physical-spatial change, representing the beginning of a longer-term transformational process.

○ catalyzer

The **catalyzer** is a significant place, either in terms of dimensions, characteristics and recognition or its symbolic content. It should be sought in areas that will be re-appropriated and regenerated from among void, under-used and abandoned areas.

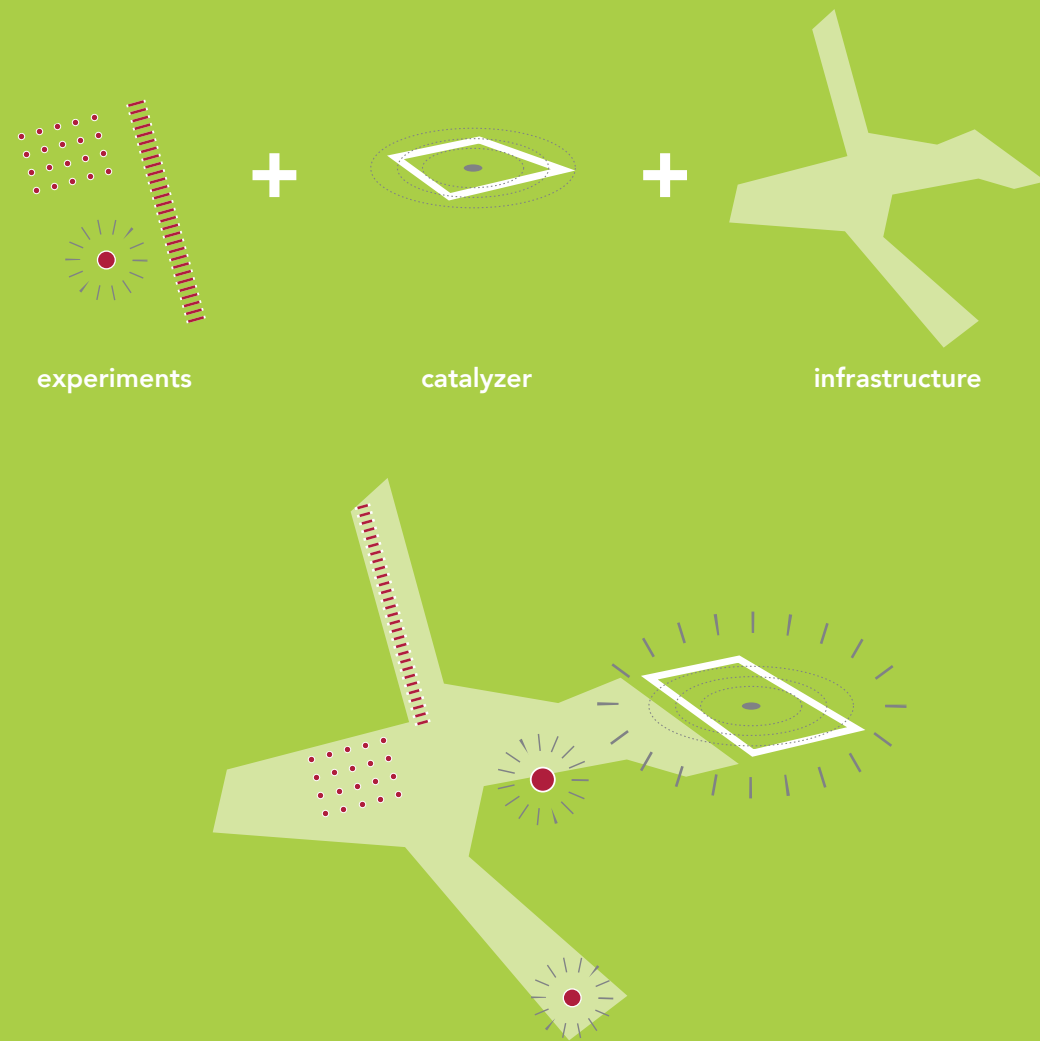
The **catalyzer** is also a space attributed with the potential to initiate and diffuse the transformation process through the project's transformative action. Introducing the **catalyzer** into a long-term process produces catalysis, the liberated transformative potential. Transformation is produced through βίος dynamics in which light, color and people relate to each other through movement.

The catalysis thus activated, at the peak of its function, distributes quality and dynamism, involving other spaces and situations having existing reactive potential.

○ infrastructure

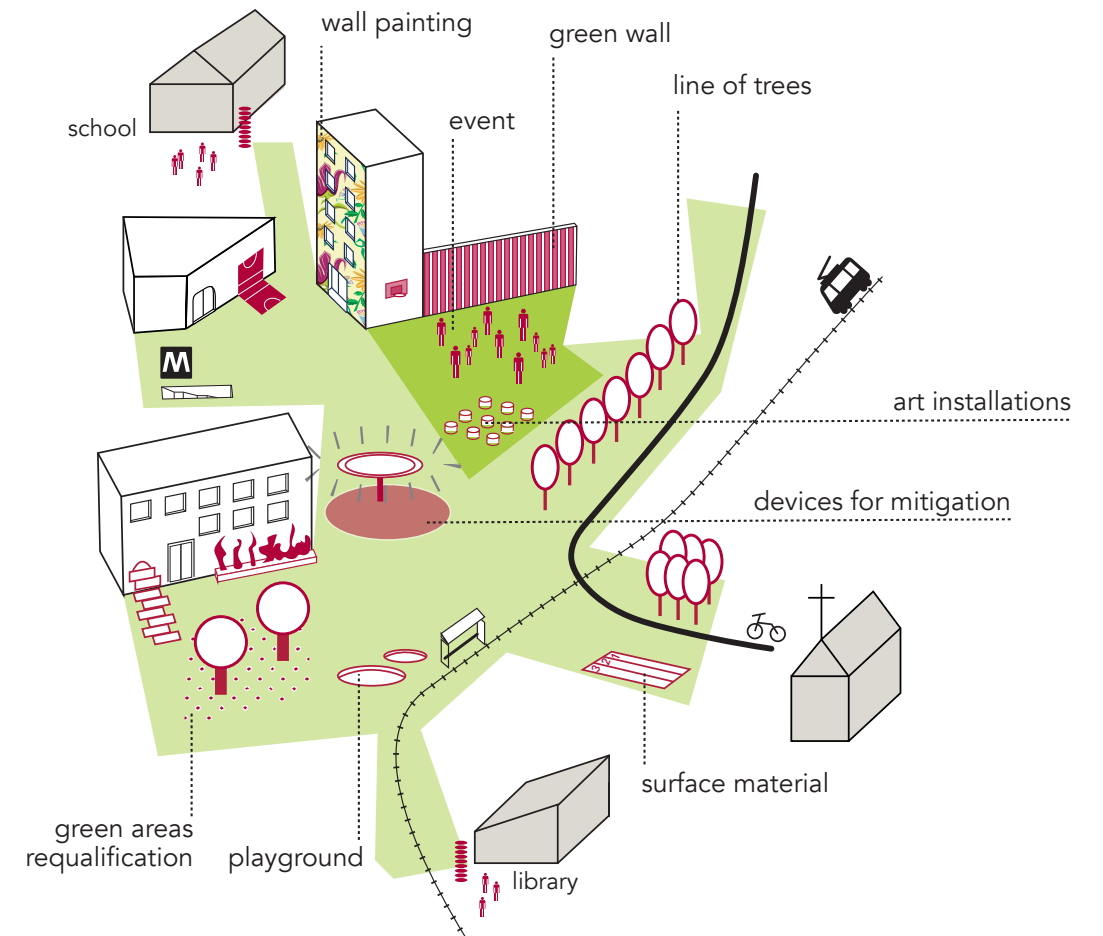
Infrastructure is the spatial translation of a system of connections and relations that the project can create and empower. It is a network of spaces and routes composed of different signs and materials, identifiable as a single intervention, with great power of communication. The **infrastructure** of places, conceived by means of a systematic and incremental project for public spaces, is the final goal of the project/process. Its form and dimensions relate to the needs of a context, interacting extensively with funding and sponsorship opportunities. For the sake of simplicity, they are projects made up of continuous lines and nodes, important places along a network/infrastructure. The nodes are already locations for experiments; they can host small-scale urban elements and offer support for existing activities (such as the waiting spaces in front of a school) or create opportunities for new modes of using space. They are hybrid elements, which combine innovative technologies and forms, and work on the less-characterized urban spaces (sidewalks, traffic medians, flowerbeds,

etc.) to demonstrate possibility and create connections among the network elements.



The implementation of experiments in the nodes, the activation of an empty public space as a catalyzer, the extension of regeneration through creating infrastructure in a context, are the three fundamental elements proposed in **PLAYTIME**.

Project components



The network of spaces and routes is regenerated over time through coordinated action, which, with different intensities and intentions, transforms places and imbues them with life. Implementing the concept consists of delineating the different β_{i0} materials, constituting the different components of the project, based on the forms and occasions offered by the selected urban areas; in particular, taking into account the resources that can be identified, such as the main existing services (schools, libraries), the existing physical spaces to be regenerated or activated (ground, walls, enclosures), public transportation connections and slower mobility corridors. The red areas symbolically represent the heterogeneity of possible interventions.

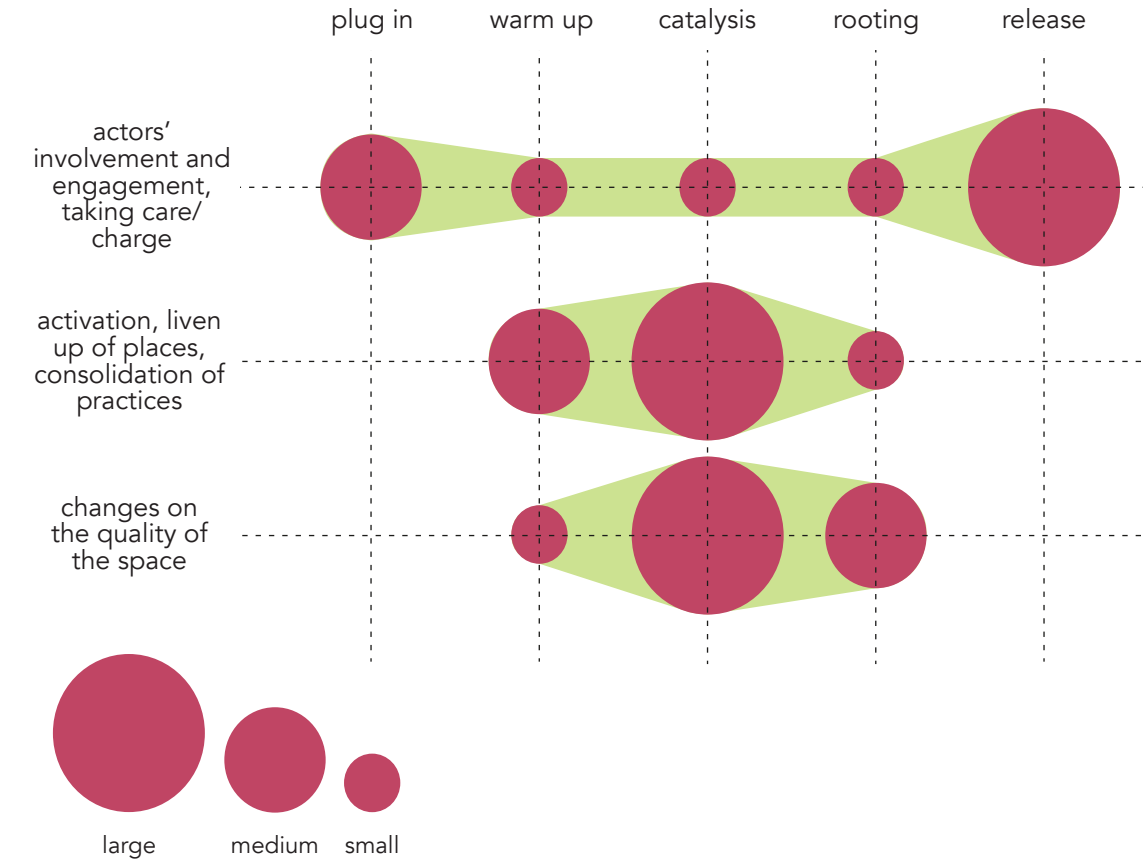
Meta-project

Process // The **PLAYTIME** concept is not limited to thinking about design materials. Rather it suggests a strategy, which, because it assumes creative interaction with a context and gradual responsibility for places by users, must be conceived of and structured as a process. In this light the construction, implementation and maintenance of a project become foundational steps within the process itself defined by five phases: plug in, warm up, catalysis, rooting and release. Each step corresponds to goals, actions, tools and indications of the places in which the actions are implemented, step-by-step.

The proposed timeline and sequence of interventions is not to be understood as a rigid management model; it is not necessarily repeated in the same order in every context and for every project and, in many cases, phases will overlap and merge especially in terms of goals and activities.

Time is an element of the project tied to feasibility and the need to build the social and logistical conditions for its execution. It is also tied to: the need for scheduling investments; the opportunity to strengthen the effects of the intervention; daily life practices; the impacts of the seasons on using and leveraging places; the phasing of releasing the project so that the local community can take over.

Therefore, time, as a strategic dimension, deposits and reveals opportunities, giving way to a process that can “simply” take on a long-term prospect by reinforcing collaboration between subjects, collective learning and the birth of new practices,



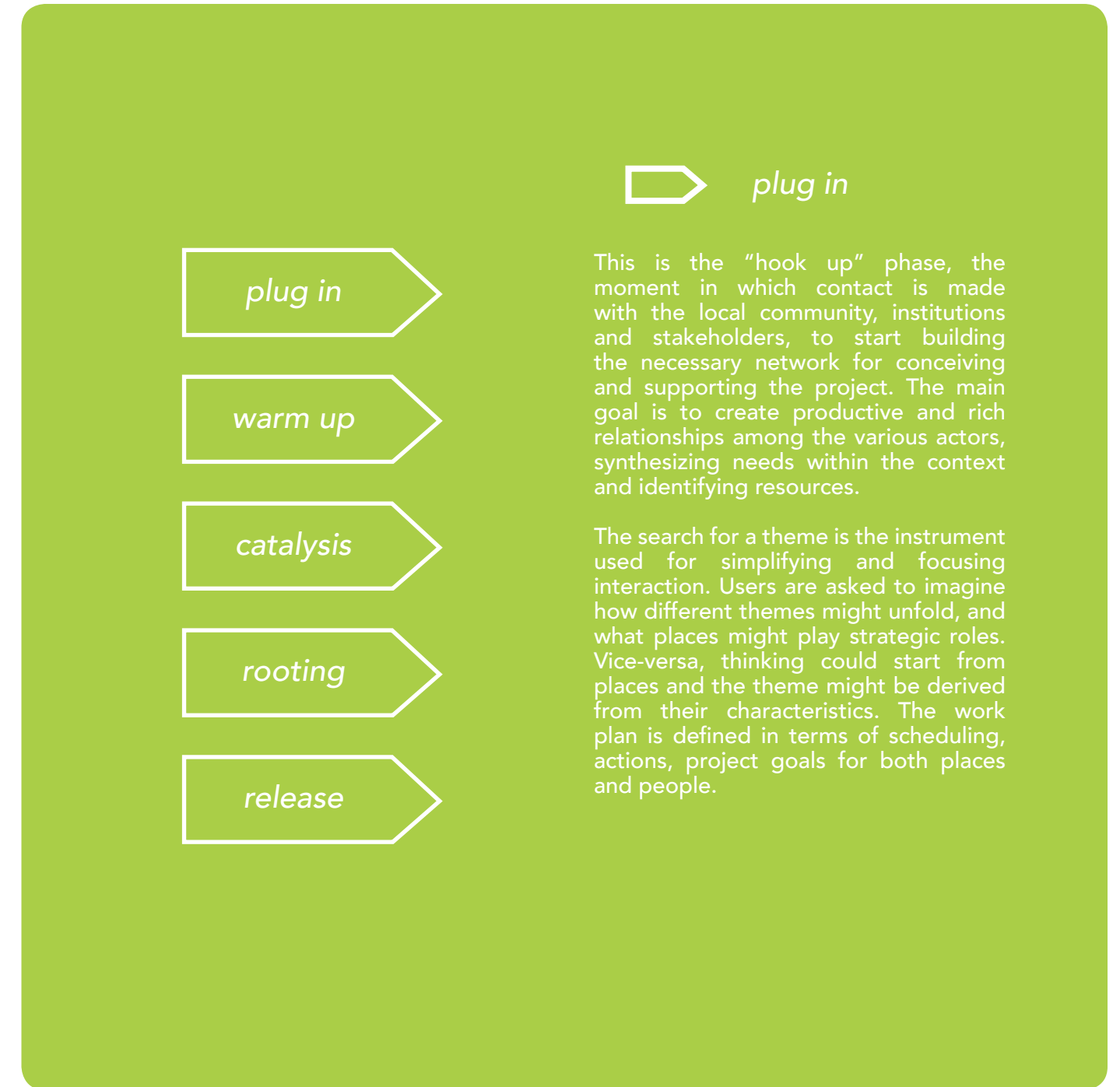
The concept, in its various phases/acts, is translated into action in space and with people. A narrative with many possible events and forms, which nevertheless unfolds based on three common goals: long-term active involvement of people; activation of places through new and existing practices that require reinforcement; radical change in spatial quality.

Primary goals, phases and intensity of actions

which over time create the profound meaning of spatial transformation.

A project/process in line with **PLAYTIME** goals originates from a careful reading of the context, sought through the knowledge of the local economic, social and institutional actors who are active in a given system. This can come into play only following the construction of a *modus operandi* that reflects the organization and confrontation between different fields of expertise and skills. In the start-up phase, it is based first on outlining a shared language, and then on the formation of pacts and alliances. A **PLAYTIME** project has great potential for generating knowledge, and in alignment with cognitive dynamics, it must be able to recast itself.

The design thrust and ambition of this program can grow or shrink (together with its impact and resonance) according to how people can interpret their own roles and grow and mature them.



warm up

Design is prepared, initiated and accompanied. The goal of this phase is to involve an ample segment of the population and create expectations for the upcoming project. The warm up phase produces shared knowledge, practices and perceptions, defining an image of the future intrinsically linked to the theme identified by residents and users. Actions involve some places that are already significant within the context (schools, markets, waiting spaces, churches, libraries, public parks and gardens), that are activated, so intercepting the interests of the different categories of people who use them.

Proposed actions are conceived as small experiments and simple interventions, having significant effectiveness in terms of the power of their communication, attracting attention, involving people and gathering the information, data and stories necessary for creating a shared narrative. These small experiments test the efficacy and degree of support of some of the practices introduced by the overall project.

Various instruments are used in this phase. Play, sharing and free use are essential dimensions. A specific app could be created to support activities; different functions (maps, events, games, augmented reality, services) might create an effective virtual multiplier based on the activities implemented in the various spaces.

The warm up phase, in short, aims to create interest and open a channel of communications with citizens. It also identifies existing emblematic places where the first traces of more-or-less solid infrastructure can be deposited.

catalysis

The warm up creates expectations and conditions for working on the catalyzer. At the start of the process, the catalyzer is a large under- or poorly used space. It is empty in terms of practices, but it is accessible or located near flows of people and nodes, awaiting regeneration, reactivation and care. The project deems such a space a catalyzer. The selected space is not a catalyzer per se, but can become one through design proposals and actions.

Planning the intervention over time is a determining factor in activating the catalyst and bringing it up to speed. The process is initiated, brought to an effective functioning threshold, and maintained; only then is it ready for embodying the potential for transformation by the energies liberated.

Catalysis unfolds in three steps: initiation, maintenance, transformation.

Ignition // takes place through the execution of a big experiment in collaboration with a number of users;

it can last several days or weeks, bringing a new function to the area and new modes of use to the space by means of deploying light, temporary infrastructure, which can be executed without the radical disruption of the place, or with reduced investment, while still creating quality for the places involved.

The goal of the ignition phase is to demonstrate the potentials of a place and create conditions for its regeneration and repurposing.

The big experiment is a temporary intervention that activates practices aligned with the use goals of the project. Activation is based on two actions: cleaning (elimination of objects, furnishings, materials that are arranged in a disorderly way in the area), opening the space and introducing new uses by means of the design components (color, light, nature and movement, and obviously, people). The long-term effects of this experimental, fun, celebratory moment is the re-appropriation of a place, its redesign (partially in this phase, based on an overall conception), the



activation of significant segments of the population, while also attracting people from other neighborhoods, creating a resonance that can also assemble new subjects.

Upkeep // keeping interest in the project alive by creating a calendar of events and activities, filled with the initiatives promoted by local users, promoters and possible sponsors bringing exceptional events to the area. The goal is to multiply the effects of activation, strengthen catalysis and prepare the groundwork for future actions.

Transformation // completed with the opening of the building site, which will bring deep transformation to the catalyzer space. Spatial recovery and transformation is based on the βίος elements. The catalyzer develops its power of regeneration and can spread its effects to other spaces in the network, some of which already involved in the warm up phase initiatives.

The activation initiated by catalysis overflows and intercepts other spaces, where hybrid elements, devices, are placed to mark the main network terminals. The goal is to create an infrastructure with services to support already-consolidated practices, generating small experiments activated during the warm up phase. Devices give way to objects with specific functions designed specifically for different situations. Devices can therefore be situations (weekly or monthly activities, sporadic initiatives), conditions (heat or cold, light or shadow), and also physical furnishings (seats, ramps, fences, totems, clothing hangers), which, due to their qualities, language and the way they are introduced into a context, are identifiable and traceable to the **PLAYTIME** formula (working over time and interacting with existing resources) and βίος goals.

Devices are located near nodes, places marked by the high use already noted in the plug in phase, which require support and infrastructure for uses already populating the public space. The realization of these interventions

takes place over time to produce a reverberating effect and the multiplication of actions (the canopy of a waiting area is decorated with a theme-colored space, pedestrian walkways are marked and protected, lighting defines spaces, etc.). The device can be reproduced and placed in other nodes. Devices are physical manifestations of the regeneration process activated by experiments and events, creating widespread quality, increasing urban comfort and intensifying participation. The action of the devices is completed through the construction of connections between the places intercepted by the project. The goal is to create continuity for the paths and usage experience, to mark, equip, plan and simultaneously improve the regenerating effect of the catalyzer and/or other significant places. Infrastructure is rooted in the ground, marking a network of pathways and accesses to the places intercepted by the project through a series of coordinated actions, including pathways with color, green areas, furnishing, situations, mobility interventions such as the creation of 30 km/h slow zones,

planters, creation of green walls, and important interventions on existing green areas.

This consolidates the rooting effect of the physical infrastructure, which uses, improves and integrates existing spaces. The practices and roles of local subjects are also brought into focus during this phase. Taking root requires the involvement of local subjects, most probably already involved in the plug in phase; they must take responsibility for the spaces and the functions introduced by the project in the next phase.

Expected results:

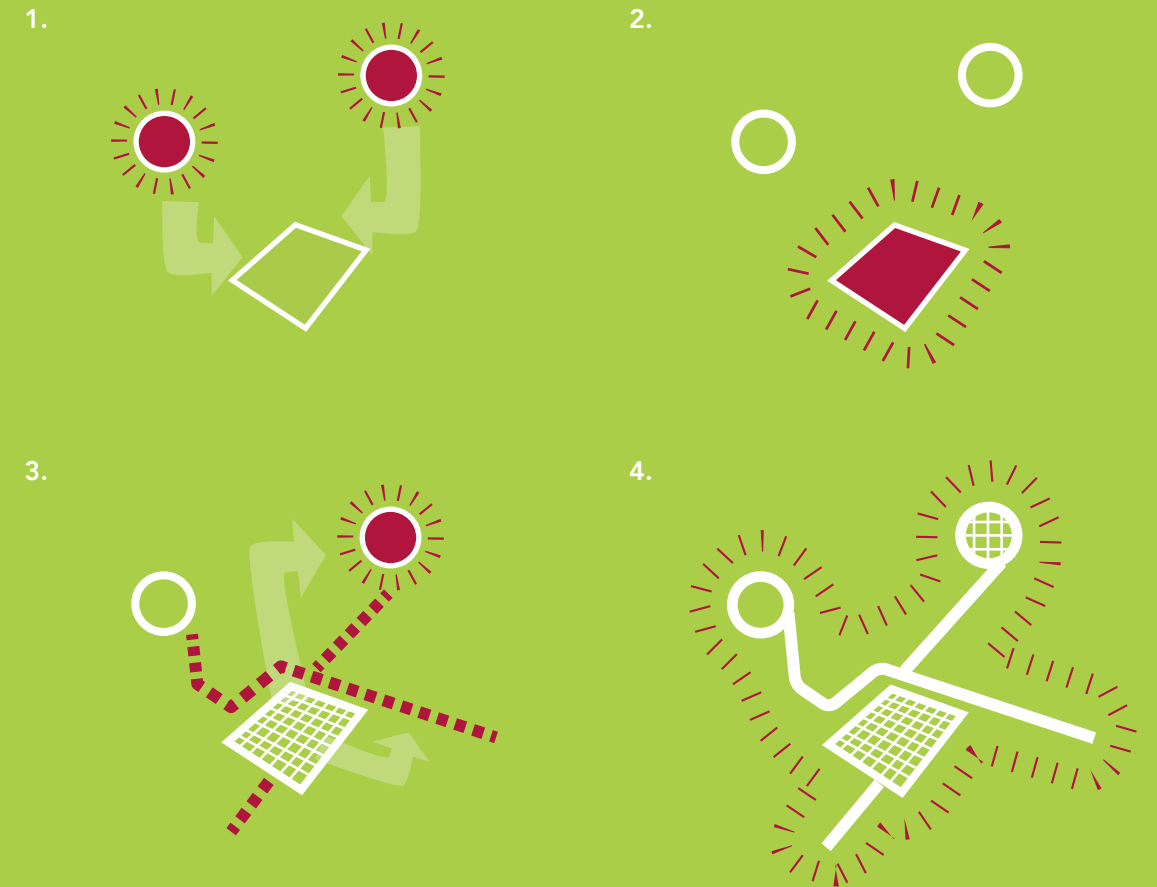
- underscoring the sense of systemic action;
- reinforcing the quality and well-being that takes root in a neighborhood;
- creating new spaces for other activities and narratives;
- creating conditions so that local users can take responsibility.

➤ *release*

The network of places, materials and actors constituted in the previous phases can now take over and support the management of places and activities. Promoters release the project.

In this phase local users take responsibility, formalized in agreements and/or different organizations for administration and governance.

The infrastructure is vital and fully functioning. Planned activities are maintenance and care, enabling consolidated practices, constant construction of scheduled activities and involvement, and experimentation with new activities that leverage creative ideas generated through the interaction of people and places.



From the warm up of nodes near empty spaces (1), to igniting the space as a catalyzer (2), to its regeneration (3), to the generation, thanks to this action, of new resources and practices that produce improved conditions of the nodes and their connections (4), consolidating an authentic public infrastructure linked to the catalyzer, alive and supervised through its use.

Relations among project actions

A possible narrative for Largo Gelsomini in Milan



Without action in real contexts we can only imagine, and so imagining is the exercise proposed in this section. We imagine implementing the **PLAYTIME** concept in an emblematic neighborhood in Milan, Giambellino. This exercise explores the potential of the concept, helping to clarify it.

The result of the exercise is naturally influenced by the fact that it is a simulation, but it still allows the exploration of the conditions for a feasible project. The themes and key elements of the narrative remain; its unfolding is only one of countless possibilities.

// Context, actors and resources //

// A story in five acts //



Context, actors and resources //

Al Giambellino is generally referred to as a historic peripheral neighborhood, well-connected to the rest of the city by tram line 14, bus 90/91 and other connections; the area is awaiting the new number 4 metro line. Nevertheless, Giambellino continues to be a peripheral area, especially because of the total absence of maintenance of the enormous public housing complex, left to fend for itself on more than one occasion. In the 1970s, the area was named the “drug dealing capital of Europe” to the point that the S. Cristoforo train station was the first station in Italy to use automatic ticketing to address the high number of robberies taking place there.

Over the last thirty years, the neighborhood population has significantly changed with a high concentration of immigrants mainly from North Africa who have integrated into the area. Recently however, also due to the momentum of gentrification with the new metro line and the illegal occupation of dwellings, which are poorly managed by the public safety authorities and administration, social tensions have aggravated the fragile conditions of the area. The local population established several movements, associations and support/inclusion structures, specifically focused on home and school. They are both informal and spontaneous as well as institutional and structured.

Largo Gelsomini is part of the Giambellino neighborhood, and was designed and built as part of an urban planning project during the first half of the 1900s, when the city was expecting a great surge in population. Largo Gelsomini, at

the intersection of three main roadways coming from the northwest, west and southwest, was supposed to be the start of a large thoroughfare, including a bridge over Naviglio Grande and the Milan-Mortara railway line, to terminate at Piazza Negrelli, thus creating a fifth ring in the concentric roadway system inherited from the Austrian Empire.

This design was never concluded, rendering Largo Gelsomini a vast urban void; it is a parking area, a place without any real quality that hosts only a weekly street market.

Within the larger Lorenteggio-Giambellino urban system, Largo Gelsomini is a physical barrier between the public housing development to the south and the isolated, still lower income private housing more to the north; it is a strange centrality in the area, an empty urban space with a system of densely populated regular blocks organized in north-south and east-west layouts.

Actors // In Giambellino, numerous active actors already play different roles, in addition to the presence of City Hall and Municipality 6:

- local associations / committees / active citizenry among which: Rinascita per il 2000, Cd Giambellino and Su La Testa Association for the disabled;
- religious organizations active in the area, for example, the Santo Curato Church;
- institutions managing public residential buildings;
- businesses, for example, the Municipal Market;
- companies, for example, Lidl;
- cultural organizations, for example, Dinamoscopio;
- subjects involved in the entertainment and leisure sector;
- sports organizations and centers, for example, Palauno.

Resources // The numerous resources in Giambellino that the **PLAYTIME** initiative might connect with:

- green areas, including Largo Balesta (Participatory Budgeting winner 2018) and the Shared Garden Retake;
- schools, including the Nazario Sauro Elementary School, the Rinascita Middle School, associations, for example the Municipal Library and services like Casetta Verde;
- commercial / residential mix;
- roadways with public transport;
- proximity to M4 and railways;
- strong local identity;
- high residential density.



Largo Gelsomini



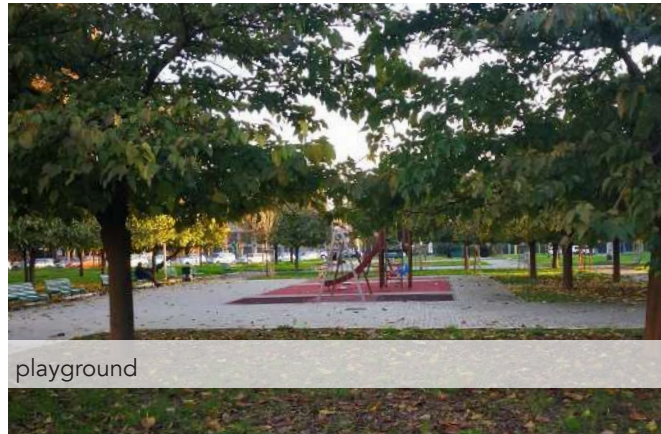
facilities for children



Largo Giambellino
Via dei Biancospini



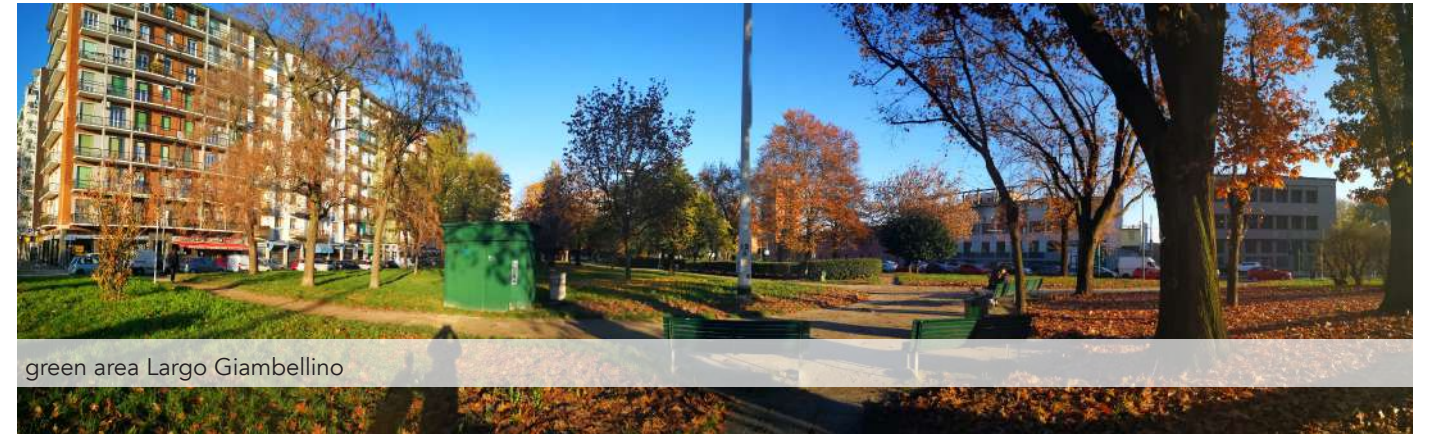
crossroad Largo Giambellino - Largo Gelsomini



playground



green area and walkways



green area Largo Giambellino



parking lot



green area Via dei Biancospini



Largo Scalabrini
Via Vespri Siciliani
Via G. Bellini



housing Via Vespri Siciliani - Largo Scalabrini



Via Giambellino
Via F. Brunelleschi
Largo A. Balestra



crossroad Via Brunelleschi - Via Giambellino



road and dog play area Via G. Bellini



green area Largo Scalabrini



parking lot Lidl - Palauno - Rinascita school



open space Lidl - Largo Balestra



elementary school Nazario Sauro

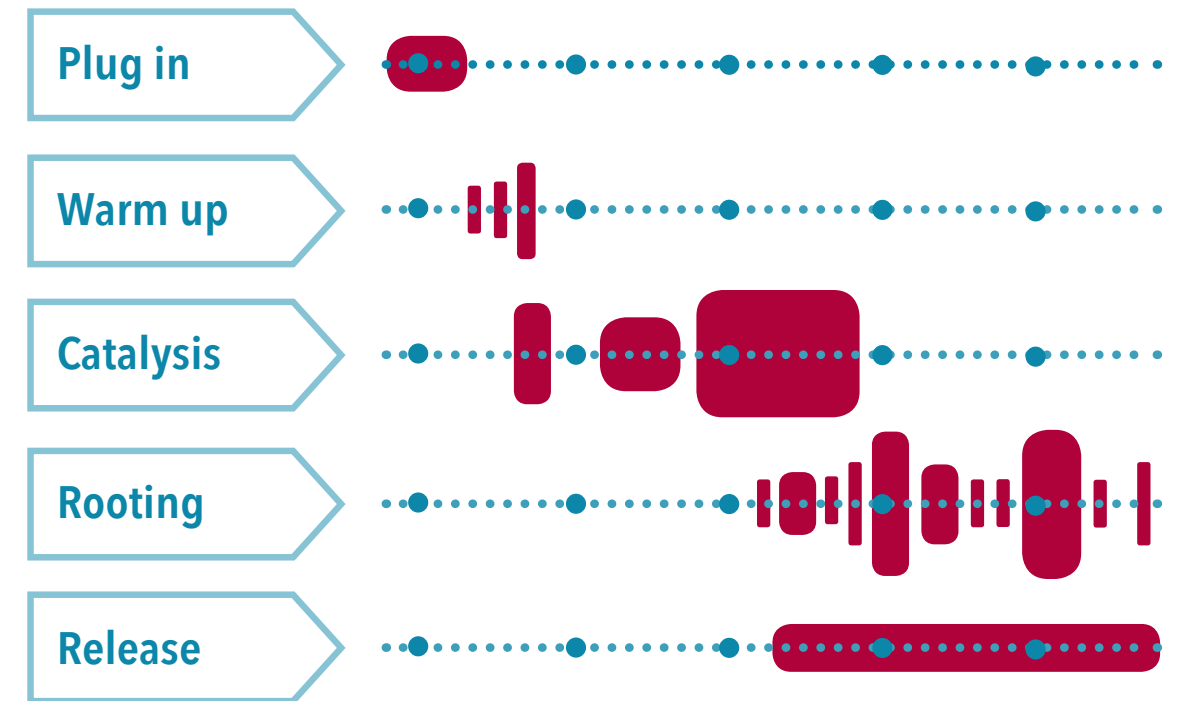


cultural association Handicap Su La Testa



green area Largo Balestra

A story in five acts // Through the immersive **plug in** phase, the project is constructed and organized by means of interacting with users and experiencing the specific places. The strategy, as a set of experiments and actions, defines its own rhythm and resonance, which creates moments with greater tensions and expectations (**warm up**), moments of great intensity and activity (**catalysis**), moments of reinforcement and “normalization” of change (**rooting**), to finally reach a moment where future actions are taken over by local users (**release**). The alternation of different levels maintains attention and creates conditions for action and the experimentation of new practices.



Plug in



Interaction with local users starts with plug in. Users participate in the construction of the project, which, in this phase, is concentrated on identifying the theme by means of which *βίος* will be distributed in Giambellino. After the definition of the theme comes the identification of the local actors to engage in the design and planning of activities and spatial regeneration.

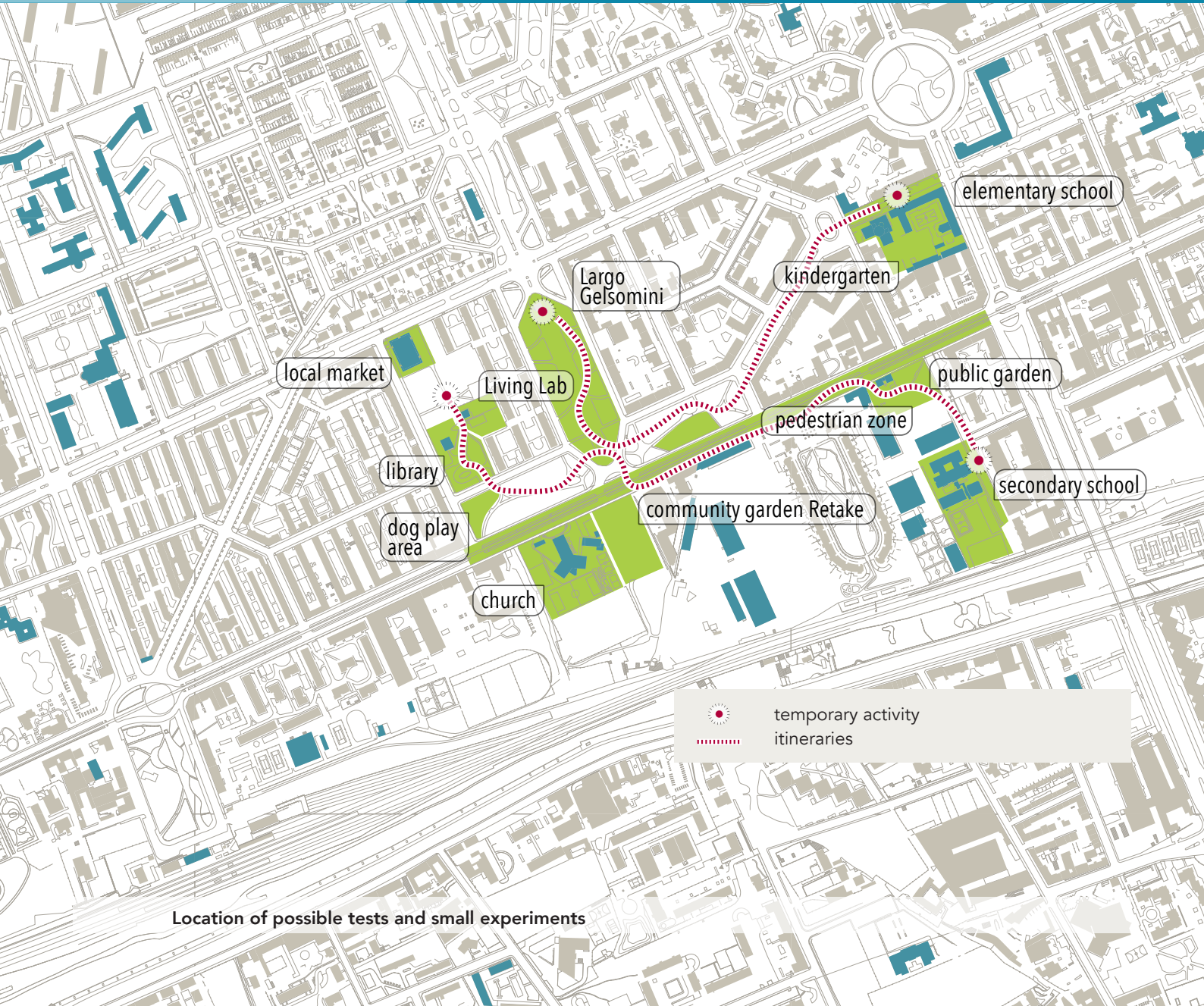
Theme: Sports and play *Giambellino gets moving*

Sports and play as the active presence of people in space. Play is the free use of places, which are outfitted to grow opportunities for involving people, by stimulating the senses and physical experience. Sport as physical well-being and immersive knowledge acquired through practice. Movement and free play, along with organized sports activities, times for practicing sports that have movement and spatial experience as their main elements. Sports and play also as opportunities for inter-cultural exchange.

Actors

- kindergartens, elementary schools and middle schools
- sports organizations
- senior citizen centers
- family practice physicians
- neighborhood associations

Warm up



Location of possible tests and small experiments

Warm up activities create expectations and tune inhabitants in with the theme of sports and play as factors for urban well-being. Through small experiments, different people (chosen in terms of their age, role, interests) are involved in stimulating sports activities based on individual pursuits and spatial practices. The implementation of interactive activities, supported by temporary installations in different strategic places in the neighborhood, stimulate and create curiosity in residents; repeated activities give life to recurring events linked to the theme of well-being and health.

Small experiment 1: What does playing sports and exercising outdoors in your neighborhood mean to you?

Type: a contest activated through social networks, gathering photos, videos, creative contributions
Mode: gathering contributions from residents, creation of installations, posters, murals, sidewalk painting based on the theme
Target: school children
Duration of the installation and event: 1 day
Duration of the experiment: 1 month

Small experiment 2: Giambellino gets moving!

Type: group physical exercise
Mode: weekly walks in the neighborhood along a path crossing the project areas
Target: families, seniors, youth
Duration: 1 hour, once a week, in the evening

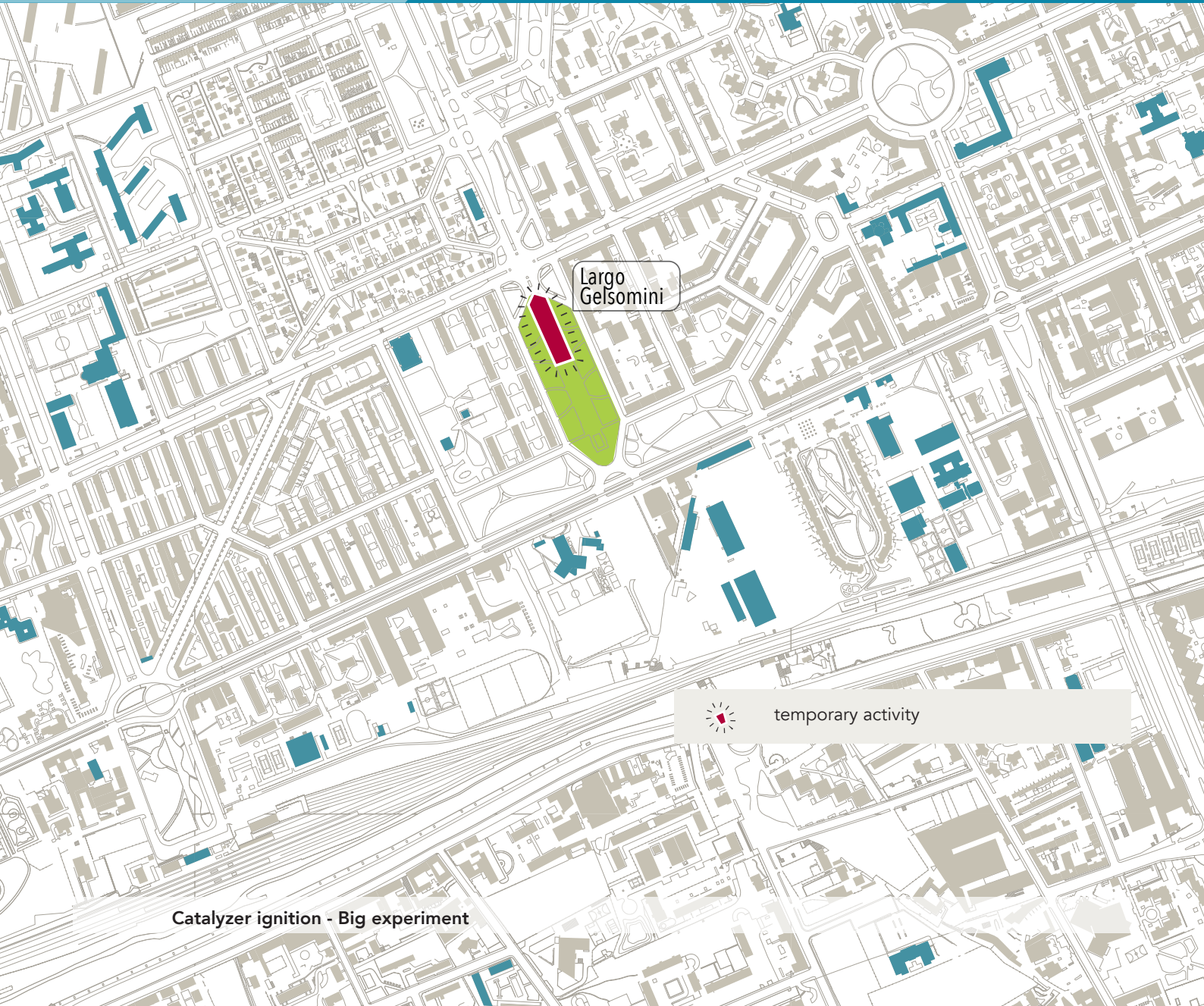
Warm up



Catalysis

first year

second year



Largo Gelsomini

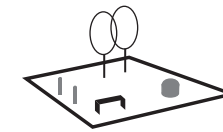
temporary activity

Catalyzer ignition - Big experiment

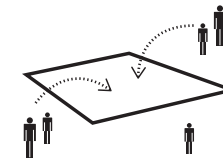
Largo Gelsomini activates and transforms, becoming the catalyzer that can activate and direct the regeneration process for the public space system in the neighborhood.

Catalyzer ignition

Change is initiated through a first step that modifies the spaces through temporary interventions and actions, as well as equipment/furnishings located in the areas that will definitively transform these spaces.



Light interventions on key spaces



Involvement of associations

Big Experiment: Challenge Me!

Type: sports tournaments with cooperative dynamics (organized by community developers), school tournaments, open lessons, exhibitions

Mode: RFP for sports organizations, setting up spaces for temporary activities within the catalyzer, inviting "notable" people and testimonials

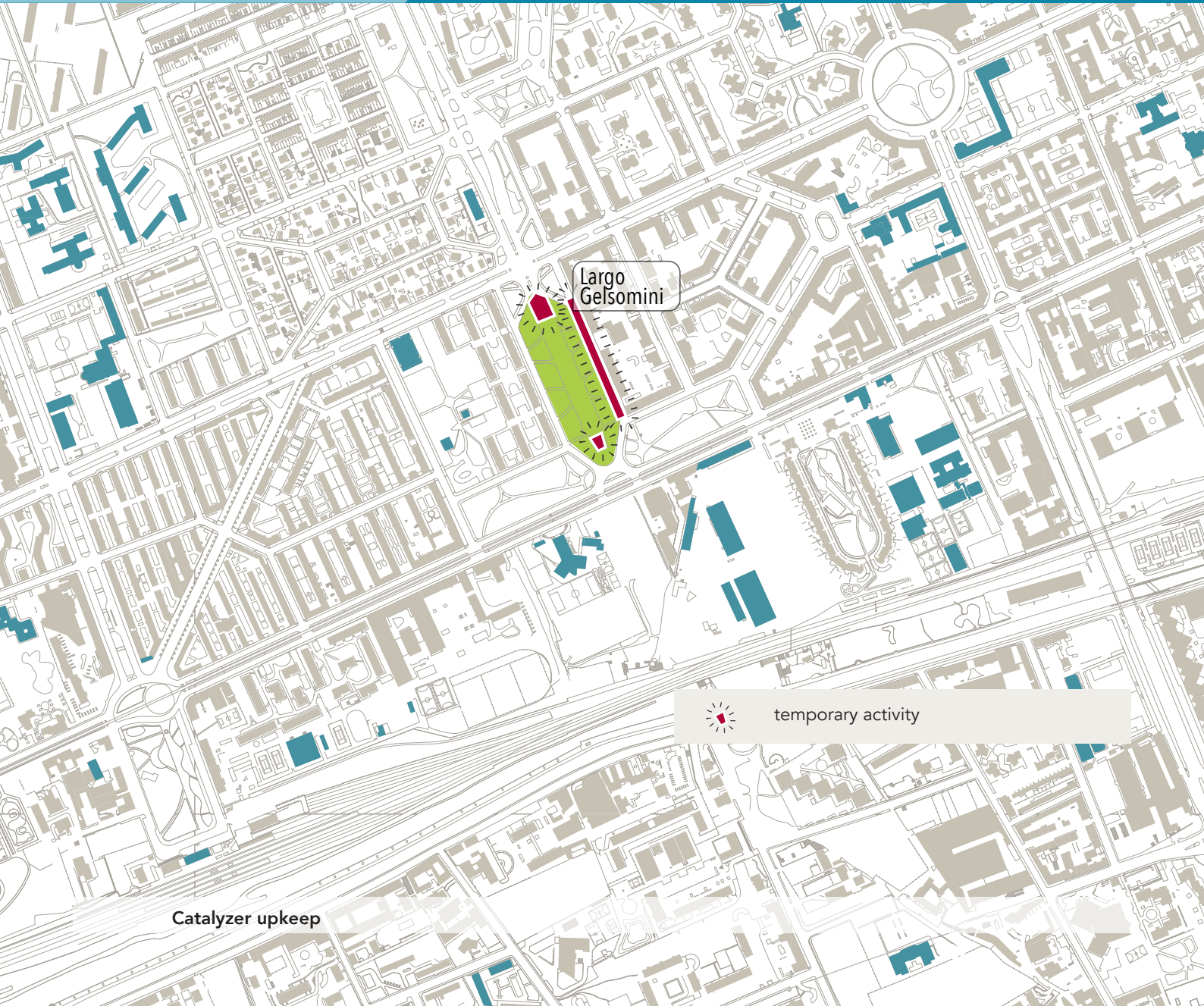
Target: the entire neighborhood (with activities differentiated by age groups and interests) and beyond

Duration: 4/7 days

Catalysis

first year

second year



Upkeep

The effect produced by igniting the catalyzer can be maintained and expanded through a program of activities lasting for a considerable time (an entire summer) to reinforce roles and use practices. Some subjects already involved can manage activities and spaces during the summer (this depends on creating the conditions for releasing the project).

	mese		
1		X	
8	X	X	X
15	X		X
22	X		X X

Planning the activities agenda

Event schedule: Gelsomini Beach

Type: organized summer sports activities, outdoor cinema, leisure activities organized directly by neighborhood associations

Mode: setting up a temporary area dedicated to sports (e.g. sandy area) in the catalyzer, organizing theme days, calls for subjects who can manage the event schedules

Target: families, youth, children, schools

Duration: 2 months

Catalysis

first year

second year

winter

spring

summer

autumn

winter

spring

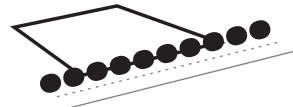


Transformative catalysis

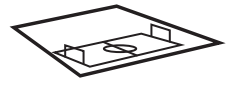
Continuing with the functions and uses triggered in the prior two steps, Catalyzer ignition and Upkeep, the regeneration project for a portion of Largo Gelsomini takes shape, transforming the area from a parking lot to a high quality space dedicated to sports and outdoor activities.



Spatial continuity



Riappropriation of the street



New equipment and functions

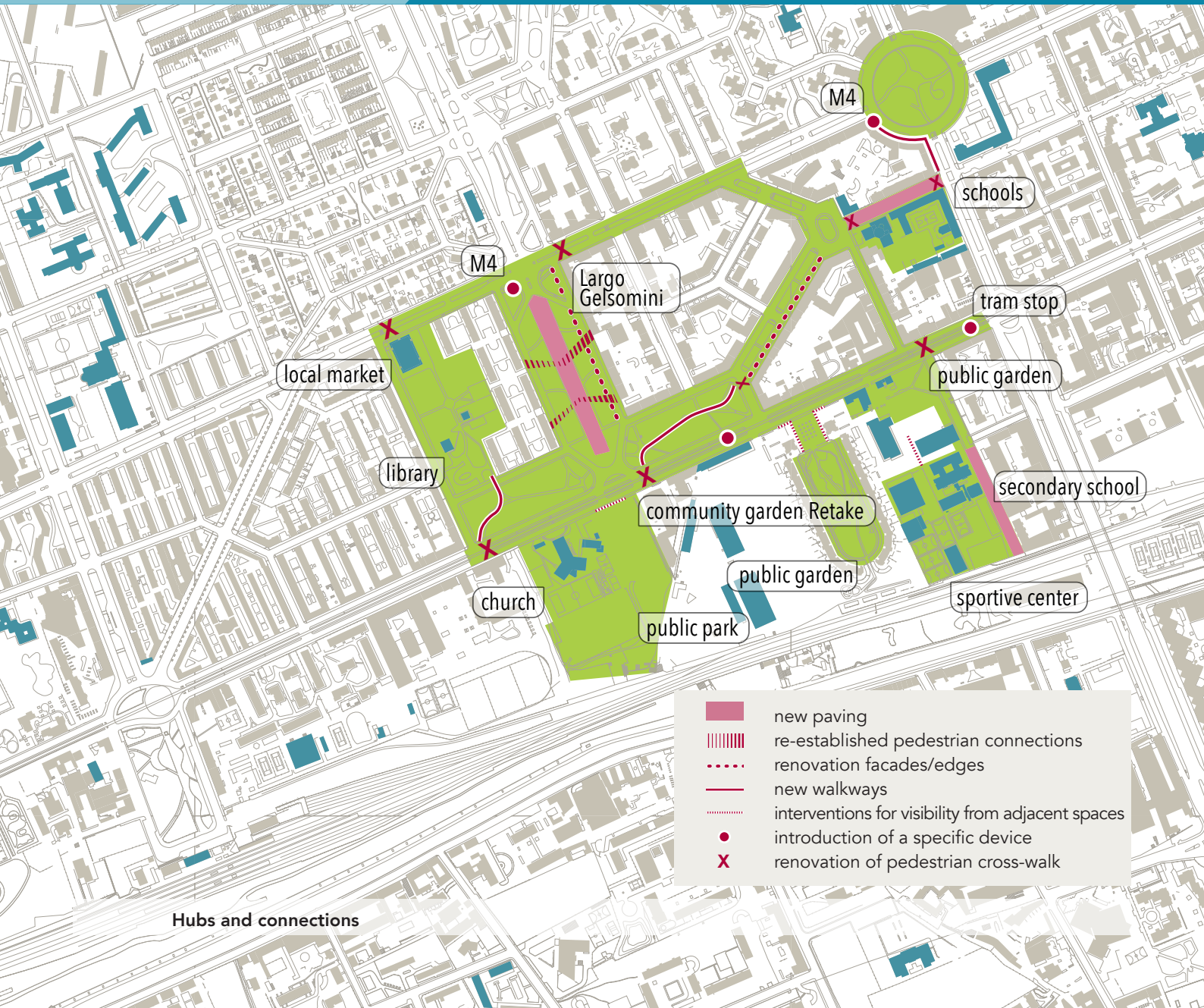
Planning and realization of an area outfitted for sports and exercise

- overhaul of the current parking area paving
- construction of sports areas
- installation of a children's playground, its equipment and accessories
- expansion of green areas along the edge of the square to protect the space
- renewal of pedestrian walkways and connections.
- construction of outfitted sports areas

Catalysis



Rooting



Hubs and connections

- new paving
- re-established pedestrian connections
- renovation facades/edges
- new walkways
- interventions for visibility from adjacent spaces
- introduction of a specific device
- renovation of pedestrian cross-walk

The infrastructure begins to shape the catalyzer/Largo Gelsomini, with pathways and connections, creating a network of spaces and points identified through plug in actions and activated during the warm up phase. The activation of the catalyzer also produces effects in other nodes, creating opportunities to further reverberate through the installation of custom devices, activities and events.

Device 1: Catch me if you can!

Type: outdoor games and installation of a bench/slide
Part 1 – hook up: planning and installation of temporary equipment for waiting and playing near the school and the organization of a kick-off event/activity
Target: families
Event duration: 1 day
Part 2 – consolidation: planning and execution of a permanent play area through: installation of safety paving, accessories, fixed equipment, and the renovation and addition of green areas. Over time the same devices and equipment can be multiplied and used in other areas (voted on by the population from a selection proposed by designers and professionals).

Device 2: A flowered path

Type: creation of a “green” connection between two nodes in the infrastructure
Part 1 – hook-up: seeding wildflowers and potted plants along the route from the catalyzer to the senior center/library
Target: seniors
Event duration: 1 week
Part 2 – consolidation: planning and execution of a pedestrian walkway by means of: renovation or replacement of paving with durable surfaces, introduction of hedges or border or potted plants, introduction of informational stations, painting information about the path on the ground (length, stops, etc.), installation of custom accessories, benches and lighting.

Rooting



Release

first year

second year

winter

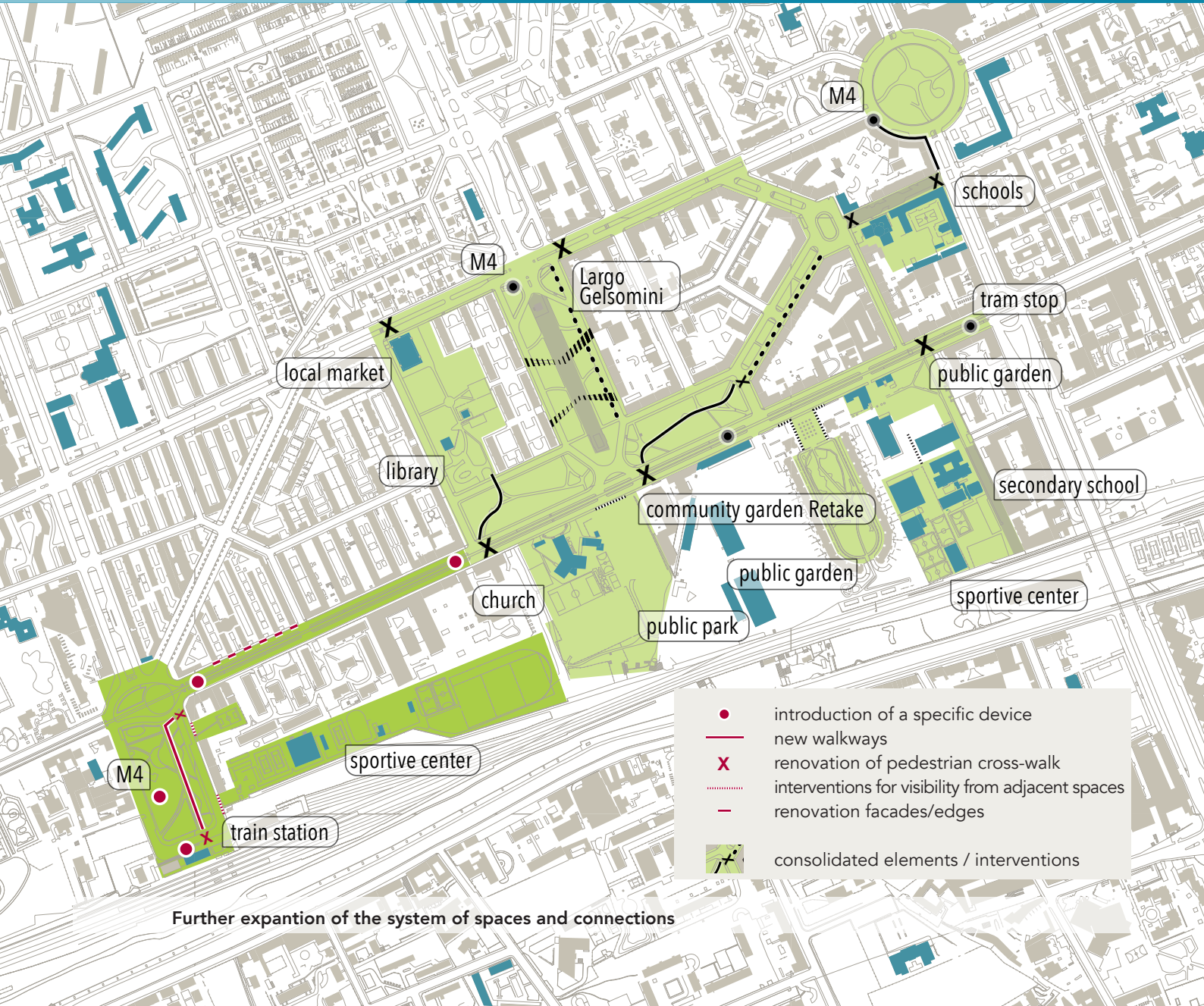
spring

summer

autumn

winter

spring



Different actors, who in the meantime have organized and created systems to manage the process, keep these places active and well-maintained, taking responsibility for the space, equipment and activities.

Actors

- City Hall
- Municipality
- associations
- citizen groups
- companies / business owners
- cooperatives

Forms of agreement

Shared gardens: agreement for the recovery and management of recreational green spaces and/or vegetable gardens (not for private use) in abandoned/under-utilized/degraded public areas (also areas with social decay)

Collaboration Agreement: a collaboration contract between citizens, individually or in organized groups, and local authorities, for the care and management of a shared urban property (physical and/or social)

Technical sponsorships and collaboration: Sponsorship contracts for the care and improvement of public green areas

Closing notes

Playtime. Monsieur Hulot's freedom and the design of the urban landscape // Before the project and method for activating public spaces in peripheral neighborhoods were described in these pages, *Playtime* was a marvelous film produced and directed by Jacques Tati in the late 1960s. In a new Paris, truer than true, reconstructed with an investment that eventually led the author and filmmaker to bankruptcy, where the places are similar to one another and blend together, the main character, Monsieur Hulot, moves through space and time in the city, among oft-incomprehensible sounds and dialogues, abstract architecture, road surfaces and pavements, with their decorations and signs, images reflecting city life.

In 1967, *Playtime* presented a critical vision by speaking of alienation and the anachronisms of the contemporary city. Yet nevertheless, if we watch it again (and it is worth watching several times), we notice how the director goes beyond judgment and subtly opens to imagination and change without excessive pessimism. Tati's gaze is still affectionate when looking at people and things, always with an intuition regarding how the spaces of the contemporary city are destined for change, and how they might be interpreted differently from how they may appear.

Even fifty years later, by placing the city at the center of the scene, *Playtime* openly suggests ways of creating possible conditions, spaces and design methods.

Imagining the way investments and changes modify space and how over time they can improve the conditions for living in the city comfortably, **PLAYTIME** proposes to consider the urban landscape, in particular the landscape of public open space, as a place of relations between people and things, a scene where people enter and exit, possibly producing new conditions through spaces defined through the commitment of administrators, decision-makers, visionary designers, active citizens, or simple users.

The physical organization of the public open space in our cities is the result of long investment processes. Not a single square meter of the city was produced without some kind of design and budget choice, however limited. This technical micro-history is populated by decision-makers, designers, contractors (aware or not), with results that often appear as chaotic, fragmented and incongruent collages.

Aware designers must work by responsibly entering into the scene in full action, interpreting the movements and voices of the actors, interacting with the existing heritage, infrastructure, roads, sidewalks, trees, lawns, lighting, seating areas, benches, partitions, systems and technological networks that are the physical and infrastructural framework of the city. This can be done in many ways, either rashly or discretely. But every project (especially if it is light and partial but well-conceived) can be thought of as a device that can produce important changes, instantly or over time.

The design of the urban scene and its support structure, which **PLAYTIME** sought to recover with a narrative applied to reality, is therefore primarily a sort of curation, based on the knowledge of relations and improvement of what already exists. The possibility of modifying physical space is the power and strength of the designer. He or she can understand and interpret places and people, but fortunately cannot in any way control and guide choices and future trajectories.

In the words of Fabio Fulfaro, “when interviewed about these peripatetic wanderings of Hulot, Tati answered that his movements were reminiscent of those of a dog, which often explores its environment in random directions: the needle of time is truly broken and there are no defined trajectories. The answer to the modernist optimist architecture of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus is the creation of a comical subversive figure who leaves the judgmental conscience to the video camera”¹.

We must imagine that freedom to roam – the freedom of Monsieur Hulot, who explores space in unpredictable trajectories – should be the same for people who today live in the city and in neighborhoods and who will live there in the future. This is even more true for the freedom of those who, as designers, imagine the future and attempt to shape it.

¹ Fabio Fulfaro in *Sentieri Selvaggi*, June 2019, <https://www.sentieriselvaggi.it/playtime-tempo-di-divertimento-di-jacques-tati/>



Playtime, Jacques Tati, 1967

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Apple Store, Shanghai (China), Bohlin Cywinski Jackson

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The Gates, New York (USA), Christo

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Pigalle Basketball, Paris (France), ill studio e Nike

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Color Jam, Chicago (USA), Jessica Stockholder

Installation view of Color Jam in the Chicago Loop Alliance, Chicago, 2012

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Floating Umbrella Festival, Agueda (Portugal), Ágit Agueda

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Cattedrale Vegetale, Val di Sella (Italy), Giuliano Mauri

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Zighizaghi, Favara (Italy), Ofi architecture / Francesco Lipari

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Before i die wall, Oro Valley (USA), Candy Chang

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The Uni project, New York (USA), Street Lab

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<https://www.theuniproject.org/programs/solve/>**Park(ing) Day, San Francisco (USA)**, Reuben Margolin

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MiMuovo, Milan (Italy), Comune di Milano e Irss

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21 Balançoires, Montreal (Canada), Daily tous les jours

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Impulse, Montreal (Canada), Maotik

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Aerial view

source: Google Earth

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Car-Rousel [Playtime, Jacques Tati, 1967]

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Beyond the central beating heart and the large and small centralities spread throughout the city, public space does not exist. This statement might appear incorrect because of the fact that, in reality, public space is not at all lacking. It is often significant in its size and evident in its planning. But just as often, it appears poorly maintained and supervised, and can generate a sense of indifference, disadvantage or danger. **PLAYTIME** defines a way of working with public space and promoting transformation based on a research method focusing on everyday practices and care. **PLAYTIME** is presented as a handbook and describes a course of action for experimenting with the construction of public space precisely in those places where public space seems not to exist.

CALL (Cities in Action Living Lab, www.citiesinactionlivinglab.org) is a multidisciplinary RUFLab research group at DASTU, Politecnico di Milano. It is composed by planners, designers, economists, organization and innovation experts. CALL develops projects in the city and for the city, with a focus on open innovation dynamics and the mobilization of local energies and resources.



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