IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Spatial Design and Urban Activation

edited by Barbara Camocini and Davide Fassi

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Over the last few years the international design research network has become an important reality, which has facilitated the sharing of ideas and opinions, improved understanding of the subject and increased awareness of the potential of design in various socio-geographical contexts.
The current expansion of the educational network allows teachers, students, researchers and professionals to meet, both online and in person.
It would seem therefore that the time is now right to propose a new series of books on design, contributing the construction of the international design community, helping authors bring their work onto the world scene.
The Design International series is thus born as a cultural setting for the sharing of ideas and experiences from the different fields of design, a place in which you can discover the wealth and variety of design research, where different hypotheses and different answers present themselves, in an attempt to draw up a map of Italian design, though in a continuous comparison with the world scene.
Different areas of design will be investigated, such as for example: fashion, interior design, graphic design, communication design, product and industrial design, service and social innovation design, interaction design and emotional design.

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In the Neighbourhood. Spatial Design and Urban Activation

Barbara Camocini and Davide Fassi, Politecnico di Milano

Peripheral and semi-peripheral neighbourhoods of contemporary cities are “hypersensitive” and “fragile” areas, transit and stopover spaces of national and transnational migratory flows, areas of transformation and fragmentation, where dismantling and unbalancing processes generated by the “Global Age” arise.

Reconstruction and re-occupation of urban spaces guided by residents are becoming increasingly frequent in these places; inhabitants, both newcomers and existing residents, claim local references to which to report their identity and where to live their daily lives. The competence and culture of the people living in these contexts, getting closer to the city centre, allow them to trigger urban transformation autonomously or integrated into institutional activities.

This book presents some reflections on the role of design discipline in this fertile and proactive context, proposing specific research methodologies and intervention strategies in close relation with the resident population, building new skills, creating original synergies and new processes of inclusion and social innovation.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section establishes the cultural frameworks of research on new urban development trends, with insights into different project-specific areas. The second section provides a description of two field research applications at the NoLo neighbourhood in Milan (Italy).

The first two chapters are aimed at defining the thematic framework of the discussion, namely the role of design culture,

specifically of spatial design, to increase the quality of the urban space and its relationship with the community that inhabits it.

The first chapter investigates the importance of the inner margins of urban space, interpreted not as borders but as narration devices regarding the functioning of the city and privileged places in the relationship between inhabitants and the materiality of the city. The second chapter, therefore, focuses on urban public spaces as enclosed accessible spaces, hospitable places of shared experiences, which can interpret the needs of the inhabitants, and support the urban changing processes. The following two chapters examine the theme of art and commerce as tools to trigger social relations and urban activation. These two themes are also the starting point of the two research experiences shown in the second section of the book.

The research activity will focus on a specific context of analysis and application: the neighbourhood recently named as NoLo − North of Piazzale Loreto − in Milan, characterized by the existence of many associations and a social district, a social street extended to a larger portion of territory. Social streets have become a consolidated reality in the city of Milan, recognized and registered by the Municipality.

While this new instrument has stimulated the re-activation and monitoring of neighbourhood spaces, apart from the communication and awareness of the inhabitants of being part of a community, NoLo remains marked by an evident cultural and territorial fragmentation that requires interventions.

Two approaches emerged from the surveys to enhance and further stimulate the regeneration activity of the neighbourhood, working together with the inhabitants and with the support of the social district:

- *Arnold - Art and Design in NoLo Social District* based on the set-up of exhibitions of artworks by 22 artists in 22 unconventional places of art through a co-design process with neighbours, artists and owners of the concerned sites.
- *ZIP Spaces* focused on the creation of interior design proposals through solutions of temporary reuse of dismantled commercial spaces that can display innovative aggregative formats of activities derived from existing business in the neighbourhood.

These two activities have been constructed by imagining future scenarios of hybridization that will provide an answer to the future development of the neighbourhood. The uniqueness and high quality of craftsmanship activities are struggling to survive due to the new commercial and productive business formats: the rise of real estate development businesses led to gentrification the risks of which are faced by social districts and associations at every level of intervention.

Section One – Urban Frames

Introduction

Barbara Camocini and Davide Fassi, Politecnico di Milano

The first section of this book is about building the cultural framework of research done by the authors on spatial design trends dealing with public space and including focuses on urban inner margins, inclusivity and accessibility of urban space, public art/public spaces and retail and neighbourhood identity.

The first chapter "The City that Talks About Itself. Looking Beyond the Threshold into the Inner Urban Margins" by Barbara Camocini gives a wide view of the crisis of the contemporary city, its vulnerability and its growing risk of fragmentation. It also highlights the contemporary awareness of being able to intervene in the processes of urban transformation, also thanks to the increased power of Information Communications Technology and its ability to capture and display new energies of renewal. The analysis and the design of urban public space is confirmed, in the contemporary debate, as a privileged approach to intervene in this transformation process at the neighbourhood scale, involving human attitudes and sense of perception. In this field of research urban inner margins strongly contribute to generate a concise and updated representation of the city. Through urban margins inhabitants can physically perceive and interact with the city. Margins interruptions, such as thresholds or shop windows, overlooking the streets, convey and communicate its city internal dynamics of transformation, thus making inhabitants participate in this process.

Moving from the aforementioned margins, the second chapter, "Urban Interiors as Places of Inclusion" by Agnese Rebaglio, focuses

on the importance of the redevelopment of the urban space due to its important role to foster innovation dynamics, besides the regeneration of the built environment and the social programs. The claim for new links with public space by the inhabitants is becoming more and more evident. Indeed, in a friendly and accessible public space, the inhabitants can recognize answers to both their explicit and unexpressed needs. The design of urban spaces is required to meet this new demand through intervention on human scale, designing sets to display renewed identities of a territory, promoting the relational dimension and including individuals and the community as references in the design process.

The chapter "Designing Public Spaces with Local Communities through Art" by Laura Galluzzo analyses the relationships among citizens' initiatives, public art, public spaces and cities transformation. By the definition of public spaces and public art, this chapter focuses the attention on how street art is generating citizens involvement to improve the quality of contemporary cities. The author explains her research through the critical reading of several projects on public spaces through art including: *Giardino delle Culture* (Milan), *Borgo Vecchio Factory* (Palermo), *Favela Painting* (Brazil), *B.ART arte in Barriera* (Turin) and *Street art Ostiense district* (Rome).

Citizens' involvement can be fostered through the enhancement of the neighbourhood identity. The chapter "The Role of Retail in Building a Neighbourhood Identity: The Isola Case Study" by Giulia Gerosa investigates how a transformation of a Milan neighbourhood (due to huge public and private estate interventions) could affect its identity and how a rooted tradition of craftsmanship and small shops has developed into the strongest feature of the area. According to the author, shops are increasingly becoming the new places for socializing (instead of public spaces) and since the Isola neighbourhood has been affected by a deep transformation, she underlines how a research project strategy could reinforce its image. The research presents three different approaches: the identification of highly characterized urban furnishing elements, a communication plan about the peculiarities of the neighbourhood and the definition of an event system to increase the neighbourhood attractiveness.

This section introduces the second one where the results of research activities on the NoLo neighbourhood in Milan mirror the research background delineated here.

The City that Talks About Itself. Looking Beyond the Threshold into the Inner Urban Margins

Barbara Camocini, Politecnico di Milano

Contemporary cities are studied by experts according to two different paradigms: on the one hand they are considered engines of innovation, models of economic and social progress; on the other, they represent the areas of gaping inequality and fragmentation (Florida, 2017). Over the last two decades, studies devoted to globalization and revolution have focused on urban organisms, as places where such transformations are particularly evident. In fact, new urban geographies have emerged. Some cities have gained global economic control positions − *global cities* − and others have seen a loss of functions and activities − *shrinking cities* − covering marginal positions in this system (Oswalt, 2006; Sassen, 1991).

These observations are part of a recent past, now well-analyzed and known, the effects of which are still ongoing, and are made more evident by the recent global crisis of 2008.

Urban regeneration linked to the so-called *Creative City* is now accompanied by the *Fourth Industrial Revolution*, determined by an advanced digital culture, which attracts to the city a cultured and creative population with an economic level that allows access to urban goods and housing. This process tends to exclude residents who are not prepared to participate in these renewal dynamics, such as the elderly or groups of immigrants who escape due to the ongoing crisis and wars, and seek shelter and living resources in cities. Therefore, the contemporary disciplinary debate focuses on the need to include the population in the urban life experience with

the aim of making all citizens able to recognize the public space as an extension of their own space. The aim is to enable them to interpret the messages communicated by the public space about modes of use and opportunities for social interaction. The strategies proposed to achieve inclusion lie at urban and metropolitan level, but also at global level, through the *Sustainable Development Goals* established by the *United Nations* (UN), the global organization that brings together its member states to confront common and global challenges.

The awareness of being able to intervene in the processes of urban transformation is also beginning to spread - even if the engines of these changes seem far from our field of intervention, both as citizens and as scientific experts - by stimulating innovation, creating synergies between existing resources and new technologies, enhancing the existing urban spaces, promoting the proper functioning of the city and its development. *Information and Communications Technology* (ICT) is emerging as a useful tool to monitor and direct the ongoing urban changes. It offers a sort of 'augmented vision' that allows to capture and interpret the energies of renewal, to see how they manifest themselves in public and private urban spaces, to recognize new or expanding networks, even when they have no physical evidence. Advanced technology is therefore recognized as an effective tool of inclusion and participation, used in the Smart City's strategic frameworks, to integrate bottom-up processes conducted by neighbourhood associations and by *Social Streets*, the network currently gaining importance in Italy.

The design culture is deeply involved in the inclusion of population in urban life; one of the fields in which research is now focusing more to pursue these goals is the regeneration of urban public spaces at the small scale, the one closest to the daily lives of the inhabitants, the neighbourhood. Interventions at this scale allow to affect the existence of a community that can use and share urban spaces. These spaces talk about their past and their future, and enable inhabitants to record, without fear, the changes taking place in their proximity. Through their neighbourhood, citizens feel immersed in contemporaneity, with its innovations and its challenges.

The Changing City

Various studies, analysis and intervention processes contribute to build an up-to-date image of the contemporary city and its development. Different views intersect in the analysis of the contemporary city crisis, vulnerable to the growing risk of gentrification and to the increasing gap between citizens who participate in the urban experience and those who are excluded. Such processes, specifically in western economies, can be interpreted in a broader field of research through the UN global intervention plans to face the crisis due to the demographic concentration in cities of populations in difficulty. The observations surfacing from this vast literature on the subject allow us to build an image of contemporary urban life, the spaces in which it takes place, and to prefigure a future scenario.

By describing the contemporary city crisis, Florida sees in the urban regeneration led by creatives who have infused new strength and dynamism to the city – the same class of creatives, characterized by the three "t" of *Technologies, Tolerance and Talent* that he has identified – the risk of increasing the urban gentrification and the gap between people who can benefit the city and those who are excluded from this renewal: "the same clustering of talent and economic assets generates a lopsided, unequal urbanism in which a relative handful of superstar cities, and a few elite neighbourhoods within them, benefit while many other places stagate and fall behind" (Florida, 2017, p. 21).

To imagine a future scenario of the city in relation to the changes that will affect it, we must consider how humanity can benefit from what has been defined the *Fourth Industrial Revolution*. It envisages the mutual strengthening of new applications of technology – *social media, mobile devices, cloud computing* and *big data* – supported by systems that combine physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human. Schwab, a founding member of the *World Economic Forum*, argues that "these revolutionary factors could help shape a future that works for all by putting people first, empowering them and constantly reminding

ourselves that all of these new technologies are first and foremost tools made by people for people" (Schwab, 2017). However, he warns against the threat of inequality and societies fragmentation, because this Industrial Revolution is likely to worsen the crisis of the suburbs, where poverty, insecurity and crime can increase, and economic and racial segregation may grow deeper, with the decline in middle-class neighbourhoods that had formed the structure of cities.

As the city, globally, is increasingly the site of humanitarian crisis, the UN-habitat – the United Nations program working towards a better urban future − identified the "sustainable development plan of action for people, planet and prosperity" as the 11th of 17 *Sustainable Development Goals*, in the 2030 agenda aimed at "making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (UN, 2015). The sociologist Richard Sennett introduced the concept of *Urban Open System* – borrowed from biology – to achieve a certain porosity along city edges in order to secure spaces, even physical, to mend the urban transformations and the behaviour of its inhabitants, recognized as a matter of design (Sennett, 2015). This approach to promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements requires systemic actions that integrate the interests of the various stakeholders, the operators responsible for the economic development of the city, the owners of the property, the inhabitants. The sociologist Saskia Sassen, in "Who owns our cities?" (Sassen, 2015), warns against speculative economic interests that can create a "loss of habitat in cities" and tend to homogenize urban spaces. Therefore, the debate on the contemporary city has fueled the research aimed at managing the risks associated with its development, seeking to promote systematic actions, also at international level, among several actors for long-term planning and regulatory frames in which participation, integration and sustainability are the driving goals.