

City Building. New language for olds cities

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Abstract

A progressive dwindling of free and accessible public spaces, apparently connected quite intimately with changes in the life of Italian cities over the last decade, has beset Italy and the splendid squares that have so frequently served as inspiration and model for innovative co-housing projects in the rest of Europe.

Indeed, the cartography of relationships that once guaranteed—thanks to a particular genius loci and a mixité solidified over centuries—a quality of life and a daily exchange distinct from the socio-spatial separations of northern European rational functionalism, now appears to have blurred.

In the meantime, new spontaneous forms are emerging. From the virtual to the real to the virtuous, they appear to be redesigning the spaces and times of a community that takes shape, joins together, and melts on the wave of events to fully be in the time of things, in a “dasein” that requires no framework or prefiguration and where streets, arcades, and gardens once again perform the role of thread that links lives and activities of their inhabitants as they relax, work, hang out, and reflect.

Is it possible today to achieve a harmonious dialogue between citizens’ desire to participate and those who govern, between creative energy and the desire to live with a renewed sense of community?

In an attempt to follow the traces of new landscapes redesigned by those who, through participatory actions, social streets, and creative practice, spontaneously tend public space, my reflection takes inspiration from Alexander Langer, who as early as the early 1990s, in response to the constant reduction in opportunities for chance interactions and a decrease in gardens and uncultivated spaces where one could cultivate humanity through exchanges with others, proposed free opportunities as a sure antidote to the growing danger of widespread anomie.

Key Words: proximity; community; sharing; relationship's cartography; free opportunities; reciprocCity

Public space between relational 's cartography and new forms of citizenship.

“ Developing the concept of free would mean protect and valuing all the places where we can meet, stay, talk, even if we are not part of a structure, or we don't pay the entrance , or we are not subscribers, and we don't have a technical assistance contract for the following maintenance”. Alexander Langer ¹

All this concepts of free encounter can be translated into opportunities. Opportunities left open to chance, enriched by new components—unexpected and unpredictable, opportunities that reflect the identity of those who move ceaselessly through spaces and over pavements, occupying them and creating a unique and singular human landscape that renews itself each day to form the web of relationships of every city-organism. It is possible to find this synchronic harmony in every place where people mix and listen together the rhythm of life. Therefore, nearness becomes proximity, the pleasure of staying together and sharing space and time comes back, a pleasure thought to be lost that each city can create again as soon as a “free” opportunity to rest on the fluency of the meeting is offered

Every exchange leaves a trace

While nowadays the word “sharing” for many conjures up the idea of sharing a “status” easily and virtually at the click of a mouse, it is becoming increasingly difficult to share a space that is real, not fleeting and temporary as impressions and comments are. Words we use every day have changed meaning and now no longer suffice or help to communicate and define actions, moods, feelings: they often simply record fictitious and/or transient impulses. This, above all, paves the way to a tendency to abdicate responsibility, which runs the risk of leaving a vacuum easily filled in random and ineffective — if not downright irresponsible and meaningless — ways.

On the other hand, when encounters and exchanges are destined to leave a trace, and as such need real and continuous presence, actions, debate and genuine sharing to have an impact on the space that surrounds us, everything becomes once more less ephemeral and unstable, and the real [or perceived] lack of time is no longer an obstacle to commitment that stretches beyond short-lived moments of proximity. It is therefore increasingly urgent and unavoidable to focus our efforts towards activities that are able to express [and to experience] meaning, but also capable of delivering and developing an impact on our surrounding that is as legible, legitimate and inclusive as possible (whatever our understanding of “inclusion” might be!).

¹ The following is a passage taken from Alexander Langer's paper (9° Congresso Nazionale dell'Aniarti - Associazione nazionale infermieri di area critica-) given in November 1990 when he substituted, at the very last minute, his friend Ivan Illich

Redefining “surroundings” through public space.

Which stages then, must we go through when we feel that our actions are capable of altering the appearance – and not only the virtual appearance — of our surroundings? What happens if we go from the “virtual” to the “real”, and from there, hopefully, we reach the “virtuous”? Which unexpressed and inexpressible paths remain unexplored in our anxious progress, paths that appears to dominate our present at all times, and too often does not allow the memory of the past to reach out to us and help us shape and make sense of our future?

Indeed, our present, full of complexity, conflicts and contradictions as it is, often only leaves room citizens and grassroots groups are taking their destiny into their own hands, as citizens of our planet, aiming their activities towards specific initiatives capable of altering the surrounding space and, therefore, their life. for incursions into the past that fail to connect, other than in a superficially visionary way, with a more direct ability to plan and design. The risk is that all this reflects only distant echoes of shared spaces, and will lead us to consider the present not as a door open towards a future of which we can still be architects, but as a container from which, at the appropriate time, we can whip out the correct response to well-worn — if not worn out — circumstances, which are only in appearance fundamental or necessary to our living. And so we are capable of mastering high-tech instruments and techniques with relative ease, but we feel increasingly awkward, lost and ham-fisted when we find ourselves in the most common “training grounds” for socialization: the street and the public spaces around us.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves — and this conference is the ideal opportunity to do so — to what extent, and how, we can still counter the pervading anomie which seems to haunt our present and to cast long shadows on the future of our cities, if — as Marc Bloch says — the failure to make sense of the present stems inevitably from ignorance of the past, because “not only does it harm our understanding of the present and compromises our diagnosis: it leads to ineffectual therapies, putting in jeopardy our very actions. “

News languages for olds places

The social fabric of our country has changed significantly in the last few years and more and more so : “If, from the Babel of growing metropolises that our future seemingly holds, we believe we are still able to decipher and make sense of it, then we need to listen to other voices. Those that are capable of transmitting signals of difficult, yet unavoidable changes in direction. These voices will suggest strategies for the redefinition of the places that we encounter every day, through new paths and new languages. The places of daily life today do not seem to invite encounters anymore, because, over time, they have lost that dimension which characterized their first appearance in the world of possibilities that urban life offered. More and more often, the spaces of intimacy and reciprocity (which should be in balance with the growth of the individual and of the community) tend to close up when in contact with the outside world, and, at the same time, they become constantly permeated by incursions of a reality which often contain only powerful

syntheses of other worlds. Is contemporary man still able to inhabit yesterday's spaces, considering that this is the necessary condition to remain an active player in the city of tomorrow, without incurring only incremental shifts of identity and pseudo-liberations? Is the changing scape of the city still interacting with its inhabitants in a complicity that supports new alliances, or is it withdrawing from this dialogue, being too busy, changing too rapidly and uncontrollably? Who now interacts with the city? Are they its old inhabitants? Or rather the new ones, those that walk the same streets? Who have won the discarded and abandoned places. Or could it perhaps be the composite communities? Those whose children, with their inexhaustible exploring, can provide the key to open new doors of a future that is not just about technology, speed and isolation. We must now regain the ability to re-trace those visible urban routes where differences multiply, creating and opening spaces to the outside, where the other is immediately recognized as one of the possible facets of our identity, preserving the specificity that only a rich environment of care and stimuli such as a truly educating city can give. New bonds from different realities of sharing and meeting are created and flourish, to restart the process of being inside places." (Montalbano, 2005)

In the course of time : the suspended space of recipro-city

In the course of the time, many free meeting occasions have created a space almost forgotten, or, as Lange said, a wide vegetable garden, that has been transformed thanks to its inhabitants' love and care. I would like to start from some image of this cement garden in the center of Bologna, that was abandoned, plundered and destroyed centuries. From its absolute decline, it was born again firstly thanks to the wise sensibility of an architect who re-imagined it embracing memory but also hearing and observing kids which played there among its ruins, and thanks to its obstinate inhabitants who were able to see something that could bear new fruits ²

² Trying to combat the deterioration that attacks the heart of Bologna's university area, a "green space", formerly the domus aurea of the Bentivoglio family, there is an association of citizens who have stopped dwelling on its current state. Who have seen the merit in the interventions and practices that research brings in finding a balance between control, and the facilitation of proactive citizenship. Starting from a specific space, coordinating and establishing connections with the rest of the area, they are aware of the necessity to intervene in the area, and with the intention of setting a good example. 'If this can happen in the Giardini del Guasto then perhaps it might happen in other places'. An historic site, transformed into a park through architectural intervention, it is now projected to fulfil the needs of playing children. The open space, refreshed and invigorated by water, is characterized by an intentional use of concrete, modelled in forms that recall the continuous variations of nature, and aimed to stimulate the imagination of children and their free expression in play. The play, the workshops and the parties are excellent occasions to form new social ties. New families arrive and get acquainted through the activities that these residents started in the hope of curing this space, which was a former symbol of deterioration and danger. Nowadays the Garden is an intergenerational and multicultural space where bonds are forged, where people from any social group can come. Finally, it is a useful stimulus for interaction throughout other city quarters. [66]



Fig.1: Guasto Gardens, a green-space in the historical centre of Bologna Source: Googlemap – Guasto'sArchiv

Their care made these meetings possible in a hanging space over the city, a space that, instead of being consumed by time and space, has been nourished by its inhabitants and pedestrians: they have transformed it in reciprocity space where each “free” occasion reminds us that an urban landscape lives with exchange relationships that exist and insist on it. Its “insistent” inhabitants permitted to continue using and existing an area “destroyed” by time and history, thanks to an architect’s idea aiming at not overcoming to memory by imagination and, on the contrary, mix imagination with experience; this was the case of some children who played among the sixteenth- century ruins who were the best consultants of the projects.

People who live day by day, model and sign those spaces with their explorations are the most able to re-create them and, as Colin Word would say, who could explore and sign city’s maps and places in it better than a child? If people, in these years, have seen territory as an exchange of experience and life, have shared their peculiarities, have offered their daily know-how in order to create new ways of living space and time, that always ask to be changed but we are not able to do because we try to codify other systems that confuse and isolate us in even more suffocating borders where it is almost impossible take care “freely” of ourselves...if the “Giardino del Guasto” has been able to guest events for all age residents, enforcing relationship between parents and children, their families and the other members of the community...maybe we should start to see the city as an only pulsating organism where also the periphery becomes important for relationships, re-formulating open space identity and preferring connection places in order to re-define public space, by using strategies that go from the initial look to the project itself.



Fig.2: During the second *Biennale of Public Space* , organized by the Urban National Institute, at the Bologna Giardino del Guasto, the 2° award of the “*National Contest for Open Spaces planning and management*” was won
Source: Duepuntilab - Guasto's Archiv

Fragments from an interview with the Architect Rino Filippini (1920-1998):

“ So I answered : We must do a different , particular kind of garden.”

[...] a garden as an opportunity to study children's reaction on forms taken from nature, promoters of (ancestral ?) suggestions and the kind of behaviour and game that they could promote.

[...] the Guasto once was a hill much higher than now .It had been formed as a deposit of part of the ruins of the Bentivoglio's family " Domus Aurea " (destroyed by the people's fury in 1500) and it had grown during the centuries as a dumping ground for the city. At the end of the nineteenth century it was limited by a wall of moonstone; in the last war there was built a shelter from which still remain the actual basement. The material taken for the construction on the shelter was collected over the area . When the works for the garden began researchers came who riddled the ground and found fragments of ceramics original from various periods (1500 to 1900). Those we have found during the works were given to the archaeological museum.

[...] We did not intend to change the morphological character that it had and it presented on the exterior as a formal particular emergency. There were the conditions to create a hanging garden:

[...] The plain garden was so small that 30 or 40 children a day would have destroyed it in a short time. Any kind of lawn would not only have been not existent , without psychological impact but first of all maintainable. So the choice of necessity to cement , but in a particular way . How would the main users, the children react? Was it legitimate to put them in a crystallized world? How was that world to be? Would adults use it?

[...] Definitely there where two areas, the plain of Largo Respighi near the City Theatre where cars and others passed, and the other, closed and completely abandoned. The idea was to unite them with different appearance and functions.

The plain area was more appropriate for rest (elderly persons) while the other was more appropriate for games and activity. To connect them instead of stairs it was preferable to build a ramp because it recalls natural forms.[...]

The Guasto was planned in 69/70 as an experimental playground for children , the works , begun in '73 lasted two years . It was inaugurated in ' 75 and it made the children play until the students protests appeared in which the gardens became a strategic base of the movement. Lo Russo was killed in 1977 . I think that from that moment the Guasto was dead.

[...] The Guasto remains an interrupted experiment that is worthy to restart . I regret that this project not had consequences bringing about new cultural proposals specific to this kind of garden

Let's sow game in the city : shared responsibility urban recreational places

Because we want to imagine this semi-flourishing context, we joined the National net S.L.U.R.P. (acronym for Urban Recreational Spaces to Participative Liability) that suggests to launch, in not common places for relationships and exchange, some actions that could regenerate the specific and other urban tissues not only occasionally. In a fixed time, once a month, S.L.U.R.P.'s of different regions send their messages, in order to multiply "free" occasions and let them infect other parts of the city. Our first action affected two zones of Bologna centre, Rizzoli and Irnerio street, where we put on the two strategic crossroads (the first one just below the two towers and the second one between Piazza VIII Agosto and Parco della Montagnola), some transparent pouches with the Giardino del Guasto and S.L.U.R.P. logo containing very little modular toys as those ones found in the snacks and plum and apricot seeds: all had the writing "to sow the game in the city". Seeing distinguished ladies and brave kids that observed the pouches with such curiosity was surprising. They tried to re-assemble the games and they were in a hurry to go sowing what they found.

And once, while I was waiting for my daughter in the garden behind the Pilastro dancing school, a symbol zone of Bologna periphery and marginality, I was surprised because some foreign kids told me they regret having left that school, in whose playground, now, they went to play also to find those years atmosphere. In which other public place of the city could I have met them casually, talk about their experiences and understand their need to tell, that maybe unconfessable thought, to an unknown person? Maybe in the *Cortile degli Svizzeri*, behind *Palazzo d'Accursio*, historical seat of Bologna Municipality, just restored and equipped for entertainment and break time where, again casually, I found some Middle - Eastern teenagers, languidly layed on the probably comfortable wooden platforms, who relaxed in the sun. We joked and, while we were

continuing our not overtly serious conversation, I felt accepted in my request to take some photos, I felt that we were comfortable because the place and the moment were right for a spontaneous meeting and where, for some moments, our identity filters were not so important. I wonder if this small-talk could be defined as an exchange or even an intergenerational and/or intercultural dialogue, but the fact that it happened in a place so rich in history and so emblematic, (that, six months ago, would not have facilitated a comfortable break except if teenagers had found exciting those bonnets of the cars parked there) let me think that, maybe, a way to transmit belonging, also through regeneration and the use of spaces apparently dead, exists. Even the fifteenth-century stones that surround that space represent a little but precious step in the long citizen-ship trip that awaits new and old inhabitants.

In fact, urban perimeters have always produced enzymes useful for developing social processes, that *humus* necessary for the creation of common languages, urban alphabets, whose extinguishment could bring us to lose ourselves between real or unreal labyrinths and enclosures, that we contribute to build day by day, without us being aware. Just from the unexpected capacity of surprising each other should we start, when we talk about transforming the nearness in proximity, in order to exchange private stories in the public city, if it is true that, as Hannah Arendt writes In Vita Activa: «The main characteristic of this specifically human life is to be full of events that can be told as a story, a biography. Each human being, in its uniqueness, desires to receive its own story telling from another one». So, even a city wants its story, its biography, its syntax able to capture subjects, times and ways of current

The social street's phenomena as a paradigm for new urban visions

In a recent interview Zygmunt Bauman said: «We need to learn to look for sources of happiness and dignity other than those which require more plundering of the planet's resources. Durable prosperity needs to be in founding relationships, in the neighbourhood, in the community»

From the virtual to the real to the virtuous but not only, new spontaneous forms are emerging for the redesigning the spaces and times of a community that takes shape, joins together, and melts on the wave of events to fully be in the time of things, in a “dasein” that requires no framework or prefiguration and where streets, arcades, and gardens are once again the thread that links lives and activities of their inhabitants as they relax, work, hang out, and reflect.

In an attempt to follow the traces of new landscapes redesigned by those who, through participatory actions, social streets and creative practice, spontaneously tend public space, I found some common lines :

Images-visions: restoring, through spontaneous or self organized activities, public open spaces the lacked quality and the effectiveness (not only figurative).

- The idea is born from caring for people and places
- To build links through the promotion of fundamental and positive social relationships.
- Re-open spaces and not close or fence them.
- To rebuild maps and paths within the city highlighting paths and meeting places that are woven through virtuous actions and interconnections
- Through new relationships and encounters that, by spreading, give a new face to the city.
- To re-tie, merge again, the threads of disconnected lives, turn on potential meeting detonators, reset communication fracture through new exchange, communication and meeting channels
- Rewake dormant energies, recover buried potential, new forces from the periphery reformulating spaces no longer quantized in an abstract and standardized way for abstract people that have nothing to do with real ones

Fulfil themselves fulfilling others Is it possible today to achieve a harmonious dialogue between citizens' desire to participate and those who govern, between creative energy and the desire to live with a renewed sense of community?³

“Maximizing utility without attention to the way that ideas shape deeds leads people to trample civilization underfoot.” (Ostrom V & Ostrom E., 2004)

³ In February 2013 was presented the first municipal regulation on the administration shared care of the commons urban, built starting from the concrete problems identified by the citizens of Bologna, a city pilot project at a national level.

See more: <http://www.comune.bologna.it/sites/default/files/documenti/REGOLAMENTO%20BENI%20COMUNI.pdf>

From the virtual to the real to the virtuous



Fig.3 Via Fondazza whit the social streeter

Source : via Fondazza fb residents page

Ideas, History and Boarding book

Few months ago, walking along the arcades of via Fondazza, the street where he is living a since 2009, Federico Bastiani realized that just very few people and no one with children to contact to play with his two years old son Matteo... How to solve the problem in a fast and zero cost way?

So Federico decided to open a Facebook group and promoted it with some leaflets along the street. Expectation was to collect a few of answers to his proposal....

What happened was a bit different and now, after 3 months, neighbours joining the FB group are more than five hundred...Relating so many people via FB represents a very important step but more important is to switch from virtual to face to face relationships, having people opening the window and talking each other, walking along the arcades and saying hallo to the neighbours and shop owners ...This is what happened and we wondered about the reason of such an extensive success.

“Social Street” plays an unspoken and almost unconscious role, even if deeply felt, of participation.

The interest generated by this first “virtual stage”, in fact eventually led to a genuine interest to know each other in the off-line world, fitting into the real life of the members of the group.

New potentiality generated by socialization are discovered every day; and positive implications involved not only the group members but the whole local community.

Sociability, saving, sharing, obtained in just 2 minutes trough a simple post on FB...

Saving food.

Saving, collective support, building a bond of trust the web is already offering such services: if you wish to sell something you can use e-bay, for the car you have car sharing, trip-Advisor advises you where to go. All these services are offered by and within the group of Residents in via Fondazza, but with an added value: mutual trust.

Sharing objects but also interests as exhibitions, theatre, readings, music, is a very important step.

But the most innovative aspect is represented by reconsidering the approach to economy, optimizing the use of resources, applying no-waste policies, considering zeroKm foods. Giving new value to goods represents a natural step in a new vision of community: what is thrown away or left unused becomes now available for the community. Same considerations are applicable to skills: skills and time are made available in return for other skills and more time

Via Fondazza is becoming a study case, in Italy and abroad...Many new groups (341!) are spreading in Bologna and in other places from the north to the south of Italy.

We think we were able to point out that it is possible to move to virtual to face to face relationships and that these relationships are able to produce a virtuous cycle involving the community, revealing the strong interest and need of the people to cooperate in order to recover a forgotten need of sociality. ⁴

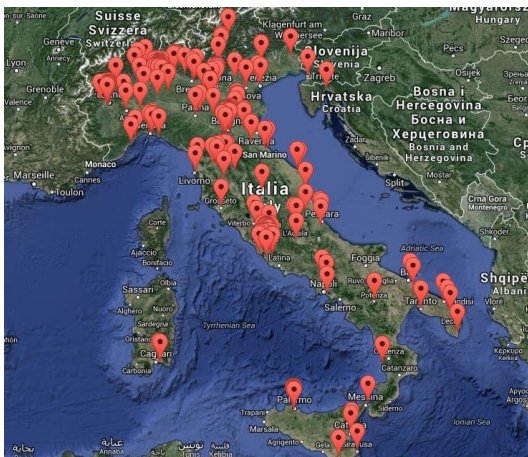


Fig.4: Social street in Italy Source: wide Facebook page

⁴ Find out more about the project at the Via Fondazza residents' Facebook page, its Italy-wide Facebook page, the Social Street website and Federico Bastiani's blog.

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