PUBLIC SPACES: resources for the city or places of conflict?

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Abstract

Public spaces, whether they be indoors or out, are an important part of cities. They are the places of everyday life that have, over time, undergone a phase of decline. Today, in fact, they are under used, unattractive, unsafe and reflect the state of health of urban centers and their inhabitants. This study investigates the quality of public spaces of some urban realities - national and international - which have become examples of sustainable urban regeneration, places of sociality and hospitality.

Keywords: quality of public space, identity, attraction

INTRODUCTION

Public spaces - whether they be indoors or out - such as squares, open areas, streets, parks, adjacent of areas, sports and leisure facilities, parking lots, public transport stops, shopping centers, service areas, etc., are an important part of cities. They are places of everyday life that have, over time, undergone a phase of decline following crises and constant changes in the city and population. The quality of life and public space has been lost, a condition that reflects and identifies the state of health of a city, its inhabitants, its administrators, and which reflects the quality of entrepreneurial ideas and the ability to implement them, which also registers the interpersonal skills and the creativity of its citizens. Unfortunately, the phenomena of conurbation have taken over, leaving local places and identities to disintegrate, creating a clear break between community and settlement, erasing signs of belonging, and undermining the concepts of the common good and the use of public space (Cilona T, 2017). To improve well-being and quality of life it is necessary that public spaces be attractive and safe, which is why it is necessary to design them following principles of sustainability that meet the needs and expectations of all citizens, particularly the weakest, as indicated in the Public Space Charter[1]. The design of public space always requires an overview and must take the historical, urban, architectural, environmental, cultural and social aspects specific to each place into account, whether it be in a historical center, a residential area, on the periphery, in an abandoned building, in an industrial area, in a commercial area or near a waterway. From the

second half of the nineteenth century we witnessed a change in function of urban public spaces - which adapted their structure to the development of transport infrastructures - and progressively gave way to production, housing and commercial needs. From this moment on their creation took place in residential areas and far from historic centers. The change of perspective registered – with a shift of housing functions from the center to the periphery – determined the phenomena of abandonment and degradation, as well as a gradual loss of attractiveness of these public spaces (traditionally dedicated to meeting and socialization of citizens) and, very often, outdoor areas began to be used exclusively as car parks. Only in recent times has a return to public spaces gradually been reaffirmed as a decisive element for improving the livability of urban contexts, driven by the growing demand of citizens to enjoy plazas, streets and parks as places dedicated to new forms of social relations. This study focuses on the quality, use and transformation of public spaces of some urban contexts – national and international – such as Shanghai, Copenhagen, Böblingen (in Germany), Madrid and Milan, which have become excellent examples of urban regeneration, resource catalysts, places of inclusion, and sociability. Cities where redeveloped public space has become a strength of the city.

THE INQUIRY: BETWEEN SOCIAL AND URBAN FUNCTION

The themes of redevelopment and re-appropriation of public spaces are increasingly common in today's debate between enthusiasts, scholars, administrators and ordinary citizens. Two aspects emerge from this heated and often animated debate: the first, concerning the growing interest in urban public spaces; the second, instead, refers to the quality and availability of public spaces which are not so obvious. In fact, considering the changes that have taken place in big cities over the last few decades, some considerations must be made.

From an economic point of view, the privatization process that involved ever larger portions of urban centers introduced new ways of using public spaces: from meeting places and commercial exchanges, to spaces for sports, relaxation or eating areas. In light of these mechanisms, it follows that it is not possible to formulate an unambiguous and exhaustive definition of urban public space, since it is the very nature of public space that it must be detected from time to time on the basis of attendance, of the social dynamics that occur as well as the rules – both explicit and implicit – that govern these spaces. Some studies have attempted to analyze the perception of public space on the part of the population through a mix of survey methods that have allowed a large amount of information to be collected (among these Marzette A, 2013) that is both quantitative and qualitative[2]. Such observations highlighted profound differences based on territory.

Specifically, in the richer cities – more advanced and industrialized – positive judgments emerged, whereas in the poorer cities negative judgments were recorded (the inadequacy of public space is recognized above all with reference to certain populations – the elderly and children for example – and is accompanied by a widespread perception of social insecurity and danger to the individual). In general, however, the spaces considered to be the safest and most accessible are those that preserved a variety of public qualities, escaping the dominant specializations in terms of entertainment and consumption. Qualities that encourage usability, sustainability, participation, meeting, resting, energy self-sufficiency and above all guarantee the reception of heterogeneous populations. These are the principles that characterize the redevelopment projects analyzed in this study below.

REQUALIFICATION ACTIONS IN COMPARISON: 5 CASE STUDIES

1 - A green oasis in the center of Shanghai: the URBAN BLOOM Project

In March 2018, a group of designers – AIM Architecture and Urban Matters – reinvented a public space in the city of Shanghai, transforming a former parking lot into an urban park through the use of recycled elements. The project called "Urban Bloom" was built in a popular area of the city - in the Anfu Road district of residences, offices, restaurants, shops and schools – and through the combination of a set of elements (consisting of wooden pallets and poles crowned with transparent spheres) intends to represent a natural landscape (fig. 1). The goal was to create an oasis of greenery, of about 330 square meters, in contrast to the city bustle, using recycled and low-impact materials. There are three key elements of the project: pallets, vases, and spheres combined together following geometric lines and lots of creativity.

Fig. 1 - Shanghai, Anfu Road, *Urban Bloom* Project

The key word, in fact, is freedom: the desire to play, to put in a good mood, to overturn the classic concept of urban space oft understood as a paved square with seats and flower boxes - perhaps made of cement - and a few trees for shade. URBAN BLOOM welcomes and attracts the visitor, maintaining sociality as a main function – favoring interaction, aggregation – stopping in this space, resting, reading, escaping from the rhythms of modernity. The wooden pallets were left partially unpainted so as to let the natural material stand out and partly painted green, to recall the concept of a grass lawn. Due to their shape and structure they can easily be adapted to the most varied of uses, transforming themselves from time to time into large and small tables and benches. Urban Bloom reflects the new needs of urban spaces and is configured as a more fluid, dynamic social catalyst, made to be fully experienced in the present: an intended use of the space that is much better than the original sad and squalid car park.

2 - SUPERKILEN: Park for multi-ethnic integration in Copenhagen

In the heart of Copenhagen, in the northern district of Nørrebro stands the Superkilen, a gigantic 30,000 square meter urban park, inaugurated in 2012. The project is part of an urban improvement plan and aims to celebrate diversity, foster integration of the 57 different ethnic communities that coexist within it, and redefine the functions of urban space around different cultures. The infrastructure system of the area has been completely redesigned, adding new stops for public transport and extending the network of existing cycle paths. An innovative element was the participation of citizens who, during the drafting of the project, were asked to position new interchange lines and walkways at their discretion. This permitted a final outcome that was closer to the needs of citizens, reduced traffic, and quadrupled bicycle use. The park extends for almost a kilometer and is divided into three colored areas: green, red and black (fig. 2).

The green area is characterized by an actual park designed as a play area, served by cycle paths and pedestrian paths. The red zone is undoubtedly the most striking starting with its planimetric prospect: the pavement is made of pink rubber interrupted here and there by red maples that further multiply the effect. The theme of this area is sport, where numerous states have provided a range of sports equipment available to everyone.

The combination of simple materials combined together has created a space rich in meaning and a union of the whole without cultural divisions: from Brazilian park benches and Armenian picnic areas to the cast iron waste baskets of Great Britain; from the climbing structure of India, to the ping-pong tables of Spain, to the swings of Iraq. All these elements make it possible to mend a part of the city and make space available that otherwise would have remained empty

and unused, rendering it magnetic and appealing at the same time. The black area is designed to be a relaxing space. Lebanese cedars and Japanese cherry trees shade the bike paths, and it is possible to stop and park your bike in racks provided by Norway. To give a relaxing air to the area fountains from Morocco and tables and benches from Brazil and Belgium (respectively) have been included, where it is possible to spend time with board games. Furthermore, Superkilen hosts a public ring where you can practice Thai boxing, spaces with gym equipment from the Santa Monica pier in California, bike paths, a typical Jamaican sound system or in the Next Up: a bowl-shaped, concrete basketball court.

Fig. 2 - Copenaghen, Urban Park "Superkilen".

And once again, you can find the revolving benches found in Baghdad, the typical Blackpool waste bins (a British seaside town), or the huge donut-shaped neon light. In short, Superkilen represents the maximum expression of Danish multiculturalism, hosting objects, structures and urban furnishings from practically all over the world: an excellent model of urban public park planning, among the most original created in Europe.

3 - BOLINGEN: a road turns into an urban living room

In the spring of 2015, in the German city of Böblingen - known for its automotive and IT industries - the Bahnhofstrasse road network was redesigned; a very busy road that leads from the train station to the city center. The artery was converted into a new backbone for public and recreational space for the community, becoming an urban living room that is elegant and attractive thanks to the regular greenery, the modular wooden furniture and the circular hanging lamps that are comparable to UFOs(fig. 3).

Fig. 3 - Bolingen, Bahnhofstrasse redevelopment

It is a place where you can take a leisurely stroll, go shopping, discover traces of the historic city, stop, enjoy yourself and have fun. The long strip, about 1.8 hectares, is closed by red brick facades and glass and steel office buildings and shopping centers. The inclusion of quality elements and ad hoc furnishings give the area a new identity whose maximum inflow can reach up to 35,000 commuters a day. Beyond the clean and linear design are the suspended annular luminaires; the pixel flooring made with Iberian stone slabs; the street furniture in ash wood, characterized by long benches; the single rotating seats; the inserts – made of prefabricated concrete and printed upon with a photolithographic technique that tells the history of the city. People are encouraged to discover traces of the old city and willingly stop even outside office hours. In particular, the Elben square, known as one of the busiest junctions in Böblingen, was designed at the same height as the new road. Bahnhofstrasse is configured, following its redevelopment, as a typical example of how it is possible to transform a busy city artery into a place of discovery and knowledge.

4 - MADRID RIO: AN URBAN PARK IN THE CENTER OF THE SPANISH CAPITAL

The Madrid Rìo is a park born from an urban redevelopment action in the Spanish capital, between 2003 and 2007 and inaugurated in 2011, which involved burying part of the M-30, an arterial road bypass built in the '70s parallel to the Manzanares river (fig. 4). In 2005 a competition of ideas was announced for the reuse of the areas freed by the burial of the ring road. These were the years before the economic collapse of 2008, when Spain was in full growth and, in addition to the numerous examples of building speculation, was also investing in projects to restore public areas. The winning project included new green spaces that would wind along the 10 kilometers of the Manzanares. In this way, contact between the river and the population was restored, recreating the connection, sacrificed for decades by the M-30, between the northern and south-eastern part of Madrid, in a fairly central area of the city, not far from the Segovia Bridge, the Royal Palace and the Almudena Cathedral. The Park is divided into a wide variety of spaces and the main green areas are: the Huerta de la Partida, the orchards of the Royal Palace (proposed in a modern key with the addition of a wide range of new species), and the Arganzuela park (whose morphology is designed with alternating homogeneous areas of tree species with intertwining, wide, curved pedestrian paths, which reflect the flow of the river and is also recalled in the numerous water features).

The main public spaces, built recently or previously, are in turn connected by the Salòn de Pinos, a green corridor aligned with the now buried ring road and reanimated by 8000 newly planted pines. At the same time the two city and park edges are connected again thanks to the

restoration of historic bridges – such as the Segovia, Toledo and La Reina – flanked by the dense system of new pedestrian and cycle bridges.

The success of the park is however conferred by the endowment of numerous services, which include areas equipped for sports activities, skate parks, play areas for children (made of natural materials and divided according to different age groups), as well as the elimination of physical barriers for the elderly and disabled, access to the area via low-floor bus lines, the presence of tactile, visual and sound signals, and the use of different materials in the pedestrian paths to signal an intersection or a point of interest. In summary, the project represents a reversal of the trend towards the widespread diffusion of speculative practices whose past social and economic effects have been devastating.

Fortunately, the Madrid administration succeeded in creating a contrasting model of land management that has allowed the redevelopment of entire urban plots.

Before   After

Fig. 4 - Madrid Rio, Urban Parck

5 - The Porta Nuova project in Milan: an urban by-pass

The Porta Nuova project, approved in 2004, is the largest urban redevelopment ever carried out in the heart of Milan which transformed about 290,000 square meters of abandoned areas and involved 8 designers of different nationalities. The objective of the project is centered around the idea of generating a new sociality for degraded parts of the city through a new spatial perception in continuity with the historical tradition of the Milanese gates. The landscape intervention, inserted within a broader redevelopment operation that is both public and private, covered the entire design chain, from the concept to the creation of open spaces. The Porta Nuova project was articulated as a sort of urban by-pass, linking the quarters of Garibaldi, Isola and Varesine (fig.5) that were previously separated. The project proposal, billing itself as the longest promenade in the city, has proved to be of fundamental importance from an urban point of view as a hinge between different neighborhoods and a device capable of revealing a new part of the city, as well as from a social point of view. In fact, today it is a place that is loved by its citizens. The redevelopment of Porta Nuova is considered to be the natural expansion of the existing neighborhoods and aims to relate the history and identity of each of them through a qualitative implementation of public spaces, new squares, pedestrian paths and parks for the community.

All this was made possible thanks to the development of refined solutions both at an environmental and a technological level. Is therefore an example of successful redevelopment and re-appropriation of public spaces.

Fig. 5 – Milan, Porta Nuova

CONCLUSIONS

The examples illustrated above describe paths of regeneration of public spaces undertaken in countries and regions with different histories, traditions, customs and traditions, but with a common goal: improving the quality of life of citizens (Cilona, 2015). These cities created different urban regeneration projects thanks to civic leadership, the foresight of administrators sensitive to the subject, and the commitment of cultural associations and individual citizens trying to improve the urban spaces in which they live. Public spaces are a very important part of the city and their development makes them more livable and attractive and the examples shown in this study demonstrate it. For these reasons, they are considered a great resource for the city rather than places of conflict.

Note
1   - The map of public space has been approved during the work of the 2nd Public Space Biennial (Rome, 16-18 May 2013) - in line with the European Landscape Convention and the United Nations Programme for Human Settlements (UN-Habitat).
2   - The data are the result of a survey carried out in 2013 on a number of residents stratified by gender, age group, territorial distribution and size of the municipality to which they belong.

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