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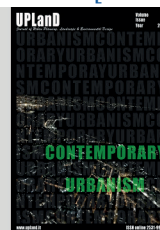
Learning from the informal and temporary use of public space.

From bottom-up tactics to adaptive strategies of medium-term projects

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Highlights

- Bottom-up tactics and temporary use of the city
- Making public space lighter, quicker, cheaper
- Risks of the city "on demand"
- Adaptive strategies of urban regeneration

Abstract

The paper deals with the theme of the temporary uses of public space related to bottom-up actions, with the aim of obtaining adaptive and resilient strategies for planning and designing the contemporary city which is currently characterized by uncertainty and scarcity of resources.

A literature review of tactical urbanism will help investigating the contingent requests behind these actions, with the aim of understanding whether the proposed models are enough effective to provide an answer to the citizens' needs or if we can, at least, derive useful information from these self-organized models in terms of use of public spaces and socio-spatial relationships in the contemporary city.

On the other side, the paper reflects on the risk of a possible ideological drift towards a model of "city on demand", related to episodic urban transformations not supported by a wider vision.

The paper prospects a complementarity of top-down strategies, planned from above, and bottom-up tactics, identifying a possible synergy in the intermediate scale of urban regeneration projects.

Overcoming the idea of a "populist" urbanism, which sees the uselessness of the urban planner, we try to define a new role of the urban designer as a strategist, who has the ability to prefigure scenarios as well as to configure inclusive spaces for people.

1. THE TEMPORARY CITY

The idea of "temporary city" (Bishop & William, 2012), linked to the temporary use of urban areas (Haydn & Temel, 2006), is subversive and fascinating at the same time. For many years the models proposed for "the city of the future" by architects and urban planners have been absolutist models, suggesting a unique visions of development: the "Ville Radieuse", the "Broadacre city", the "Garden city", or the contemporary "smart city" are representative examples of this vision.

The temporary/flexible city, on the other hand, does not aim at proposing a univocal model, but is based on an adaptive logic, largely influenced by the existing conditions and has as its only certainty the lack of certainties. The temporary city finds no basis in the final result and in well-defined urban structures, but rather in the decision-making process.

Temporariness of use presupposes reversibility, flexibility and opening to the unexpected. The city flexible to changes and adaptable to transient uses seems to be an effective response, in this times of crises, to the serious problems generated by the great urban transformations of the modern and contemporary city: including soil consumption created by speculative expansion, abandonment of urban areas, shrinkage of suburbs due to process of deindustrialization and depopulation.

Public space, in this context, plays a decisive role in hosting temporary uses, related to occasional events and activities. Musical concerts, cultural events, village festivals and universal exhibitions, transform cities for short periods, with anomalous public inflows compared to the ordinary attendance of the same places.

Temporariness of use of urban spaces is often linked to bottom-up actions including spontaneous and sometimes extemporaneous movements that involve groups of citizens, who become protagonists of urban transformations. Think of certain phenomena that have occurred on the urban scene in recent years, from activists of guerrilla gardening, to artistic movements in public space, to the redevelopment of public areas by urban collectives and groups of active citizenship.

Starting from a discussion on the informal uses of public space, the essay considers the possibility of transforming bottom-up (adaptive and resilient) tactics into urban regeneration strategies assisted from above.

2. BOTTOM-UP TACTICS AND INFORMAL USE OF PUBLIC SPACE

2.1 Tactical urbanism

The "temporary city" in its meaning of reversible action on public space proposed from below, stands as a sustainable model of the city. The idea of foreseeing something not definitive and permanent in the urban context, which can evolve and transform itself, seems to be a necessary remedy for urban transformations, being sometimes too invasive and harmful in the past, leaving an irreversible mark on the territory.

The temporary and informal city is based on small-scale low-cost interventions, on cooperative and shared actions, which try to give adaptive answers to local issues, promoting more general themes related to sustainable living in the contemporary city: from the reactivation of degraded spaces, to greening the city, to pedestrian and urban cycling, etc.

Diverse scientific publications have consecrated and exalted the positive and proactive values of tactical urbanism, (Garcia, Lyndon, 2015) and of temporary urbanism (Bishop & William, 2012), presenting a review of case studies, successful actions and tactics replicable in other contexts such as "Short term action for long-term change".

Such tactics, made famous by the literature on the temporary uses of public space, can be critically examined to infer design strategies for the contemporary city.

Some tactics, aimed at creating a vibrant and diversified urban environment introduce new uses and functions in urban space, such as pop-up shops, restaurants, cultural spaces, as well as elements of street furniture, vegetation and attractive spaces for pedestrians.

The "Better Block project" (Dallas, 2010) proposed the recovery of an abandoned area through a bottom-up action, operating initially without the municipal authorizations on the change of use, creating a neighborhood with mixed uses and an active ground floor.

Similarly, the "San Francisco's PROXI project" introduces shipping containers to allocate services open to the public in a residential area, thanks to a temporary license for 5 years on vacant lots of government property, while the builders were stationary due to the recession. As often happens with temporary projects, the success of the project makes the temporary artefacts stay long-lasting.

Other projects operate only on the pedestrian sidewalk. The "Pavement to Plaza" or "Pavement to Parks" tactic, used in San Francisco since 2008, has transformed parking spaces, unused road spaces, in public squares; furthermore in the same city it has been tried to convert parking spaces along some streets in "urban parklet", as extensions of the pedestrian sidewalk, favoring the pausing of pedestrians in small furnished spaces.

The "chair bombing" tactic promotes an increase in urban furnishing to make urban spaces more comfortable and usable, compensating for the scarce endowment of benches in urban spaces with self-construction of seats.

The 2009 "Viva Vancuver" project introduces a series of undulating pop-up parks and temporary sits enriching the urban scene and creating more playful and comfortable spaces for pedestrians.

On the pedestrian and cycling theme are focused the tactics of "parking day", as much as "Play street", or even the "Guerriglia byking", which provides the tracing of unauthorized cycle paths painting lines on the road and even pedestrian crossings ("Zebra crossing").

There are other actions operating in the public space aimed at favouring public engagement through the introduction of secondary temporary activities, such as street vendors, food tracks, street fair, cultural or artistic events.

Figure 1:   Park(ing) day. *Source: Iomarch (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) via Flickr.*

2.2 Placemaking and self-construction

"Placemaking" is another word widely used to define the construction of public space through the participation of the local community and (sometimes) through self-construction, in a temporary and flexible dimension.

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) website advocates, in this sense, a systematic dissemination campaign on placemaking, supporting citizens and communities in transforming the public space of their cities into vital and participated places, according to a lighter, quicker, cheaper strategy (LQC), which provides for reversible, light, fast and cheap interventions.

From the season of "participation" we have moved on to the more democratic (or revolutionary, depending on your point of view) season of "sharing" and "self-building". Many citizens, when the crisis hit, have decided to act personally, often compensating the inaction of the Administrations.

Non-profit cultural associations, active citizenship movements, non-governmental organizations dealing with culture, citizens who are committed to protecting the places in which they live, proliferated in these years. Participation in something that was offered from above is turning into a form of proposal from below.

Several experiences of self-construction of public space have become exemplary, such as that of the urban collective Collectif Etc. Place au Changement (Saint Etienne 2011), which has transformed a void of the urban fabric placed in a street corner, into a living space, built with the help of the inhabitants. The young architects of the Collectif Etc left in 2012 for a bicycle Detour de France, creating ephemeral, self-made and low-cost works among the major French cities, also passing through Brussels and Barcelona. The working method of the French Collective is not unlike that of many other similar movements: they weave relationships with public administrations, collaborate with other local associations and groups, animate debates, involve intellectuals, creatives and citizens in their works.

What is really interesting in these low cost and self-construction projects is the temporary, flexible and reversible dimension of the project. In Saint Etienne, citizens continued to transform the place in the years after 2011, interacting with the designers of the Collectif and other groups of artists, giving new characterizations and meanings to the place.

3.   Discussion

3.1   Learning from LQC approach

Tactical urbanism, guerilla urbanism, DIY (Do it yourself) urbanism, pop-up urbanism, placemaking, all are experiences of active participation in the construction of the city through low-cost, reversible and temporary interventions. They are expression of a right to the city, a desire to take back public space and to reconstruct the sense of local community.

The common denominator of these low-cost urban redevelopment actions, with bottom-up tactics, is to encourage the construction of places that are vital for people, albeit in the temporal dimension of the intervention.

For citizens is more relevant to have "places" to meet people (Whyte, 1980), rather than "designed" urban spaces without social content. Human activities taking place in public space become part of the project, which have to include the choreography of people moving in the space itself (Gehl, 2010). The project is today called to redesign the existing (Clemente, 2017), intervening with a light hand, which interprets the places, corroborating the formal contents with those of social relations. The construction of public space from the bottom favors the achievement of these objectives, because it subverts the order of things, focusing on human capital, on activities open to the public and on social content.

The lighter, quicker, cheaper (LQC) approach to which the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) website refers has a series of winning ingredients that are particularly effective in the contemporary context, which can be used as useful principles and operational strategies for interventions in the city.

The principle of "lightness", which is reminiscent of Calvino's American lessons, should inspire a strategy that provides flexibility already from the beginning, or the possibility to practice different activities according to the seasons and adaptability to the changes that might occur in the future.

As for "speed", we can say that the project should have an effective idea, immediately usable in the present, in completely different times compared to those in which architecture and urban planning have traditionally implemented urban transformations, perhaps after 20 years, when the community that desired and promoted it perhaps no longer exists. Speed therefore means "real time" of change, an immediate response to the needs of the

Figure 2:   Periphery of Bari, Japigia district. "Salotto urbano", initiative by the group Xscape. *Source: courtesy of Xscape Associazione Culturale.*

community, and therefore also interaction with the community itself in the construction process. The cost-effectiveness of the intervention (cheaper) is synonymous with sustainability, ecology, saving of energy and resources. Moreover low cost does not necessarily mean low quality, which instead depends on the ability of the designer, on the strategy implemented and on the effectiveness of the realization.

3.2   Risks of the city on demand

The temporary use of public space through bottom-up actions has represented, in the current lack of economic resources, a way to express the needs of building places for the community, beyond urban plans and major urban transformation projects. On the other hand, even the city that is activated "on demand" to respond to contingent and temporary needs presents its limits and its criticalities.

Leaving aside the case of temporary uses of urban space due to festivals, events and special occasions but still planned from above, the temporary city that is activated with bottom-up tactics has, first of all, a problem of legitimation.

Many temporary "tactical activism" practices often arise in a potentially illegal and punishable situation, in a climate of tension with local administrations (Kitsinger, 2014), which are then diluted by the consensus that the local press usually gives to

them.

Designing a cycle path without prior authorization and without a project, could expose cyclists and pedestrians to the risk of collision with cars and the administration cannot escape the responsibility of governing the use of public space.

Social practices cannot therefore be a derogation of the Public Administrations in their political responsibilities in the management of the territory and public services to the citizens.

The principle of "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1991; Stickells, 2012) must be guaranteed from above, avoiding that spontaneous intervention may also involve the involuntary exclusion of someone, beyond the democratic methods used by activist movement to involve residents.

Many authors have also expressed skepticism regarding the possibility that pop-up landscapes can lead to the achievement of long-term goals in the urban context still strongly directed by the development of real estate (Schaller & Guinand, 2018). Moreover, short and quick interventions risk to be as temporary as to result ephemeral and not to solve the real problems of the urban context, not to give adequate answers and provide necessary public services.

The risk is that we move from the idea of the "mending" to which Renzo Piano refers, aimed at mending tears in the urban or social fabric, to that of the "patch", aimed at putting a piece to hide a hole, without actually posing shelter from structural problems of the contemporary city.

We can state that the temporary interventions, which may have a preventive utility of people engagement in the urban space (Sawhney, de Klerk & Malhotra, 2015), in order to have more lasting efficacy, must be included in a strategic framework and be legitimized by local administrations.

The creative district in the port area of Amsterdam NDSM Werf, a famous example of disused artefact

Figure 3:   Portlanders enjoy an urban living room on the street. *Source: Kai.bates (CC BY-NC 2.0) via Flickr.*

occupied "illegally" by artists and creatives, has been able to survive within a legitimacy given by a concession of use for 25 years.

Similarly, the temporary uses of urban space in Berlin have been exploited in economic development policies and in official marketing strategies of the city, promoting a more general discourse in Berlin as a "creative city" (Colomb, 2012).

3.3 Medium-term strategy opportunities

The bottom-up actions, although characterized by different intentions -sometimes political-demonstrative, of social claim, other times linked to artistic events, or more oriented to the project of the public city- are all of great interest both for designers and for those who administer the cities (Finn, 2014).

Furthermore, the bottom-up approach in the urban space, as well as the various websites that promote initiatives for people involvement, have often remained beautiful stories to tell, which have left weak traces and have not be transformed into longer-term strategies for the city by Administrations and planners. Nor can we think that the "tactics", which manifest themselves in episodic and local interventions, can be taken tout court as a method to solve at low cost more complex problems of the city.

It is therefore necessary to frame the tactical approach in a wider strategic vision; that is to transform the tactical urbanism from empirical praxis to an institutionalized modality for urban regeneration.

De Certau (1984) explored the difference between tactics and strategies. The tactics refer to an isolated action, which often arise as a "polemic" reaction to an enemy (the bureaucracy? The system?), as micro-devices, responses to contingent circumstances, referring back to the everyday life. The strategies refer to a large-scale vision and prospect for a more lasting future.

Even though the traditional urban plan has failed to prefigure too ambitious scenarios; as well as it does not seem possible yet to be able to change the Urban Planning Law in Italy (until 1942), there is still much that could be done, in our opinion, at the level of strategic planning to reconcile the demands expressed at a local level in a government perspective (Alberti, Scamporrino, Rizzo, 2016). I am thinking of the integrated programs of inter-vention, the various PRUSST (urban regeneration programs and sustainable development of the territory), the PIRU (Integrated Urban Regeneration Programs) and all the strategic instruments that allow interstitial interventions in the cities, starting from the public space and from public services. With contracted and participatory planning, it is possible to introduce into existing fabrics, for example, private services, retail stores in the pilots plans, even temporary pop-up cafe containers, to reactivate pedestrian flows in the public space, demolishing the fences that make these places as gated communities. The successful tactics described by Lyndon could thus become good practices that can be exported to "institutional" revitalization projects for dormitory neighborhoods in urban suburbs.

The financial support can come to the Municipalities from funds by the European Community, or from regional POR-FESR programs, which promote Sustainable Urban Development Strategies (SUS). Additionally, without substantial modifications to the general urban planning instruments, the Municipalities can apply specific exceptions on the reuse of disused assets to introduce cultural, social, recreational and exhibition destinations in favor of non-profit associations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, bottom-up tactics that introduce temporary uses of public space can be a great opportunity for planners and citizens to collaborate on local projects; but they can have real effectiveness if they assume a complementary character with respect to coordinated top-down actions.

It seems that little has been done yet to transform this anthology of good practices into legitimate and planned actions of urban transformation, letting these spontaneous and informal manifestations move in a way that is at the limit of legality, sometimes transcending into vandalism. The uncertainty about the timing of flexible interventions, should not also become uncertainty of the right of transformations (albeit temporary) of the city.

We must avoid the "Do It Yourself Urbanism", in promoting the people's demands in urban transformations (Douglas G., 2014), ends up taking a "populist urbanism" drift, which proclaims the absence of technicians and planners, de-legitimizing the role of the designer.

In fact, from an evolutionary perspective (Boonstra, Bolens, 2011), urban planning tactics can be considered as self-organizing processes (Silva, 2016), or cooperative processes without hierarchical organization, in which the designer / planner can assume the role of "strategist".

The design process should establish a dialectical relationship with the informal processes and human actions present in the urban space. In the absence of this dialogical relationship, according to Lefebvre, there can be no "creative capacity" to interpret space by the community (Lefebvre, 1991). The urban designer / urban planner, in an evolutionary perspective, could play the role of the enzyme in the urban organism, or as a strategic coordinator of design and social processes, between temporary bottom-up tactics and flexible medium-term strategies.

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