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Infill public spaces: Prompt, low-cost and participatory interventions on residual urban areas

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PAPER ABSTRACT. Against a backdrop of crisis and austerity, of debates over direct democracy and social justice, of emergence of alternative economies and credit systems, it is necessary to think over the traditional relationship among professionals, citizens and institutions. For this purpose it can be helpful to extend the notion of Open Building to the public space range and widen the view on it. Open Building is not conceived as the end of architects design research, but as a halfway point interposed in two stages enhancing its capacities: a preceding participative process and a following urban self-building action. This intersection produces a proactive citizenship, able to discuss on public spaces as commons and to work on them using new kind of currencies based on both equity and reward models. To overcome the risk of neoliberal drifts, usually linked to informal management of urban spaces, it is necessary to increase citizens ability in co-managing and maintaining the public space as well as in promoting and enabling small-scale urban acts aimed to patch urban fabrics otherwise weakened by voids of meaning even before than by absences of services or infrastructures. New models of planning, conveyed to identify and strengthen alternative ways to shape our cities, can go beyond the worn ways of producing public space, embracing makeshift actions to build common grounds.

KEYWORDS: participation, open building, self-building, urban acupuncture, tactical urbanism

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1 Introduction

Contemporary cities are networks in which needs and contingencies flow uninterruptedly, overwriting urban fabric and defining relationships whenever original between events, potentialities and possibilities within settlement systems becoming increasingly complex[1]. Very many factors – expected or unexpected, planned or improvised, permanent or temporary, intentional or incidental – arise, through multidimensional urban scenarios which embrace both the physical and spatial realm as well as the political, socio-economic and legal one.

Pursuing their daily aims inhabitants exercise, consciously or not, their ability to adapt and change the

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[1] Colin McFarlane, 'The City as Assemblage: Dwelling and Urban Space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 3 June 2011.

relational environment, fitting in a creative way within the dynamics and policies of city life, in ways that are beyond the tools of conventional design and configuring hybrid scenarios in which the distinction between technical and amateur, between formal and informal, is far from clear[2].

As Kevin Lynch remarked, the city manifests itself more and more clearly as «the product of countless operators which, for specific reasons, are constantly changing the structure [...] controls to which its growth and its shape are only partially susceptible. There is no final result, only a continuous succession of phases»[3].

The societal changes involve, over relatively long time scales, modifications to the urban fabrics. However some transformations, which today are of indubitable consistency, are increasingly representative of immediate social relationships between individuals belonging to big or small groups, more or less structured and organized and relationships between different groups where interests occasionally converge on specific issues. These relationships, according to Henri Lefebvre, are attributable to the size of the near order[4]. It is essential that culture, institutions and the same codes that support them, will project into a practical sensitive reality – legitimized by participating in it – and will understand its real character because, although the city arises through objects and forms which are easily recognizable, the settlements production, and the social relations in which it takes place, is a production and reproduction of highly contaminable identities: «The city is and remains the object, but its objecthood is like that of language which people and groups receive, and then modify»[5]. We are faced with a composite reality in which relationships have to be elaborated, constructed, reconstructed and contaminated as a product of many factors that are constantly changing the structure and triggering a succession of phases that never comes to an end.

In this context it is necessary to reflect on how design culture, which shaped modern and contemporary cities, has gradually replaced the meaning of inhabiting with the idea of carrying out activities within hyper-specialized building and spaces, designed to minimize the non-functional moments widely deemed as dissipative. This deformation is not only unnatural, but also absolutely harmful because, as Augustine also argues, even if a body alternately moves and stands still, we measure with time not only its movement, but also its stasis.

Streets, for example, are chosen by Saskia Sassen as paradigmatic public spaces, affected by a *de-ritualization* and ingrained with codes of *what they are used for*: pedestrians have lost control of the street and the right to create their own culture there due to an *overdetermination* of functions, adopted nowadays everywhere.[6] An idea of design that gives priority only to issues of functional nature cannot take into account the fact that the same places perceived as spaces of lost of time are indeed places with a huge potential: *silent places* where find the instruments for the realization of "*habitare*". The same places in which there is a momentary condition of equality that *per se* does not exist elsewhere, but can only appear at moments when our trajectories meet in public spaces[7].

The idea of an *organic* built environment expressed by Habraken is still deeply rooted in this scenario where the inhabitants role is increasingly raised from the mere condition of statistical data to the status of *people taking action* in urban fabrics, not conceived as forms produced by design, but rather as *being designed fields*[8]. Users become serious partners and catalysts of a «use- and process-oriented form of urban development»[9] setting processes in motion that can be observed as forward projections and from which new insights can be gained and integrated in further planning activities.

In this context architects have to continuously discuss about how and why their participation in a process,

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[2] Fran Tonkiss, *Cities by Design: The Social Life of Urban Form* (United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2013).
[3] Kevin Lynch, *L'immagine Della Città* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2006).
[4] Henri Lefebvre, *Il Diritto Alla Città* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2014).
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, 'PUBLIC SPACE / Shared Spaces with Saskia Sassen (OV Es Subt En)' (Vimeo), accessed 10 March 2015, https://vimeo.com/121450482.
[7] *Ibid.* "public space is *one* place, a moment in complex trajectories in which equality can appears. Equality does not exist. It exists as a momentary condition in public transports, in a square, in a street […]" trad. by authors from Spanish.
[8] N. John Habraken, 'Cultivating the Field: About an Attitude When Making Architecture', *Places* 9 (1994): 8–21.
[9] Philipp Oswalt, Klaus Övermeyer, and Philipp Misselwitz, *Urban Catalyst: The Power of Temporary Use* (Berlin: Dom Pub, 2013).

which mainly proceeds independently, is needed. As Jamie Lerner argues «sometimes, a simple, focused intervention can create new energy, demonstrating the possibilities of a space in a way that motivates others to engage with their community»[10]. Through an approach to architectural design and city planning conceived to make good things happen, new professionals can have a key role in the achievement of a public sphere where citizens, institutions and environment intertwine in a self-sustainable[11] condition of interdependency.

2 Tracking Urban Hackers Profile

Cities consist of a physical structure, but – as already mentioned – are primarily a set of built and not built forms, of phenomena and configurations which are more or less stable, according to which urban projects cannot be designed to end users but only for users in time: since all urban occupations are temporary. They must be able to sustain its debasement, or crossbreeding, maintaining its dignity in coexistence however unprecedented. Contemporary settlements tend to a more and more representative state of collisions and confluences that feed them. It is at this point that theoretical fundamentals of the modern city crumble, bringing out the new perspective of a post-city under construction on the site of the ex-city[12]. The spaces, which are being degraded under neoliberal urbanism, could be seen as «anchors for an alternative vision of the city as a ground of common life and collective self-management»[13]. In this framework, the site of a design intervention is viewed as a *commons*, a space of continuous, collective appropriation and transformation by its users.

Nowadays we need spaces where you can easily abandon what survives to ones own use. In this sense it may be useful to translate the concept of open building to the scale of the residual public space. It can represent the halfway point interposed in two stages enhancing its capacities: a preceding participatory process and a following urban appropriation action through interpretable and implementable self-build platforms.

Citizen's participation in urban political processes has been gradually eroded in the last decade's experiences: people are always more unselfish and faraway from urban designing processes due to a shift from an idea of urbanization benefitting the many into models of urban profit for the very few. New professionals can improve an idea of architecture seen as «a political field and a cognitive system that can enable the "public" to access complexity, building collective capacity for political agency and action at local scales»[14]. To achieve this goal it is necessary a deep reflection on how delivering architecture into people's hands. Therefore, merging the two fundamental steps of architecture, designing and building, is a chance to restore people's interest and enthusiasm to call to account their *right to the city*[15], participating in shaping it. Harnessing new technologies to enhance communication and dialogue, new architectural participatory practices activate processes that can generate concrete solutions to the pressing needs of a community, introducing a new way to experience the city that puts people in a condition to establish mutual relations over shared programs and strategies.

Participatory processes and their results can be translated into ethical designing processes, aimed at identifying new values and relationships, at capturing and interpreting diseases, disorders and symptoms of urban contexts which are measured by flushing public space of the high relationship quality between physical environment and social environment[16]. Democratic participation in the configuration of representative spaces of life that takes place, produces spaces which belong to, are identified with, and are taken care of, by the community. The active role of citizens allows the rearrangement of relations around the collective space and the transformation of all aspects of urban life according to an innovative process of emancipation that restores the democratic right to influence public decisions, passing through the conquest of tools, spaces and opportunities of comparison. Furthermore, nobody knows citizens' needs better than citizens themselves. Even if users have different habits and interests, and it is almost impossible to find a solution that fits

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[10] Jaime Lerner, *Urban Acupuncture* (United States: Island Press, 2014).

[11] Alberto Magnaghi, *Il Progetto Locale. Verso La Coscienza Di Luogo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010).

[12] Rem Koolhaas, *Junkspace* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2006).

[13] Neil Brenner, 'Is "Tactical Urbanism" an Alternative to Neoliberal Urbanism?', *Post at MoMa*, accessed 30 March 2015, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/587-is-tactical-urbanism-an-alternative-to-neoliberal-urbanism.

[14] Teddy Cruz, 'Rethinking Uneven Growth: It's About Inequality, Stupid', in *Uneven Growth: Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities*, ed. Pedro Gadanho (United States: Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

[15] Henri Lefebvre, cfr. *supra*, footnote n.4.

[16] Augustin Berque, *Médiance de Milieux En Paysages* (Paris: Belin, 2000).

everybody, people need to meet together. Public space can be the common ground where everyone can satisfy the abovementioned need of reciprocity, finding different tools to please their own individual preferences.

It is interesting to understand how to introduce different decision levels in the configuration process of new urban settings, which investigate the urban fabric sphere, considered as a first level support to the project which in turn, represents a second level support for users' interventions aimed to modify and adapt the open platform to many uses. In this process the definition of the degrees of freedom that each level must guarantee to others is crucially important to assure them flexibility, adaptability, intensification and systematization over time[17]. Each host space can be strategically interconnected with others and owns infill projects with different lifecycles that configure a flexible and "for parts" editable environment, that better fit the specific and changing needs of inhabitants. The urban project has, in this way, an eminently processual character: it is an adequate summary of common programs, not only because it is shared, but also because it is open to renewal and to continue discussion. The classical planning methods are in this way turned upside down: «instead of first achieving an accumulation of building volumes and than renting space to users, […] a gradually increasing concentration of activities, programs and networks little by little begin to express themselves in constructional terms as well»[18].

In this strategy participatory processes represent a way to improve an active citizenship, collaborating with institutions and professionals and working together as *city makers* able to implement and modify public spaces in order to make them strategically fit to contingencies and needs. Low-profile transformations of small parts of urban fabric can substantially change a scenario, and self-build solutions are the way of doing it rapidly and in a manner that is economically sustainable. Self-building interventions trigger processes that can redefine relationships between people and things leading to rediscover an idea of building oriented to the conformation of a social fabric in harmony with the spaces it faces. This practice, if oriented to the improvement of urban relational fabric, can involve a wide range of actors by enhancing their proactive attitude through an incremental process where it is possible to progressively achieve micro-programs implementing direct and localized actions. In this way, citizens can prepare themselves for an extended debate, aimed to systematize proximal areas complying with the nature of the urban fabric in which, as is well known, nothing is experienced individually but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences events leading up to its creation, and to the memory of previous experiences[19]. Self-construction is a stimulating opportunity to experiment with new methods of urban design on a scale of 1:100. It is in this perspective that self-building can be useful in a wider sense embracing the sphere of planning instruments. Planning strategies should combine hard and soft tools to integrate short- and long-term actions in order to catalyze actions of urban overwriting through unfinished state and transitory situations[20].

3 Case Study: UPDATE #03 the new La Larga Park

The case study illustrates how an expanded vision of design — as a set of combined capacities for spatial intervention, social empowerment, and fresh policies — can contribute to the ongoing research for alternative urbanisms.

The new *La Larga Park* of Provezze, in Brescia district, has been designed as an open urban platform on which citizens can stratify common living solutions. The municipality, who funded the project, chose as intervention area a 3200 square meters *friche* in a recently urbanized neighborhood where the lack of common spaces represented an issue for the inhabitants. The project was designed and realized according to "UPDATE Urban Upgrading Processes" rules and it represents the conclusion of a six months process directed by sa.und.sa architects in collaboration with local institutions, citizens, associations, schools and architecture students from many European countries.

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[17] N. John Habraken, cfr. *supra*, footnote n.8.
[18] Philipp Oswalt, Klaus Overmeyer, and Philipp Misselwitz, cfr. supra, footnote n.9.
[19] Kevin Lynch, cfr. *supra*, footnote n.3.
[20] Philipp Oswalt, Klaus Overmeyer, and Philipp Misselwitz, cfr. supra, footnote n.9.

Fig.1. First phase of design with students during the workshop week.

During the first month an outreach campaign was conducted to gather citizens' interests on the area and IT platforms were implemented to report all the steps of the participatory process. In the following months public hearings, neighborhood meetings, surveys and design games were carried out to involve citizens in shaping a common vision of their own relational space. All data collected during the first phase of the participatory process were analyzed, processed and reported in a design strategy, later accounted in a public meeting. Responding to citizens' desire to use the area during an all year timeframe, twenty *Ginkgo Biloba* (deciduous trees) have been planted in order to provide both cool shadow and warm sunshine depending on seasonal conditions. To fully grasp the potentialities of public space within a neighborhood consisting mainly of young families, the project focuses on the place of children in public space.

Centered around a pre-existing pathway, the newly defined areas in the park are each characterized by their own spatial vocabulary. A new playground, consisting of linear objects to climb, pass, cross or hang, generates "controlled challenges" where the child can surpass himself, dealing with obstacles and perceptions of insecurity but always in such a way that access to these obstacles is safe and child-friendly. Across the pathway, a composition of planes defines a more static area creating an almost infinite diversity of situations, formal and informal, of being alone or together, on display or isolated, with company or with the landscape.

While distinct in nature, both areas remain versatile and open to a wide array of uses. The playground space allows informal situations of child surveillance. The planar area can be climbed on, jumped over, or used as a stage by both children and adults. From seating in an urban living room to staging an exhibition space, from working out to playing: there is no indoctrination on the use of space, only favorable conditions. Citizens are invited and challenged to invent their own ways of inhabiting the park.
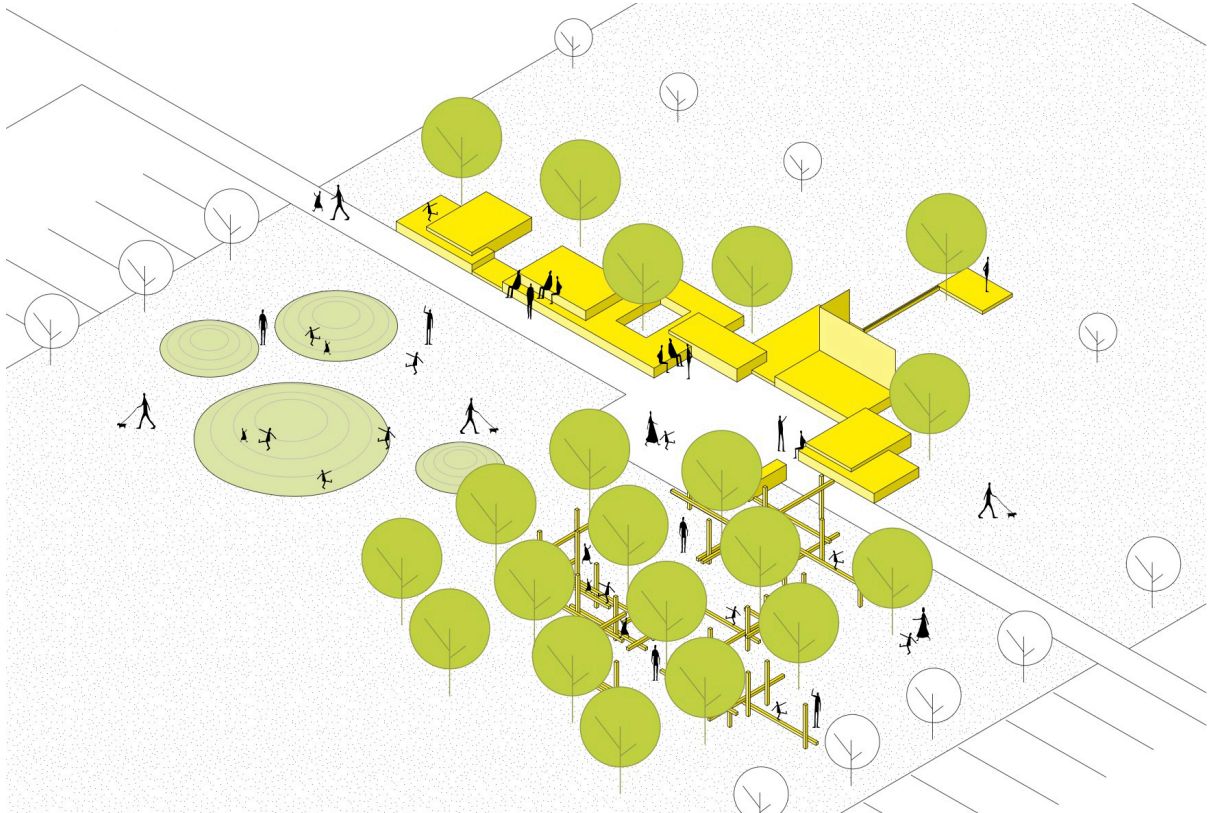
Fig.2. New La Larga Park plan.

Many utilizations have been detected in the later months; it was interesting to discover how the area has been modified again and again for temporary uses. The preexisting structure of pillars in the playground, for example, has been implemented with swings. In the same area, during exhibits and performances, several kinds of panels - rigid or swinging, opaque or translucent - have been fixed in different ways to the linear elements, shaping always new atmospheres and places as stages, settings and paths. A "shadows ballet" was organized only one week after the park inauguration by a local cultural association, to promote the beginning of their annual activities in the neighborhood. In the opposite side, the wooden wall became a support for a summer open-air cinema, simply by covering it with a white cloth.

Team working on a project founded on citizens' consensus and a flexible and adaptable co-use of public space based on a plural and permissive approach, fosters new inhabitants attitudes to co-operating within common rules and partaking to keep it alive over time.

Fig.3. A view from playground to relational area.

Fig.4. The playground area.

4 Conclusions

A hacker is "a person who delights in having an intimate understanding of the internal workings of a system"[21]. The combination of creative play and restriction-free exploration defines the field of hacking in which the attitude of adhering to an ethic of sharing, openness, decentralization, free access to information and improvement of quality of life is continuously fostered.

In the case study presented, as in Habraken's model, architects gave a pattern and inhabitants implemented on it their own idea of park. It is finally an architecture led by users, interactive, allowing improvement and changing in various time scales. Through the design and systematization of small site-specific interventions on urban fabric it is possible to provide the typical conditions for a progressive development based on compensative logics: the community participate in the editing of a *repertoire* of design solutions that can represent – within an incremental logic – a chart of coherent and efficient strategies for every phase and scale of the urban growth. It is furthermore important to consider that experimenting through the touch and working on the improvement of productive gestures, is a technical transition where a kind of rationality, filled of edifying implications, emerges[22]. Citizens' ability in co-managing and maintaining the public space is progressively pursued in a condition where "Do It Yourself" becomes "Do It With Others"[23] - which better reflects the qualities of an increasingly sophisticated society where active and free individuals operate in larger and larger networks, ever more intertwined and interactive to transform the dissatisfaction in real actions.

Working with acupunctural design solutions nto public spaces through the implementation of open platforms represents a new approach to urban design, aimed at activating places rather than occupying spaces. Triggering relationships and social cohesion, raising new urban organizational strategies, and grounding into the cities are the core values of this research approach.

Urban Hacking is a status in which the peculiarities of each member of a society are fruitfully systematized generating a proactive public sphere; each actor is deeply related to others and his role has significance only in a condition of cooperation aimed at the appropriation of the environment - or social *milieu* - within a public interest framework. This dimension of alternate "making and thinking" produces ideas, improves imagination and fosters new creative intuitions through which a slowly adaptive process, made by further trials, occurs.

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[21] 'Hacker', *Internet Users' Glossary*, accessed 24 October 2014, https://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc1392#appendix-H.

[22] Richard Sennet, *L'uomo Artigiano* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2008).

[23] MuseumArchitecture, 'Ethel Baraona Pohl | What's Going on? The New Dynamics of Public Space', *YouTube* (YouTube), accessed 2 December 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=We5bG3iOmXQ#t=18.

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