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# Towards a new “urban sensitivity”. The role of design as support to social innovation

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**Abstract:** In an urban and social context where individualism and anonymity are increasingly asserting themselves, the role of design is fundamental to define innovative ways to share and “build” urban relationships. These models try to involve citizens as users, spectators, actors, as agents of change: they become protagonists of the construction of urban fragments that could be described as preciously “uncertain”, structurally “undecided” and seemingly “weak”. They use a molecular approach: considering the micro as a way to renew the macro, giving value to gestures and dreams of the individual. The paper focuses on the Adaptable Self-managed Itinerant Pavilion (PAAI), a changeable and flexible space that doesn’t leave indelible marks in the territory: with the ambition to build a collective consciousness that might be intangible, it is long lasting. It's part of the “CampUS” research, whose name emphasizes the word “us” representing a challenge, an opportunity, a goal and a tool.

**Keywords:** Co-design, Social Innovation, Urban regeneration, Molecular approach, “Fragility”

## 1. Introduction

In a world of deep and rapid transformation, the city, as a network of diversity and differences between individuals is more and more becoming an object of study and research for sociologists, economists and urbanists.

Big cities are becoming places and systems able to evolve and react to face the citizens’ needs, but defining the role of single individuals and their identity is essential to understand the new social contest existing within the city. The citizen immersed in such urban contest is a fragile, weak wanderer who has lost his ability to establish real relationships and is surrounded by virtualism and communicative signs.

Nowadays, a fundamental role is given to the community of people, as they become the main characters facing social problems inside the urban context. These communities are groups of “social inventors” (Manzini, 2015, p.16 ) who – when facing critical social and technological conditions – find new ways to do things that are more sustainable than traditional ones, which were actually

inefficient. We could also call them “groups of ordinary people” who do their very best if given the opportunity, “heroes” of everyday life with an incredible sense of togetherness as a fuel for their actions.

“Heroes who are not ‘professional’ designers, nor members of a social elite invested with institutional roles, but rather forward-looking people capable of sharing their vision with others” (Meroni, 2007, p.9).

The new citizen is now experiencing a convergence of tensions and expectations, a horizon of values, practices and attitudes. A time of change that is leading people to live "individually together" (Bauman, 2002, p. xv).

It is the concept of sharing in lighter forms such as local aggregation, grouping, faith, seeking relationships as a source of emotions.

On the other hand, he is a human being with his weaknesses and vulnerabilities, if we consider him from the individual point of view.

With the definition of the role that single individuals play in facing the transformation taking place around them, this paper aims to demonstrate how these weaknesses and vulnerabilities could turn their energy and creativity into innovations and new projects. We should ask ourselves what the role of a single person is and what is the one of designers.

More specifically, in an urban and social context where individualism and anonymity – two ontological and structural conditions of what has been called "surmodernity" (Augé, 2005) – are increasingly establishing themselves, the role of design and its disruptive force is fundamental to structure a credible and effective environment. Its aim is to offer new sustainable socio-economic models and, at the same time, to define innovative ways to share and “build” urban relationships.

These models try to involve citizens as users, spectators, actors, but also as agents of change: they become protagonists of the construction of urban fragments that could be described as preciously "uncertain", structurally "undecided" and seemingly "weak".

With an approach based on a user-centred perspective, the involvement of stakeholders through participatory design has proven to be useful in social innovation (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010). A number of failed projects in this field highlighted that designers, professionals need to build new approaches, tools and methods to be able to contribute in this new direction (Mulgan, Tucker, Ali, & Sanders, 2007). Everything around is changing; with “design is never done” they mean that professional designers should rapidly answer in different ways to “continually respond, adapt and innovate” (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone, & Winhall, 2006, p. 21).

This framework underlines that both the role of the designer on one side, and the citizens’ role on the other are role-no role positions.

Among the most effective approaches, co-design may help define strategies able to organize methods improving the collaboration between the people involved in the co-creation process.

Focusing on these typologies of citizens there is a need to involve them in decision-making and to carry out bottom-up processes in order to turn their interaction and collaboration into the real fuel of social innovation.

Only in this way will they be architects, designers and builders, but also those who live and "feed" the project.

To get to a direct action, the individual's empowerment in all his actions and the act of listening in all the project phases require his active involvement from the very beginning.

The individuals should be considered as real designers also in order to build a sense of belonging to the on going project. Only a direct inclusion of users' input will increase the probability of a successful design outcome.

John Pløger argues that:

"agonism could be said to be the ethos of a democracy respecting the legitimacy of difference and interests through public participation. Public planning should ideally be a place for strife about legitimate opinions and meanings on the road towards reasonable and commonly agreed solutions or consensus-building among mutual adversaries"(Pløger 2004, p.72).

Starting from the purpose to develop the city by including the voices of a variety of actors in the urban space, it is important to build a strategy to involve them in a feasible way. Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to demonstrate how co-design and bottom-up processes should be put in relation to the individual dimension and be interpreted as the engagement (listening, empowerment, action) of the single person and as reflection of his rich and multifaceted subjectivity.

## 2. Background: the relevant cultural panorama

The reading here proposed is actually not new: the radicals had already expressed a similar view with their provocative use of weakness, uncertainty and precariousness to describe their futuristic projects as metaphors of modernity; these values have their roots in sociological and anthropological philosophical lectures (such as Popper and Baharier, Morin and La Cecla) though not being free from spatial repercussions. What's more, they are able to strongly affect our daily social and aesthetic experience as well as our perception of the city.

In the following case study, the Self-managed Itinerant Adaptable Pavilion (PAAI) promoted by Politecnico di Milano as pilot experiment in some peripheral areas of the city, we will try to highlight its design impact both in urban and setup terms and from a usability/management perspective.

According to Popper, science philosopher supporting the *theory of fallibility* and the *principle of falsifiability*, the evolution of scientific progress always starts with a "hitch" and "the attempt to solve it" (Popper, 2000, p.7). Mistake, misunderstanding is not positive in itself, but in the process of building new scientific models it plays a crucial role and must not be stigmatised: "the sooner you find a mistake, the sooner will you put the scientific community in the urgent need to find and try a better theory" (Antiseri, in Popper, 2000, p. 9). For this reason, in Popper's view "avoiding mistakes is a mean purpose" (Popper, 1975, p. 242). On the contrary, as he reminds us, "every knowledge is human and as such intertwined with our mistakes, prejudices, dreams and hopes" (Popper, 2000, p. 93); in such Socratic attitude, knowing he knows nothing absolutely certain, he rejects every dogmatic and speciously objective view, while promoting the values of a multiple and heterogeneous *Open Society* (Popper, 2004) based on the inclusion of differences and on the intrinsic dignity of every human person.

And so Dario Antiseri, in his introduction to the book *Perdersi. L'uomo senza ambiente (Losing oneself. Man without context)* keeps highlighting that "fallibility, tolerance, [...] the defence of freedom and of the person's empowerment" (Antiseri, in Popper, 2000, p. 24) are the key principles of Popper's view.

These axioms also recall the so called "theory of claudication" (Baharier, 2014, p.74) that the biblist, mathematician and psychoanalyst Haim Baharier defined "a proud handicap, as greatness and precariousness are not in contrast with each other but represent the *modus vivendi* of responsible men" (Ibid, p.27). Therefore, just like in falsifiability, also in claudication is an inherent, deep idea of imperfection as value and of perfectibility as new horizon to pursue.

These theoretical cornerstones exposed in *The Open Society* could be linked to the bottom-up participatory approaches currently pursued by design – of which PAAI is an emblematic example – in an attempt to empower every single citizen and turn him into an active player in the (even symbolic) building of the city, to make him subject and "object" of this staging process. Furthermore, design and especially co-design, more than other project-based disciplines seem able to deal with these contemporary paradigms as intrinsically aimed at enhancing reversible approaches – fortunately "precarious" where deliberately temporary and structurally "delicate" and economic – giving voice and "shape" to aspirations, gestures, often fragile collective dreams. In one word, still widely searching for a deceptive "eternity" and for a speciously "absolute" shape, design promotes the ability to manage open and often unpredictable processes, claiming its unique attitude to "design uncertainty".

The extreme modernity of the issue is also highlighted in the artistic research carried out by Alessandro Verdi that, already in 2009, Achille Bonito Oliva had seen as an attempt to "sail uncertainty" in the eponymous exhibition he curated among the Fuori Biennale events of the 53rd International Art Exhibition.

Many epistemologists, artists and psychoanalysts, but also several philosophers and sociologists made these concepts their own reinterpreting them in their own disciplinary areas; for example Edgar Morin, key representative of the contemporary culture, who underlines the importance and strategic role of uncertainty (Morin, 2001, pp. 81-86) and sees the society as a complex of "weak concepts" (Morin, 2006) that, as we would say, get the issue back into the design context, "promote awareness of provisional and temporary, conceiving the space of fragments not as a residual territory, but as an opportunity to give voice to the minimum actions" (Di Prete, in Crespi, 2016, p. 157).

If Popper, Baharier, Morin develop similar theoretical and philosophical concepts yet focusing on different aspects, it is probably La Cecla who translated them into a spatial dimension, introducing the concept of misunderstanding (La Cecla, 2009, p.162), bewilderment and the local mind into a broader discussion on the "ability to live" (La Cecla, 1988, p. 3).

"The «local mind» [meant as expression of this *ability to live*] consists in the perception, definition and use of a space that only its residents can fully possess" (Ibid, p. 4).

When the building of shared places becomes an activity that excludes its inhabitants, regarded as pure "recipients" of spaces designed by others, the city deprives itself of a spontaneous and highly fruitful design which is often more innovative and able to reflect the spirit of the time than the planned and structured one. The author goes on saying:

"it's about acknowledging that there are more functional ways to organise living spaces [...] than the one based on structured planning. After all, nowadays' design is going through a crisis [...] that postmodern architecture and urban planning are trying to solve [...] with the creation of a design method able to activate, or reactivate the local knowledge of the place and the dialogue with its inhabitants" (Vattimo, in La Cecla, 1988, pp. XII-XIII).

This is the basis of what was subsequently defined as co-design, a discipline that recognises the importance of experience and emotions when structuring shared spaces (products and services) with a strong identity, assuming co-design and the active involvement of final users as one of the essential components of the project.

Indeed, La Cecla wishes for much more than a simple involvement, while rather considering initiatives deeply rooted in the local environment and empowering people as key actors, authors who want to write part of the urban script, builders of physical and relational spaces, bearers of new aesthetic and sympathetic values. According to his view, such initiatives should start spontaneously "from the bottom", diverting that process that excluded the environment from its inhabitants' proactivity (assigning its management to the local authorities) and that started in the 19th Century with the censure of "street life" (La Cecla, 1988, p.4). But street life – with its often unplanned performances, its fortuitous crossings ending up in collaborations, the sought-after, long-awaited meetings that triggered new design processes, its multi-ethnic and multifaceted folklore – was actually a fertile ground for the starting and development of PAAI's activities.

Indeed, during the 5 months of activity, the itinerant pavilion was designed as a neutral structure where many regulated yet totally unplanned activities took place. It was a programme full of chances and opportunities that managed to establish new design alphabets welcoming the unknown and accepting unexpected events and uncertainty as such, finding useful nourishment in the contribution of apparently "weak" social players.

This idea of an open and participatory project, rejecting any top-down traditional logic, pertains to a culture of living more and more defined as "without architects", "spontaneous" or "primitive"; however, La Cecla rejects such expressions "because each of these definitions is not only a humiliation of the immense fresco of the human ability to live, but also a hopeless definition" (Ibid, p.5). Hope is exactly where we should start from, as being capable of awakening a dormant sensitivity as well as of building new transversal communities that share the same design approach.

In the same book the author also insists on the condition of distracted, often apathetic and indifferent bewilderment, which is typical of the citizens of the modern metropolis. As highlighted by G. Vattimo, however, what scares him is not the fact of losing oneself

"but rather the opposite: what we lose in the homologated and planned space of modern industrial cities [...] is exactly the possibility to lose ourselves and then to live that sense of bewilderment and subsequent reintegration which is inherent to human existence" (Vattimo in La Cecla, 1988, p. IX).

Between distraction and decontextualisation, fear and wonder, losing oneself is "an [individual] deviation from an inner landscape" (La Cecla, 1988, p.27), though it often requires an immersion into something alien, i.e. an act of sharing and trust, of deep opening towards the others.

In such landscape, the experience of the single person and the concurrent events prevail on absolute axioms: serendipity and wonder are purely individual conditions, but at the same time they pertain to a public sphere representing a society that more and more consciously puts *wonder and chance* at the core of its own development (Gargani, 1985). Wonder "has the function of starting the engine" (Ibid, p.12); "chance takes the shape of a crack, a split in the group on which the symbolic construction of experience is based and organised" (Ibid, p.19).

Today's discipline of co-design has a deep interest in these cracks and splits – that can be spatial, social or psychological – seeing in such stretchmarks the very essence of the contemporary age, that has moved from a paradigm of "protected and well-established education to a fragmentary set of marginal and superficial fortuitous events" (Ibid, p. 22).

### 3. A case study: PAAI – Self-managed Itinerant Adaptable Pavilion

The paper here focuses on the case study of PAAI, the Self-managed Itinerant Adaptable Pavilion promoted and designed by Politecnico di Milano within CampUS, a research programme that in its very title places particular weight on the “US” representing a challenge, an opportunity, an objective and a tool at the same time.

This is a pavilion available for the associations of District 9 of Milan, a peripheral area characterised by a great socio-cultural ferment focusing on the communication, promotion and staging of entertaining and recreational activities as well as of exhibitions and social events. Crossing the areas of Isola, Dergano and Affori, the itinerant pavilion has now become a promoter of innovation and social cohesion, but also an opportunity for urban regeneration.

It was basically a modular, multi-purpose, easy-to-change movable wooden structure made of various components that could also be partially used to meet the morphological features and the "performance requirements" of each of the contexts it has been placed in. We are using the past tense because the first pilot experiment has just ended and, as winter is approaching, PAAI has finished its activity.



Figure 1. The setup of PAAI - Self- managed Itinerant Adaptable Pavilion, at Parco Savarino during the event: “Stammi bene! (Take care!)”. In the image educators and psychologists while they are promoting educational, pedagogical and psychological activities of the association L'amico Charly Onlus. The pavilion here is composed by three modules together to compose an audience of about 75 sqm.



Figure 2. Night view of PAAI at Parco Savarino; the wooden structure is enriched by three different materials (one of each module): blackboard, which allows a temporary customization of the panels during the event, the mirrored film that allows a reflection in the space, and the metal sheet. The cover is made from a waterproof fabric.



Figure 3. The setup of PAAI - Self-managed Itinerant Adaptable Pavilion, located in “Isola”, Milan; Here the arrangement is with three separate modules.



The initiative, realised with the support of Consiglio di Zona 9 and the collaboration of Fondazione Politecnico, promoted by the Design Department with DASTU (Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani) and DIG (Dipartimento di Ingegneria Gestionale) and financed by the 2014 Polisocial Award, insisted on a twofold purpose: it obviously had a spatial and staging function, but was also bearer of a strong social and participatory value. The idea underpinning the project was that this manifold space could trigger bottom-up transformation and rehabilitation processes in specific areas involving – thanks to the co-design methods and tools – universities, cultural associations and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood just like randomly “intercepted” passers-by, but especially the NEET, kids and over 75 – groups often excluded by an increasingly money making-oriented society.

Indeed, the theoretical model originally outlined – which was then turned into something practical thanks to the project carried out by some students from the “Scenic design and Performance Spaces” course involved in the process and thanks to the substantial contribution of local associations in the many working tables organised for the initiative – has faced many difficulties in the everyday programme, though also achieving significant results: with 45 associations involved, 87 events, less than 10,000 euros of costs, the pavilion has crossed the outskirts of Milan from May to October 2016. Situated in 3 areas agreed with the Municipality of Milan and considered as highly strategic due to the surrounding urban or social conditions (Parco Savarino, Via De Castillia near Stecca degli Artigiani, Parco di Villa Litta), PAAI has been able to trigger new design initiatives and to involve the concerned areas in participatory sharing sessions, parties and debates.

The 87 events organised, which were fully managed by the associations engaged in the project, included social, musical, artistic, recreational, sport, theatre activities as well as readings, lectures, small exhibitions, artisanal dance and creative recycling workshops. In sum, the pavilion worked as backstage and framework for the implementation of informal social activities creating non-institutional spaces available for the citizens as places for debate and exchange. As initially outlined in the concept, the pavilion was like a “living organism” capable of growing and diminishing and of producing every time a different relationship with the space and with the people “living” in it.



Figure 4. The PAAI - Self-managed Itinerant Adaptable Pavilion during a music performance made by the participants of the music and hip hop dance workshop of “Amico Charly” association.



Figure 5. The PAAI - Self-managed Itinerant Adaptable Pavilion during a photo exhibition on the local urban history.

Now that all the activities are over, the dismantling of the pavilion has been the “final curtain” and the end of the “show”, but if the setup is ephemeral, what has remained in the territory and in people’s memory is the sense and meaning of what has taken place there.

With respect to the paper’s topic, the model proposed by PAAI is extremely important, as the project did not mean to leave tangible, “indelible” marks on the territory: it was designed to be a structurally reversible experience, changeability and flexibility were intrinsic in its ability to adapt to different contexts. Should we describe it under a psychological perspective, we could define it as deliberately “delicate” for its ability to represent diversity and multiplicity and, on the other hand, apparently “transient” in its choice of being temporary.

Despite (or maybe thanks to) this anachronistic approach – as some have defined it – PAAI was able to build and strengthen long-term social relationships promoting new networks and collaborations between associations and citizens. It also allowed to lay the foundations for new projects born by the meeting of local players; it set a positive precedent giving trust to an entire community and showing how the synergy of individual thoughts and actions can actually build new aesthetic scenarios and define new social and sympathetic structures even with a limited budget.

The focus on spatial, urban, social and psychological marginality was not a *minus* for the project, while rather enhancing its great potentialities. The choice of working in a peripheral area and especially of dealing with “fragile” individuals, trying to trigger bottom-up, widely engaging processes of self-management and self-building has in fact highlighted the energy of the local players: it is no coincidence that, according to La Cecla,

“the local Mind has some chance to find itself again today, [...] but only within the limits of metropolitan existence. The undisciplined areas of the metropolis are those in which one can still have an authentic experience of living, building spaces

on the basis of a «local» heritage that is deeply linked with both a collective, participatory life experience and the continuous and growing development of a relationship between central and peripheral areas, inside and outside, known and (relatively) unknown" (Vattimo in La Cecla, 1988, p. XI).

The result is a project that

"frees itself from the traditional vision of positivist urbanism, foretelling and often rigidly incapable of accepting the differences, reasoning rather on the micro dimension to rethink the macro one, [...] and proceeds through an almost kaleidoscopic sum of contributions, ever changing and unpredictable" (Di Prete, in Crespi, 2016, p. 157),

thus structuring real urban interiors (A.a.V.v., *Urban+Interior. IDEA Journal 2015*) that show the colourful variety of life in peripheral areas.

It is not only about "urban survival" projects, as Esterni would call them, but rather proposals to intensely "live the city" again (La Pietra, 2011).

## 4. Conclusions

Given the increasing trend that sees the rise of individualism and urban anonymity as predominant values – as opposed to those of extended family and solidarity which were typical of a tradition today recalled by many nostalgic thinkers of the lost dimension of the village – co-design is a design discipline able to give appropriate response to the contemporary needs by proposing new bottom-up approaches, new methods and tools, but especially unexplored scenarios finding a chance for progress in the very "crisis of the project".

We are not talking about a one-directional, universal, scientifically acknowledged progress, but rather about the ability to improve by acting on the dimension of what is infinitesimal, residual and marginal. This kind of attitude was well defined by Alchimia in the so called manifesto of "fragility" (Mendini, as cited in Parmesani, 2004, p.442), a term that, design-wise, means care for the uncertain, the micro and the evanescent: it is the choice to pursue projects that Mendini would call "weak" (Ibid, p. 432), to promote the gestures/aspirations of the individual and all that is normally considered as "waste".

Several examples now exist able to build such variable and flexible spaces using reversible solutions and rejecting any ambition to leave indelible tangible marks on the territory, but rather aiming at building intangible yet long-lasting imaginaries.

As the experience of PAAI has shown, these urban fragments, although contextualised in their case, may work at systemic level to redesign the urban image starting from a particle-based approach: this is the awareness that the micro can rebuild the macro giving new value to individual actions, desires and dreams, being persuaded that a community becomes real when its multifaceted and plural identity is able to give voice to what is invisible, neglectable and different.

The use of almost "psychological" traits to describe a project and to design a space (everyone now talks about fragile, uncertain, precarious, defective, weak, temporary, unpredictable, subjective, emotional spaces...) may appear as a mere lexical exercise, but the sometimes discordant similarities that can be suggested may have strong effects from a design perspective, giving us the chance to define directions, methods and tools for a new "urban sensitivity".

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