PUBLIC SPACE AND ITS CHALLENGES
A PALIMPSEST FOR URBAN COMMONS

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1. Foreword

In future cities we will have to deal with challenges of different sorts related to the irreversible overpopulation of urban citizens, which the UN estimates will reach 6.5 billion in 2030. "The population problem has no technical solution; it requires a fundamental extension in morality" assert Garret Hardin in his paper about *The Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin, 1968): population is growing exponentially, consuming a prodigious amount of energy enough to jeopardize the very concept of common goods. Because of these circumstances, the international debate is now oriented around issues like holistic sustainability, quality of life, well-being and urban happiness in the built environment, in order to reverse this point of view.

At the same time, the "recent revival of emphasis upon the supposed loss of urban commonalities reflects the seemingly profound impacts of the recent wave of privatizations, enclosures, spatial controls, policing and surveillance upon the qualities of urban life [...] and the potentiality to build or inhibit new forms of social relations" (Harvey, 2012: 67). Public space has a transversal role in the whole discussion, crossing each of these issues and ensuring the delicate balance between the physical and the social domains of the city. As observed by Stephen Carr (1992: 3) in his very accurate definition of public space, it is "the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds".

From this perspective, the *publicness* of public space is enhanced by the presence of life that is communal, collective, and shared between individuals that are simultaneously the actors and the audience of this 'drama'. In such a respect, discussing the quality of urban life seems to be a wide and democratic issue, since we live almost all in built environments and are joined by the same interests in political and cultural debates about the places we live in, regardless of age or social background.

In terms of political efforts, research and literature production, the social role of public space, and of urban design too, has been reconsidered in the public agendas as the proper tool to be adopted for a better quality of urban life. In both material and immaterial ways public space is crafted by how it is lived, by the criss-crossing flows around, inside and outside the built domain during the many everyday-life activities. This phenomenon has remained unchanged throughout the centuries, even if it has been weakened or neglected by social, political and economic forces that have altered the sense of living the city.

2. What challenges for the cities?

In the last century urban forms and ideals have left us a tangible testimony of the fracture that occurred between the social shaping of the city and the rational, functional and capitalist one, and it acts as a clue of what can happen when people are left out of the urban scale in terms of habits, activities, mobility, and proportions. The functionalist approach to space, especially in the suburbs, has been dramatically conditioned by the rules of free market (Bottini, 2010: 16).

Cities have been transformed by way of highways and automobiles in order to let people spread and circulate all over a territory, superimposing a traffic infrastructure over a socio-spatial one, regardless of what they spread across or at what cost. This kind of approach has determined a fragmentation of public space as a whole, seriously affecting pedestrian mobility, accessibility and interfering with the many

social, cultural and recreational activities of everyday life[1] (De Certeau, 1984), related to the processes of territorialization (Madanipour, 2003) and the different practices that transform space into places (Norberg-Schultz, 1979). Moreover, the tendency to attribute specific functions to urban spaces has led to an additional social fragmentation in which people are labelled in formal categories (Sebastiani, 2010: 238-239), "destroying the integrity of the individuals, isolating them from society and depriving them of any defence" (De Carlo, 2013: 66).

On one hand the disconnection between the two key elements of urban dynamics – a society/space – has impacted upon the decline of public space, worsened by political inability to deal with the issue and the growing privatization of entire urban areas. On the other hand, urban design and public space have gained more importance and presence in public agendas and, what is more, there has been an increasing awareness that a well-designed public space can improve and enhance the social life it contains, positively affecting people's perceptions and users' activities. As Jan Gehl observes, "first we shape the cities – then they shape us" (Gehl, 2013). In this respect it has been recognized that there is a need for new and sharper tools to identify and analyze problems and develop specific solutions, in order to navigate the rising number of variables existing in such an inter-disciplinary framework. More importantly, it requires the ability to address also large-scale problems in the inter-scalar dimension of public space, in order to understand phenomena in each particular and general feature of city space and city life.

As Micheal Sandel argues[2], market solutions applied to the city cannot work on the immaterial domains of civil life and social practices: markets do not care about values and intrinsic meanings. What the market system has corrupted is indeed communality, civic en-

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1 Identified by De Certeau as talking, walking, shopping, staying, playing (1984).

2 Michael Sandel during the TED Conference in Edinburgh, 2013: https://www.ted. com/talks/michael_sandel_why_we_shouldn_t_trust_markets_with_our_civ- ic_life?language=it

gagement, social practices and the chance to recognize that "we are all in this together". For these reasons the concept of the 'right to the city' suggested by Henri Lefebvre (1974) has been used as a motto for whoever is trying to survive this era of privatization and neoliberal development of cities, adapting the way in which responsibilities are conceived.

In such a respect local bodies are the ones who have granted market economy to invest in speculations, tourism facilities and housing estates over public spaces. On the other hand, the community is the one who wants back the chance to define the rules in the neighbourhood, in terms of relations between individuals and the governance of the common ground, in order to live in a nicer and open place. Continuing along the path offered by Lefebvre, we can use his "Spatial Triad" to identify the main themes of urban space. The social production of space, as previously said, strictly depends on the collaborative interrelations of many dimension, which the author identifies as conceived, perceived and lived space. Each dimension represents a scale, a way to shape space, its specific tools and the actors able to use them.

The representations of space – or how it is conceived – refers to how it is actually used as a bi-dimensional or tri-dimensional medium by professionals and planners. Spatial practice is related to how space is perceived through its design, and representational space is how the space is lived and used by the inhabitants, including cultural and intangible elements. Moving the discussion to the level of the social actors involved, we can rightfully assume that the production of space can be better explained as the result of a combination of choices made by planners, designers and users, who, of course, could affect one another.

Taking into account how the tangible and intangible fragmentation of public space infrastructure has affected the quality of urban life, it seems plausible to consider the process of *commoning* as a virtuous trigger, able to catalyze creative energies – hopefully positive and proactive – in the transformation of an area. Even if the *commoning* process appears unclear, it seems to be a potentially achievable and

hopefully the right approach to holistic sustainability – social, economic and environmental – as well as a strong alternative to the contemporary urban models in which we are living. Nonetheless, *urban commons* and urban design seems to be a good combination.

In order to provide us with a framework, commons can be defined (Ostrom, 1990) as those communal goods and services whose property is not referable neither to public authority nor to private corporations, and can be identified on the basis of three elements: the common or collective property; the *commoning* attribute, as something depending on human decisions and activities; the autonomy from market or state forms of management. In this respect a common is an object of collaboration, an activity carried out by people and a form of management and ownership (David Bollier, 2014).

As argued by David Harvey, one of the issue in commons is the *scale problem*, which is clearer as we jump from one scale to another, when the nature of the problems and the prospects of finding a solution change dramatically (2012: 69). As far as we can say, several studies have demonstrated that at the city scale the governance of the urban commons (Ostrom, 1990) can succeed only taking into account why and in what circumstances the *commoning process* works or not, and in particular in what combination of public and private instrumentalities, underlying of course the need of some kind of "hierarchical form" of organization (*ibid*.).

In terms of planning and its ethical mission on the themes of quality of urban life and welfare state, this hierarchy became clearer after the Second World War, translated as a quantitative tool to support and rationalize the new phase of development, production, reconstruction and income redistribution (Bottini, 2010: 15). More recently, the discussion has been oriented on the quality of public space and closely related to other and more specific urban issues, like sustainability, land consumption, global warming, health, urban happiness. In this interdisciplinary perspective, which has also been embraced by several less recent authors like Jan Gehl or Jane Jacobs, attention is paid to how public space can affect other fields of investigation, recognizing the

potential outcomes of social and spatial metabolism in cities (Bottini, 2010: 13).

Through this lens many authors argue that the quality and the decay of public space share the same roots. In general terms, it is reasonable to believe that the decay of urban public spaces is strictly related to the practices of abstraction allowed by public policies and carried out through planning (Sebastiani, 2010: 238). More specifically, Matthew Carmona has identified several elements which have compromised the quality of urban spaces in the fields of privatization, commodification, maintenance and accessibility. Moreover, he suggests that maintenance is the key to determining the success of public space in terms of liveability and users' perceptions. Even if this could resemble a cliché or perhaps common sense, this position shifts the whole discourse on public space performance in terms of how public and/or private bodies carry out their roles.

Again, the *commoning process* aims to solve this rough dialogue between the two sides of the coin, offering alternative approaches and methodologies to the challenges of public space. Design, urban furniture or formal categories cannot be considered anymore as quality indicators, even if such equipment can increase and enhance – or even decrease – the way space is used and lived by people. What public space needs today is to be responsive, well-maintained, organised, diversified and controlled by and for the urban community in order to be a place of the people.

Inevitably, the non-planned interstitial areas of the city became object of increasing interest, both from local authorities and from civil society, as blank space ready to be transformed into liveable urban spaces. Local bodies recognize the strategic value in urban regeneration processes that are aimed at achieving quality and sustainability goals. Community – meaning private and individual subjects, associations and/or social cooperatives – has sometimes filled the institutional gap in the management of public space through its informal occupation, sometimes unauthorized, in order to offer an alternative and civil use of forgotten places of the city. These kinds of soft trans-

formation initiatives have positively affected the social perception of marginalized areas, reopening the debate on new ways of public-private partnerships and place-making.

On the other hand, the concept of *urban commons* is more frequently used to explore solution in terms of "new or alternative collaborative (and co-management) arrangements between city administrators, 'active' citizens, and private property owners for managing certain kinds of space within the urban area); this signifies a paradigm shift from a very formal way of conceiving space to a communal, collective or simply human way of designing it, involving people in the decision-making as equal stakeholders to any other professionals or investors". Of course, an effort is needed to push the limits of public-private and state-market dichotomies (Harvey, 2012: 69) and means-purposes, in which *informal commoning* and processes do not find a specific location.

The very same social practices that produce public space can be transformed into policies, though not necessarily by political parties or institutions, filling the gap between the social and the territorial meaning, as well as Giancarlo De Carlo has done developing his own process of participating architecture. More particularly, from an institutional point of view it seems reasonable to ask public bodies to deal with public space in order to avoid those obstacles that could jeopardize the socio-spatial dynamics at the basis of its production, rather than worrying about how to create new spaces (Sebastiani, 2010: 239-240).

Quoting Giancarlo De Carlo and his considerable relevance in the contemporary scenario, "the problem of *why* is now prevailing on the problem of *how*". At the same time, talking about participation but legitimately referring the whole discourse on the commoning process, a change of direction from *how* to *why* is possible by doing and experimenting certain tactics (De Carlo, 2013: 66-68). Moreover, the idea of co-city as an urban form built in the age of collaboration also reclaims the Lefebvrian vision of urban as a complex, adaptive and evolutionary system rather than a fixed space (Foster & Iaione, 2016: 84-85) and the participation process, in which the architectural form – or the urban

form in this case – has to deal with the perception and the demand of self-expression of the users (De Carlo, 2013: 70-71).

As Sofia Mazzuco states regarding urban commons and public space, there are four elements that must be taken into account: re-purposed public spaces, collective governance, hands-on action and resulting benefits that support community and urban development in terms of social, economic and environmental aspects. Of course, the open and spontaneous collective appropriation and repurposing of public spaces needs to be structured in order to be effective and to guarantee those benefits for the community, strengthen a collaborative development model and contribute to the "awareness of the city as networked spaces, people and resources that mutually impact each other".

The social construction of space should be rightfully replaced and enhanced by the *commoning* process, equally able to address both spatial and social quality goals. In fact, the common is a social practice, constructed "as an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood". On the other hand, even if this social production cannot be destroyed, of course it can be banalized by its abuse, as it happens when a street is crowded by automobiles and requires interventions in order to restore its primal balance of civilization (Harvey, 2012: 73-74). Through this lens, it becomes easy to look at public space as a socio-spatial infrastructure and at the same time notice a general lack of tools to define and shape roles and responsibilities, distribute them to different actors included in those kind of processes, and clarify a specific planning model.

The strategic value of the *commoning* processes has been widely acknowledged in Italy as well, where it has been approved as the first regulation on urban commons in 2014 by the municipality of Bologna. The Italian Pavilion at the *XV La Biennale di Architettura di Venezia* bears witness to a renewed interest in a "concrete vision of an architecture at the service of the community [...] that makes the difference taking

care of individuals and communities, of spaces and places" (Galloni in TAM Associati, 2016: 12). At the same time, quoting Paolo Baratta, the President of *La Biennale di Venezia*, "The majority [of the authorities in charge of governance and spatial planning, especially local authorities, with very tighter budgets] rather than governing development and investing incomings, try to fill their accounts seeking funds in the spontaneous development and in the revenues they can obtain in exchange for concessions" (Baratta in TAM Associati, 2016: 10-11). Indeed, the *commoning* process is often influenced by informal experiences and associations that drive urban experimentation and change. In practice, urban commons are a social and territorial laboratory: the ground for innovation in the architecture, planning and urban design fields in which interested professionals and citizens can share opinions and visions, participating and deciding together on a common aim.

One of many examples is Farm Cultural Park in Favara[3], Agrigento, a small town that has been almost unknown until the opening of the cultural center. Founded and promoted by a private couple (wife and husband), this cultural institution has revealed how a *commoning* process can be seen as an urban acupuncture action, with specific purposes and a wide range of sustainable outcomes. Starting from a very low budget and quick transformations in the so called 'seven courtyards', Farm Cultural Park has actually changed its decayed face scarred with illegal buildings by combining urban regeneration and social values, changing Favara's perception amongst both inhabitants and outsiders. So far, Farm Cultural Park has invested twenty million euros to create opportunities, attract talented artists and performers, open a school of architecture for children and become a contemporary art destination within the established cultural heritage network in the area.

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3 All the information on Farm Cultural Park are taken from TAM Associati (Ed.). (2016). *Taking Care: progettare per il bene comune – Catalogo Padiglione Italia de La Biennale di Venezia, XV Mostra internazionale di Architettura*. Padova, Italia: Becco Giallo.

3. Conclusions

Of course, the discussion on urban commons and in general on the process of commoning has to deal with the contradictions arising from the impact of such interventions on the territory, which sometimes might actually decrease rather than enhance the benefits for the inhabitants. More specifically, we can refer to the property values or rents, often increased by the creation of such public spaces, as it happened for the High Line of New York, which has denied access to affordable housing in the nearby area (Harvey, 2012: 75). Other critical aspects are represented by the difficulties in the dialogue between the different actors involved – basically identified as the city itself, the entrepreneurs, the social partners, the knowledge institutes and the social innovators – which is problematic almost everywhere. The case of Farm Cultural Park is not an exception: regardless of the international prestige of artists and architects involved in the design of the temporary pavilions placed in the courtyards, the Mayor of Favara has disposed their immediate removal – judging their presence as illegal – only to waive the requirement a couple of weeks later. The episode had such an impact on public opinion that the petition *We are Farm Cultural Park*[4] has gained six thousand signatures in two days in order to prevent the removal of the artworks.

All these arguments on public space and the *commoning process* eventually confirm the idea of a social-spatial infrastructure, in which tangible and intangible elements, dimensions and actors play their role individually, cross-fertilizing each other at the same time. All the energies provided by the circulation flow and the many everyday-life activities in public space can be catalyzed in the process of creating urban commons and catabolized into proactive and creative forces, able to drive a change in the way we conceive, use and take care of public space. In this respect, the infrastructure of public space can be used

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4   More information at: https://www.change.org/p/noi-siamo-farm-cultural-park

as an urban *palimpsest* in which the tale of the co-city can finally be overwritten.

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