

Searching for Quality of Public Space

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Introduction

The paper summarizes the research experience of a small group of Italian colleagues, including myself, with Martina Löw and other scholars of the Collaborative Research Center 1265 about the conceptualization of the quality of public space¹. The fertile exchange during the years in which we worked together led us to pursue two objectives. The first one regarded the adoption of Löw's analytical approach in thinking theoretically about space, and this was certainly the most significant aspect for us in our experience with her. The second one consisted of accepting the invitation to define quality through the lenses of spatial sociology. The specificity of this approach lies in thinking about space in relational and processual terms and in analytically defining its implications. In other words, Löw expands the perspective by introducing relational thinking as a mode of sociological analysis of space. She distinguishes two fundamentally different processes of space constitution: the first, defined as spacing, designates the arrangement of goods and people in the world; the second, which we refer to as synthesis operations, interprets the connection between the arrangements through which we experience spaces (Löw 2008). In other words, space is constituted through acts as the outcome of synthesis and positioning practices (2008). In particular, it is the mobilization of perceptions, memory and imagination that gives meaning to space. For this reason, it is difficult to imagine social action

1 Members of the group are Daniele Balicco, Dominik Bartmanski, Ernesto D'Albergo, Paolo Do, Antonio Famiglietti, Elifkan Karacan, Christy Kultz, Séverine Marguin, Nina Meier, Giulio Moini, Timothy Pape, Gioia Pompili, Giuseppe Ricotta, Vivien Sommer, Emanuela Spanò, Jörg Stollman, Gunter Weidenhouse and Michael Wetzels. Their contributions have significantly enriched our first workshop in Rome, "Hologrammatic Quality of Public Space" (March 31/April 2, 2022), and the second in Berlin, "Quality of Space. Different Meanings – Conflicts and Solidarity" (May 25/May 26, 2023), and the papers published in the Special Section *Re-thinking the Quality of Public Space* in *Quaderni di Sociologia* 91/92.

outside of space and vice versa. As a consequence of this duality in space constitution, different spatial figures (Knoblauch and Löw 2020) emerge from space with reference to the different synthesis. The notion of refiguration, as Löw (2023, p. 29) writes, allows us to “elaborate the reciprocal conditionality of different figurations and explain what we mean when we today say that social changes exhibit non-linear patterns and simultaneity of effects.” Such a perspective is similar to when we introduce punctuation into the sequence of the events we are communicating. The way of interpreting communication depends on how the sequence of that communication is ordered; an observer can consider a series of communications as an uninterrupted sequence of exchanges. But the meaning given to communication and to the type of relationship that it itself structures depends on punctuation (Watzlawick 1971).

At first sight, thinking about space in these terms might be taken for granted, in empirical research there is a tendency to consider space as a container or simply as a territorial background within which action takes place. On the contrary, according to Löw, the figures and meanings of spaces emerge from the practice of actors in relation to social structures. Following Giddens, in her approach the recursion is clear, since the same structures are the result of actions repeated over time. It is relevant for the purposes of this contribution to underline the theoretical strength of her perspective in grasping the multiplicity of possible spatial constitutions in reference to social experience and in revealing the simultaneity of various places in a single space. By introducing quality into this way of thinking about space, we can understand that in the same space different qualities capable of converging or competing coexist.

Löw’s perspective on space constitutes the fruitful framework within which one can ask research questions on the quality of space, especially considering all the changes which have taken place since the end of the 1960s. The main research question we have asked ourselves is: How can the quality of space be defined sociologically? Follow-up questions include: How is quality redefined within the contexts of refiguration, multi-spatiality, and conflict in public space?

Our research has aimed to draw an interpretative framework deeply rooted in the practices of social actors regarding the different levels and dimensions of the quality of public space. As we will see in the next sections, I have sought to explore how the implications of thinking about space in Löw’s terms has furthered the definition of quality from a sociological perspective. Hence, what I propose in this paper is a definition of quality resulting from an initial collective reflection.

If we ask ourselves about quality, the question implicitly refers to an order of value (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Meier 2024) which can be formulated at an individual level, at a cultural one and with a certain episteme, and it is linked to the objectives of use. It follows that one of the ways to define the quality of space concerns those spatial characteristics that have relative value within a certain hierarchy of value.

Our aim in working together was to unveil the pragmatics of the quality of space. This involved examining how quality is discussed in research and how sociology relates to quality. More simply, we aimed at thematizing whether there was an idea of quality of space that had an explicit, latent or practical sociological specificity. We have placed the problem at a research level and our question was the following: What presence/absence are we looking for by studying space from the point of view of its quality?

From the numerous empirical studies carried out and collected², we understand that the quality of space from a sociological perspective is viewed as contextual, relational, and contested. Furthermore, in all the cases considered, the definition of quality does not refer to a single dimension but can be found in the connection between the different spatial dimensions such as the material, imaginative, affective, and technological ones. Sociological quality is therefore plural and transdimensional.

Since the quality we are talking about is closely linked to the observation of practices, it is a daily, embodied quality, and precisely for this reason, we can also define it as affective (Massumi 2002; Clough and Halley 2007; Thrift 2007). Furthermore, we can state that quality from a sociological perspective takes into account the changes that are taking place before our eyes: this quality is not limited epistemically to binary categories but is defined by the pervasiveness of the hybrid in our experience of the contemporary world.

In this paper, three features related to quality of space have been considered so far. The first feature is an affirmative quality oriented towards practice, even in presence of strongly impeding conditions; the second is a quality that approaches the hybrid, *id est*, to cope with the contamination and metamorphosis, bringing to the suspension of classic modern classifications and rankings in many fields of social experience; finally, the third accentuates the affects because it considers the materiality of the atmospheres.

In the case of affirmative quality, the analytical level is that of classical sociology which recalls the Durkheimian objective of social cohesion; quality is related to a moral dimension and interpreted as a sort of petition of the idea of society in spatial theory. The affirmative quality concerns not only a criticism of the commercialization processes of spaces, but above all the analysis and valorization of those creative experiences of reappropriation carried out largely by minority or marginalized social groups. Attention to the quality of hybrid spaces instead directs us towards questioning the classic concept of society consolidated by the institutionalization of the concept of hybrid introduced by Latour (1993). Therefore, the analytical attention of sociologists shifts to observing spaces as hybrids of nature and culture, removing

2 The reference is to the launch of a call entitled "Re-thinking the quality of Public Space" (see footnote number 1).

them from the ontological purification of the distinction between humans and non-humans (Latour 1993, p. 10). The hybrid observed with these lenses raises intriguing questions about space qualities and prompts us to reconsider the idea of quality to which the gaze tainted by binarisms has accustomed us. The affective quality recalls a quality connected to the atmosphere. Martina Löw talked about it in her classic, *The Sociology of Space* (2016), in which she proposes to understand spaces starting from the subjective experience of material things (Böhme 1995; Löw 2016). This affective emergency related to the orientations of sociologists around the theme of the quality of spaces placing analytical attention, for example, on atmospheres, overcomes the predominantly normative, efficiency-oriented, and semiotic-cultural readings that characterized the mainstream of literature on the quality of space, especially in the eighties (Carmona 2010).

What are the connections between these analytical emergencies of quality of space? We must admit that such connections cannot be completely clarified as the qualities that we want to distinguish tend instead to overlap. The distinction should rather be understood as an artifice to make the argument more fluid, trying to engage the reader in a dynamic exploration of the topic. However, one can state that such different qualities converge towards an idea of quality which, in the sociological perspective, can be defined as generative. In other words, reference is made to an idea capable of generating movement, alternatives, new possibilities, prefiguring and intercepting spatial changes and proposing a long-term if not transgenerational vision.

In the following three paragraphs the emerging features of the quality of space will be contextualized and elaborated while in the last paragraph some brief conclusive considerations will be made.

Affirmative quality

Neoliberal policies have brought with them a simplified model of quality based on binarisms – such as safe/unsafe, clean/dirty, beautiful/ugly, etc. – and have carried out local micro-policies inspired by the first term of the binomials. Hence, the quality that prevails is an immunized one, in the sense that Esposito and Campbell (2006) give to this term (*id est*, a quality that tries to defend itself from elements which are considered alien and contaminating). This is an immunization model which before being unjust, is simplistic and idealized.

Indeed, every day we experience polarizations that concern both the south and the north of the world; a world which is jagged and fragmented. To give an example, in the very progressive Denmark, reception centers for migrants are aseptic, impersonal, and suspected of treating asylum seekers with psychotropic drugs. In the global south, in cities like Cairo, the skyline with the best hotels in the world is

next to the so-called city of dead, where five hundred thousand people live inside the cemetery's old tombs.

The idea of quality in sociology or what sociologists seek as quality contrasts with a logic which tends to polarize spaces. Sociology aims to overcome the limits of polarized thinking by embracing a more comprehensive and concerned point of view of quality. In the field of sociological research, quality seems to look at practices that tend to "mend" social lacerations. This is a quality identified with bottom-up spatial practices that aim at social cohesion objectives.³

In recent years, sociological research has focused on the improvement of spatial practices in abandoned or neglected areas. This involves analyzing spatial tactics that prioritize the safeguarding of commons and the appropriation of unused spaces. Quality emerges from transformative daily practices, giving shape to different spatial configurations, even in informal urban contexts that have grown out of proportion without proper urban planning. We refer to informal, small-scale solutions which serve as a basis for defining a bottom-up quality that may clash with top-down perspectives. In brief, sociologists seem to draw cartographies that recognize different micro-positionalities, trying to understand how the latter converge in a collaborative effort towards a spatially widespread quality. What sociological research focuses on are the forms taken by what Rebughini (2018) defines as "affirmative criticism". This term refers to the tendency not only to invest in unmasking domination, but more importantly to act on minimal changes that can improve people's lives. Social practices seem to be increasingly oriented towards small transformations rather than towards a utopian vision of radical changes. The justification to an orientation of this kind derives from the perception of an inability to counteract political and/or economic powers considered too powerful, but instead focusing on the present, on contingency, and on situated solutions to structural problems.

In terms of sociological research, quality therefore appears as contrasting practices towards those forms of urbanization defined by mainstream literature⁴ as causes of the deterioration of essential parameters of living well: such as water, air, soil, communications, interpersonal relationships, and public administration (Xiaoming 2016). Irreflective forms of urbanization have caused a widening of the gap between different social classes and encouraged intersectional discrimination (id est, lack of social cohesion). The prevalence of an extractivist logic and therefore the

3 It is worth mentioning the fieldwork conducted by some autonomous transdisciplinary groups – Think Tangier in Tangier, Cluster in Cairo, and Trame di Quartiere in Catania – which we have observed (Fassari 2023) in their capacity as facilitators of urban spatial transformation. In many parts of the world, particularly in the southern regions of both developed and developing countries, they try to work on the quality of public space despite the absence of institutional representatives.

4 See Carmona 2010, 2015, 2019a, 2019b.

affirmation of a single way of seeing (Amin and Thrift 2016), stimulates sociological research to highlight the need for a quality that reintroduces, in a Weberian key, the plurality of the logics of action that compose social experience (Dubet 1994)⁵.

In mapping sociologists' interest in the quality of space, the focus is on affirmative qualities. On the one hand, affirmative qualities intercept the values of the community (for example, solidarity, inclusion, accessibility, sharing, memory, collective identity, relationships, and mutual learning). On the other hand, the values relate to the affirmation of a logic of subjectivation, which naturally relate to uniqueness and to the freedom of the subject. In the first case, the most interesting spatial experience for sociologists follows the logic that Dubet (2016, p. 156) defines as "integration and socialization", that is, the logic oriented towards social exchange and the continuity of society. In the second case, sociologists see as a quality of space the values correlated to the logic of subjectivation, or that allow the expression of the individual's social authenticity when affirming their own autonomy towards community morality or instrumental rationality (2016, p. 145). According to the logic of subjectivation, urban transformations are described by subjectively highlighting oriented cultural practices. From this point of view, sociology maps the right to the city (Lefebvre 1968) of culturally different subjectivities, revealing a new cartography made up of feminist, queer and postcolonial cities.

To sum up, sociological research on quality often takes a critical stance of its own (Boltanski 2011). It is an approach that takes responsibility, which should sometimes be more analytical, for the demand for public spaces imbued with ethical and aesthetic qualities oriented towards social cohesion and/or subjectivation. The impact that sociological reflection seems to have on the quality of public space is to contrast (within the framework of the plurality of action logics that orient social experience) the logics of integration and subjectivation (Dubet 2016) against the logic of purely profitable use of space. The latter expressed for example by the processes of gentrification (Zukin 1998) and accentuation of social inequality (Uitermark et al. 2024) that affect contemporary cities (Carmona 2019a).

5 A good example of the plurality of logics present in spatial experience emerges from research case carried out in Songdo in South Korea (Bartmansi et al. 2023). Songdo is an innovative and sustainable city that aims at minimizing air pollution, optimizing transportation and improving the quality of life of its people citizens. However, achieving these goals requires the pervasive presence of surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition. The quality of life in Songdo arises from the interconnection of daily socio-spatial actions that are continually renegotiated, revealing tensions that arise from the convergence of different ways of seeing and interpreting quality. Sociological analysis shows that this quality is always reflexive and contested, which can lead to the emergence of new relational models.

Hybrid quality forms

In light of what has been ascertained above, sociological quality shuns polarizations. On the contrary, it tends to be recognized when there is a mending of the tears present in the social fabric. Therefore, from a sociological point of view, at least the one observed most recently (see footnote 2), quality seems to support a change of perspective. This refers to the need to go beyond the tendency to read the world through binary lenses that are polarized as man/woman, security/freedom or natural/cultural. Instead, sociology is interested in embracing the hybrid nature of the world. This change in viewpoint is crucial. For example, examining the hybrid nature of damaged landscapes can help us understand how their regeneration involves both restoration and rewilding. Restoration aims to recreate past conditions, while rewilding recognizes the inevitable fusion of human and nonhuman elements that make up the complex fabric of our world (Latour 2005). In urban environments where human activity is continuous (Westphal et al. 2010), restoring a site to its “authentic” historic conditions can be difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, returning ecosystems to their original state is futile since the world’s nonhuman nature is no longer separated from human activity. Therefore, re-naturalizing abandoned areas requires repairing and transforming the natural environment, leading the areas to new sociocultural forms (Müller et al. 2018).

The quality of hybrid forms raises discussion due to their ability to highlight the volatility of knowledge and the need for continuous vigilance. To truly grasp the hybrid nature of the world, we need to unlearn dualisms and adopt a vision enriched by diverse disciplinary knowledge. This is where the importance of the various fields comes into play, as it is through this different knowledge that we can grasp the interconnections from which quality emerges. After considering the quality of hybridity, questions arise about whether it is only related to immediate perception or whether it involves unlearning of certain perceptions that the interpretive filter of binarism has domesticated. Quality combines sedimented effects that bring forth others from a diverse hybrid. In some cases, analyzing quality requires avoiding simplistic solutions in order to resolve the ambiguity of complex, unclear and indeterminate spaces. As Haraway (2016) suggests, researchers should be aware of the challenges of exploring such situations to better understand their relationship with the world. Quality can sometimes be found in these ambiguous and unclear spaces and can only be appreciated by adopting an analytical approach that reveals their indeterminate nature. This requires being open to criticism, learning and exposing the limits of one’s perspective and research practice (Benozzo and Gherardi 2020). The quality of a hybrid has important implications for reflecting on the quality of public spaces, and in particular, on their use. A higher quality of public space could involve a hybrid use of the space itself. For instance, when observing people experiencing homelessness, we see a dynamic use of urban public space that is often unpredictable and con-

trary to the planned use, blurring the distinction between public and private space (Do et al. 2024). As the use of space is still primarily monofunctional, this hybrid use can lead to stigmatization. However, if hybrid use becomes a design principle that embraces a plurality of urban actors and uses – going beyond a monofunctional interpretation of the city – then we could discover new qualities that emerge from the interconnection between physical elements and architectural, human and nonhuman entities, static structures, dynamic flows, and the emotional and practical activities that define urban life (Amin and Thrift 2016). Examples of such hybrid areas include socio-cultural spaces that combine innovation and social inclusion, opening up urban spaces to different uses and social groups.

Quality can be viewed sociologically, as if it featured the characteristics of a hologram. Indeed, a holographic plate preserves the information content in all its parts. This quality is characterized by interdependence, connectivity, density, and multidimensionality. In other words, quality from a sociological perspective is not limited to a single dimension but is present in every small part as a reflection of the whole.

Affective quality and atmosphere

As Löw clearly states, each space has unique qualities that are combined to form an atmosphere which can evoke various sensations, such as discomfort or comfort. For instance, a pedestrian underpass can be perceived as frightening, while a sunset over the sea can be romantic (Löw 2016, p. 172). Quality and atmosphere are closely linked, as atmosphere quality is a perception of the external effect of the spatial arrangement of social goods and people. Atmosphere is a subjective experience of material things, and it is shaped by cultural filters that individuals use to evaluate their feelings. Therefore, sociological research on the quality of space raises questions about how social quality is produced: What is the relationship between quality and meaning attribution? Who has the power to produce quality? These questions emerge considering that sociologists are truly aware that qualities can perpetuate racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes. There is always an unconscious potential in reproducing discrimination when we aim to produce quality. Hence, the quality of public space has relational and affective implications that involve the gendered and material nature of bodies. Löw (2008) clearly explains how spaces are gendered; this phenomenon is achieved through the organization of perceptions, of gazes and of their corresponding body techniques. The genderization (and racialization) of perception leads, in the sense of a somatization of the social order, to a choice of place and a practice of collocation that reproduces structural principles of society. In other words, “gender can be seen as inscribed, through bodily practices, in the production of spaces” (Löw 2006, p. 130).

Indeed, much of the research on the quality of public space focuses on how women consistently attempt to deconstruct space, transform gender cartography,

and place home-making practices as part of the public space (Rose 1993; Butcher and Maclean 2018; Kern 2019; Dambrosio Clementelli 2023). From this perspective, we can stress how women reinvent space.

It is certain that these dynamics become much more recognizable in that spatial figure which we can say *thickens* perceptions. From a sociological point of view, quality can be seen as an emotional construct strongly connected to the spatial figure of place⁶. Places are units of perception that possess unique qualities created through differentiation processes. Creating a place requires the unifying power of elements such as traditions, memories, and shared experiences. Places have a specific spatiality defined by the sense of belonging and identity that they provide (Knoblauch and Löw 2020, p. 274). They are spaces that possess atmospheric qualities. Therefore, quality from a sociological point of view seems closely related to the perception of belonging, appropriation, and recognition, as well as to actions driven primarily by the community's emotions.

Towards generative quality of space

In this last paragraph I will refer to the considerations that emerged on the quality of space during the research⁷. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted our physical and social interactions, leading to the creation of empty spaces and the implementation of social distancing measures. As stated by Löw⁸, these changes have profoundly affected the perception and quality of space and the stark contrast between the quality of space before and after the pandemic highlights how external factors can drastically alter our perception of space. The quality of space varies from day to night, from culture to culture, and according to the historical context, making it a spatial and temporal phenomenon. As already mentioned, we are influenced by the perception of space which shapes our understanding of the environment around us. From this point of view, quality is not a fixed or permanent concept; it can change suddenly and have unexpected effects. As Löw (2016) affirms, an example of how the quality of space can transform over time is the sea. At one point in history, the sea was considered scary, and people avoided it. However, over time, it has become a haven of peace where people can relax. If we think of the Mediterranean, today this idea changes again, as this has become a space where tragedies take place.

6 Reference is here made in particular to the paper presented by Gunter Weidenhaus at the workshop "Hologrammatic Quality of Public Spaces" (March 31/April 01, 2022, Sapienza University of Rome) reported by Martina Löw in her final remarks.

7 I am referring to the two workshops organized during the project (see footnote number 1). The considerations expressed here are collective, but the writer is responsible for the synthesis.

8 Concluding reflections of the first workshop (see footnote number 1).

In these reflections on the quality of space from a sociological perspective, we encounter its dynamic nature: a multidimensional, relational, and temporal one. The interplay of these three aspects energizes the concept of quality, allowing us to empirically explore the quality of public spaces. Quality, we find, is not a static dimension, but a contingent and mobile one, constantly evolving, and the quality of space must enable us not only to adapt to change, but also to catch sight of it and refigure it.

However, for the purpose of this paper, we are all particularly interested in underlining how Martina Löw's theory on space has allowed us to think about quality in theoretical and empirical terms. She has given analytical depth to the interpretative lenses to the point that we are able to grasp the complexity of the term. This meant placing reflexivity within the intricate spatial dynamics that exists between subjects and objects, between the material and the symbolic, between knowledge and perception.

The sociological lens viewpoint allows us to transcend the dichotomy between *undermanaged* and *overmanaged* spaces that pervades the mainstream literature on quality (Carmona 2010). Instead, the quality sought by sociologists implies the observation of bottom-up practices to be related to those theoretical turns sensitive to the significant transformations underway. To exemplify, reference has been made here to the concepts of hybrid and hybrid spaces and to the relationship between quality and atmospheres which attempt to account for the affective dimension of the term quality. In a word, quality from a sociological perspective does not simplify, but on the contrary, forces us to deal with its intricate nature. From a sociological standpoint, in fact, the quality of space cannot be defined as univocal but as the outcome of tensions because it is defined by the combination of the different logics that make up the social experience (Dubet 2016). It follows that quality is a social problem that must always be delineated, circumscribed, and defined theoretically and empirically.

Wanting to attempt a definition of quality of space that is more deductive and diachronic, the reflection on the definition of quality proximal to the sociological perspective reveals a definition of quality of space that can be associated with its being generative.

The aforementioned twists of quality converge in a quality that is characterized by the fact that it represents a fertile cultivation ground for producing quality. Generativity is a polysemic and polycontextual concept whose root is in the process of becoming, doing, and remaking that occurs throughout generations. It is a concept we find in Husserl (Steinbock 1995), more recently in Erikson (1982) and in Chomsky's linguistic theory (1972), as emerging from processes of combination and recombination that produce an infinite and continuous expansion of possibilities. Thus again, in literature, we find re-combinatory narrative techniques that develop new paths for the reader (Wallick 2012) and in architecture and computer science, it is about

how simple algorithms generate forms, envelopes, and structures that 'reproduce' nature (Alexander 2002; Frazer 2002).

However, when we refer to the quality of space, the meaning of this term refers above all to the thought of Bateson (1995); it is not only generating something that will go beyond the present, but also a space understood as relational and ecological or situated and interconnected. Quality, sociologically understood, is a widespread process. It requires a glossary that expressed in the movement of creating spaces that prefigure the social changes. This idea of quality, interactive and anticipatory, should be understood as a posture that combines contextualized learning, aesthetic reflexivity, prospective and affective vision. It is a connective quality that holds together hybrid elements.

In summary, quality of space lies in the possibility of producing quality. In this concise definition we find, as Simmel (1917) reminds us, the meaning of relational thinking underlying our discipline. The quality that sociology looks at is undoubtedly linked to sustainability or to the sense of limitation implied in the concept of generativity. Hence, a relevant implication is that the quality of space is based on the use, reciprocity, restitution, and repair of resources in an intergenerational horizon, which therefore includes past and future generations. From the analytical level of sociology, what we mean here by quality needs to be placed in a long-term time horizon renewing an unextinguishable debt bond with those who come after. In this sense, sociology seeks a spatial quality that unfolds over time or lasts over time. The need for a generative quality that sociologists attempt to elaborate opposes the alienating process of uncontrolled growth and acceleration. Instead, the attempt is to select those practices that Rosa (2019) defined as 'resonant' or to bring people back into a vibrant relationship with what surrounds them. We can state that quality, from a sociological point of view, should not be understood as a result, a particular form, an objective, centered on some dimension, but rather as an orientation, as a *tension towards* something. Using a metaphor, quality is like the wind, it is not a reality that begins to blow but precisely the blowing itself (Elias 1978, p. 112 as cited in Löw 2016, p. 50). Quality is seen as an ongoing process or journey rather than a destination. This image shows how fluid, dynamic and challenging it is to define quality in a sociological framework. At the same time, however, it should not deflect us from considering it most importantly as an organized process and a method. This is the sociological competence we can offer when we define, implement, and evaluate processes oriented towards the quality of space.

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