Re-using the Public Space

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Abstract
The contribution illustrates some of the in-progress results of the research activities carried out by the tam based at Politecnico di Milano within the research programme En/Counter/Point funded by HERA in 2019. En/Counter/Point is a three-year collaborative project tackling the question of how and why multiple heritages, memories, processes of attachment and belonging to and in cultural spaces and places, are being (re)negotiated during a time of migration and identity "crises".
Drawing on this main research question, our study focuses on the role of adaptive reuse interventions on urban public spaces to investigate how these can foster new and more self-conscious uses of city's commons.

This short video contribution, hinges on the analysis of three emblematic examples of participatory reuse projects of abandoned, misused, or neglected public space to introduce some preliminary findings of our research activities opening them to debate. The case studies - namely L'ARGO by Orizzontale in Rome, Italy; MON(S) INVISIBLE by ConstructLab in Montreal and GANG OF MONTREAL by CollectifEtc in Montreal – are presented here by chiefly focusing on the architectural outcome of the collaboration of the designers with local communities and their involvement in the design process. In doing so, the contribution seeks to point some possible further lines of enquiry, and that notably pertain the role of designers and the design practice in triggering processes of re-appropriation and attachment to, in and through urban places by increasingly diverse communities.

01| The design of public spaces in the contemporary city:
Debate and strategies
Since 2015, more than eighty percent of European citizens have been living in or around urban areas, and the awareness that inadequate planning and design can have a deep negative impact on the possibility of promoting forms of integration, coexistence and mutual interaction among people is commonly acknowledged. In this regard, in particular, an improved understanding of design and use of public space within cities is internationally considered as fundamental for improving socio-cultural inclusion and development. This need appears even more urgent, when looking the area of major fragility within the urban territory, which is represented by the network of its superfluous spaces. Those small in-between spaces – such as vacant lots, unused infrastructural pertinences, or abandoned green spaces – resulting as a leftover of a design process. Their lack of formal identity, in fact, always reflects a lack of any public interest or collective engagement, and they often end up becoming exclusionary places for minoritarian populations (Mitchell 2003). But they can also be seen as non-prescriptive spaces, for experimenting new practices of public citizenship. This, however, implies the necessity of defining new tools and methodologies of re-activation capable of building a new sense of community within an inclusive perspective.

In this regard, although today attempts are still being made at municipal and regional planning, top-down actions of urban design and management tend to recede. As cities have become denser, in other words, and their functional programs more variable, rather than large-scale transformations, smaller "urban catalysts" have pervasively become a preferred mode of intervention for public space building and activation. These "tactical" modes of intervention have arisen, as a counterpart to a classic and strategic notion of planning, in the form of everyday and bottom-up approaches to local problems, which make use of short-term, low-cost and scalable interventions and. Be they sanctioned or not by urban authorities, spontaneously arising from the streets or emerging from given creative practices and professional specialisations, yet they always represent a flexible and adaptable tool for both initiating the process of public space reactivation and testing the different levels of feasibility related to possible future changes. For this reason, today, in contemporary cases of re-activation of urban interstices, municipal institutions increasingly prefer to fund small temporary reactivation projects, both inexpensive and participatory, to verify the sustainability of more demanding investments, both from a social and economic point of view.

02| Reusing the public space? Insights from practice
We will present here, three examples of adaptive reuse of three different city places, emblematically standing for different design strategies of reuse of misused urban public spaces aimed at fostering their reactivation and re-appropriation within a context characterised by the coexistence of diverse users and heterogeneous urban communities.
By building on these cases, the scope of this contribution is to raise some questions and spur a debate within the panel on the actual and potential role of designers and the design practice in triggering processes of belonging and attachment to, in and through urban public spaces.

The three following projects presented here, have been selected because they are emblematic of three different spatial and architectural archetypes, that we identified as recurrent in many projects analysed, by different designers, in different contexts: the *Pivot Object*, the *Listening Space* and the *Lab Area.*

L'ARGO by Orizzontale (2017, Rome, IT)
A <u>pivotal object</u> has a strong narrative power: being attractive for its evocative aesthetic, it is able to create a story on its own and to become a scenography for encounters between people; it evokes the dimensions of play and rituality. The main goal of this type of intervention is to foster the re-interpretation of a place and stimulate new interactions. Through planned inclusive activities, inhabitants are invited to experience and interpretate the object, which serves as a trigger for the re-appropriation of the place and that is meant to evolve with time.
To question the fate of the empty lot of Largo Perestrello (Rome), Orizzontale built first the Iceberg (2017) and later L'Argo, a boat (2019): these narrative devices succeeded in raising the interest of the people in the neighbourhood, who started claiming the square as a public space belonging to them. Although no definitive redesign has been set for the regeneration of the square, a community is now taking care of it.

MON(S) INVISIBLE by Construct Lab (2015, Mons, BE)
Citizen's engagement is central in the reuse of city's commons, but its definition differs from the stereotypical concept of participation. To engage doesn't mean to activate communities: it is about supporting established local dynamics and elaborating tools to promote situated resources. Dialogue and exchange are funding attitudes for a place re-appropriation and design offers the ground to build a common sense of belonging, recalling the civic value of public space. In many of the projects analysed, engagement is embodied by <u>listening spaces</u>: devices that promote active organisations, horizontal debate and self-management. These objects have a recognisable shape, that clearly declare their function. Construct Lab defines the essential attitude of gathering as *Agoraphilia*, as stated for instance in their installation for Mon(s) Invisible (2015). In the reactivation of a neglected park, the central element of the project is the *agora*: a round platform to discuss as well to celebrate and plan, where people can share ideas and take responsibilities.

GANG OF MONTREAL by Collectif Etc (2016, Montreal, CA)
The sustainability of the projects is determined by the renewability and affordability of the materials used, by the feasibility of the technical resources applied and by the role acquired by inhabitants in the maintenance of the intervention. Self-construction is the key issue regarding this aspect and many interventions involve a workshop phase: the space becomes a <u>laboratory</u>. The use of low-cost materials and basic building techniques, makes it possible for non-professionals to take part in the construction phases. This provides the community with knowledge about spatial regeneration, creates autonomy in taking care of the place and creates a strong infrastructure of domestication. In Gang of Montreal by Collective Etc (2016), the project is specifically meant to be an "open construction site". The place becomes the occasion for inhabitants to test new uses and configurations, to take part in the production of space gradually, measuring time and scale of a re-appropriation and bounding deeply with the site.

03| The public space as an encounterpoint: a designerly view

The pivot-object, the listening space and the lab-area give a form and a shape to different ideas of people interaction with, in and through the public space.

The pivot-object is the result of the attempt to foster a one-to-one physical interaction of different individuals with the place through the aesthetic impact of a site-specific object.

The listening space, ensues from the aim to create a space encouraging and allowing interpersonal encounters between different people in that specific place.

The Lab-area results from the will to create an occasion for interpersonal exchanges and engagements in a place through an interaction with it consisting in its actual physical production.

The three projects presented here, as many of those analysed in our study, are the results of different design processes, each of which has been variously characterised by an open and participatory approach as well as by its specific architectural, social and cultural context. As for any project, and crucially for reuse projects, their outcome is therefore inherently one-off, being co-constituted and determined by a configuration of pre-existing and ever-changing, material and immaterial elements within a site-specific design intervention. Aware of this, our attempt is not to identify any readymade solution, nor to argue that some similar spatial or architectural solutions may arise from different design contexts. The pivot-object, the listening space and the lab-area should be rather understood as archetypes, as analytical categories, ones that are formal and spatial, that can provide fruitful insights into the study of uses, disuses and reuses of contemporary public spaces.
This implies examining the design process and its outcomes beyond a mere architectural domain by addressing its social and cultural agency. This allows investigating and evaluating its actual and potential role in evolving public spaces within a urban context increasingly characterised by the coexistence of diverse users and heterogeneous urban communities and in triggering processes of re-appropriation, belonging and attachment to, in and through urban public spaces.