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ESCUELA POLITÉCNICA SUPERIOR Alicante University

Carretera San Vicente del Raspeig s/n 03690 San Vicente del Raspeig. Alicante (SPAIN)

eurau@ua.es

The effects of an uncertain project

Testing the device of masterplan as habitat of negotiation

Orsenigo, Gianfranco¹

1. Politecnico of Milan, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Milan, Italy,
gianfranco.orsenigo@polimi.it

Synopsis

In the last years we are witnessing a new interest to architecture as a social practice and the tendency to acknowledge the collective nature of design. From this point of view the design activity needs to be focus more on the performative nature of the process and on the objectives to produce multiple effects, physical and not only. The design process involves many players (professionals, administrations, citizens ...) with different roles (promoters, beneficiaries, co-designers, facilitators ...).

The role of architectural design is repositioned within a participatory multi-actor development process and, coherently, its tools seem to need innovation. The masterplan can be a fertile one. Its potentialities are investigated in the West Road Project, a device for activating networks and public spaces through the diffused neglected areas in the west part of the City of Milan. It is a research in action led by a multidisciplinary group of researchers and staff of local cooperative. The masterplan is imagined as a habitat of negotiations through the issue of space that host the multiple events coming up from territories and give them a broader framework of meanings. It is not a a fixed planimetric scheme of volumes. At the same time the purpose is to encourage to action the territories through the participatory process.

Key words: Masterplan, negotiations, uncertainty, social process, contingency.

1. Introduction

The issue of marginal neighborhoods is an urgent theme on the political agenda of many European cities and of the European Commission itself. Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies is one of the main challenge of Horizon 2020, a program that promotes researches aimed at the investigation of initiatives to reduce inequalities and social exclusion¹.

Disadvantaged areas are the focus of these activities, places that are characterized by strong physical deterioration of places, scarce accessibility, lack of social assistance and a high concentration of fragile populations – old people, unemployed and foreigners. The stereotyped way of thinking about these places often simplifies their complexity and confuses even more the articulated phenomena. However, these areas are full of spatial resources and of social and technical skills that in many cases trigger a positive creative vivacity.

As a result of the late economic crisis, the experimentations and promotion of bottom-up initiatives are increased, especially around the theme of common goods. Unfortunately, this design boost often dissolves itself into individual events incapable of shaping and feeding a recognizable project for places. The transformation of these places pushes to investigate some methodological devices more inclusive of different disciplines and actors, more ductile and interactive at all levels of the reactivation process. A tool that is able to adapt itself to the contingency and to act successfully on the collective spaces.

2. Design effects as outcome

The contemporary complexity is characterized by “turbulence and uncertainty”, the condition in which “the most things could happen – maybe all – but nothing it can be surely done” (Bauman 2016, 13). From the architectural design perspective, to face this complexity it seems necessary to adopt an innovative attitude focused more on the production of effects (Armando, Durbiano 2017), both physical and social, than on the predictable outcomes. No longer the design has to advance solutions to a set of given questions, but it becomes more and more a “creative act of problematization” (Stengers 2014, 193). A projective act in which “the problems you choose, or frame, and even invent, do not exist independently of you, but also determine your mode of practice and impact upon your environment, the habitat in which you are undertaking your work” (Frichot 2017, 147). We move from a problem solving approach to a problem setting one.

The project becomes a process of disciplinaries contaminations, sensible to what society expresses into an inter-active design. It orients the treatment of the complex issues, legitimating itself by addressing a series of conflicts and negotiations (Yaneva 2012) between the many players involved. The design activities, seen as an ecology of practices (Stengers 2005), becomes the habitat in which share the knowledges in a collaborative approach. The outcomes should be an open project, capable of redefining itself according to the contingency. In an outlined framework the implemented actions can seize the

¹ There are other initiatives of EU that focus on marginal issue as UIA and URBACT

opportunities without being forced into predetermined timeline charts. At the same time, they are often pushed to reinterpret creatively the bureaucratic procedures. The opportunities and resources available at a given moment feed and redirect the following steps of the full process.

In this perspective the role of the designer, or better of the design team, turn to be central. How can design trigger users' initiatives in neighbourhood transformations, making them more social resilient and self-renewable living areas? This becomes the challenge for the designers. Together to other stakeholders and through the issue of the space, they are pushed to manage and feed the participation process and the advancement of contents in the project. "(The expert) is required to structure a process of intervention on the content, building frames of reference, interpreting the territories, triggering through the proposition of scenarios, design forms based on social interaction, translating informal practices in the language of policies, supporting the consolidation of dimensions of management, approaching promoters to additional resources, promoting the dissemination and transferability of experiences, reinforcing links and networks of the local to the urban and beyond " (Fareri 2009, 203).

3. The device of the masterplan. Is it liable to innovation?

The repositioning of architectural design drives to re-think the power of the documents produced. Among all the disciplinary tools, the masterplan seems a fertile one of innovation to support the effects' project. The masterplan here is not thought as a fixed planimetric scheme but a mechanism that each time modifies its format finding the most suitable one according to the contingency.

The potentialities of this device are investigated in the West Road Projects (WRP)², a research-in-action promoted by a group of researchers of Politecnico di Milano and a network of local actors aimed at activating social processes in common spaces of the western outskirts of Milano.

The focus area is characterized by the critical presence of social housing blocks and the via Novara, a historic radial city road thought just as a traffic tube. At the same, time this is a place reach of potentialities such as urban parks and a strong network of citizens groups.

The starting point is a punctual query of Italia-Nostra (project's partner): promote a cycling system to connect the city center and the parks. The research enlarges this objective through a participative design process that engages also the on-going local micro-transformations. The idea is to consider the road as a device to reactivate a swarm of neglected spaces and to promote the local cycling connections.

The masterplan is adopted as a tool to host the heterogeneous events, *bottom-up and top-down*, and to give them a broader framework of meanings. The participatory process encourages the territories to be active and prepositive. In this view, the masterplan is a palimpsest (Corboz 1985) that

² The WRP is a tow years research project started in March 2018. It is financed by Polisocial, the social responsibility programme of Politecnico di Milano, sponsored by Municipality of Milan and some companies with technical co-financing.

coordinates and orients the actions of a variety of actors in an inclusive and upgradeable manner, capable of drawing a long-term strategic structure.

Can the masterplan be a habitat of negotiation between the different intentions of the many involved actors? In which way can it force users to act? How can architecture contribute to involve other stakeholders in the process through the issue of form? These are the questions around which the research moves.

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Biography

Gianfranco Orsenigo. Architect, currently PhD candidate in Urban Architectural Design and Interior Design (PAUI) at the Politecnico of Milano. He collaborates in research and projects at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU) of the same University and carries out his professional activity within the design group *Gruarchitetti* based in Milano.