

The iceberg, the stage, and the kitchen

Neglected public places and the role of design-led interventions

Jacopo Leveratto, Francesca Gotti, and Francesca Lanz

Introduction

The existence of open and inclusive public spaces has long been recognized as a key factor for promoting the development of more sustainable and resilient urban societies when dealing with new mobility patterns and migration flows (Delanty and Rumford, 2005). And today, in Europe, the areas that show major potential for the development of inclusive social dynamics are those represented by the so-called “superfluous landscapes” (Nielsen, 2002), a network of minor and residual in-between spaces, often decayed and abandoned, resulting as a leftover after one or more planning processes. Often described as a failure of urban development or a prototype of “anti-public space” (Littenberg and Peterson, 2019), these marginal spaces can also be seen as non-prescriptive places, liable to the continuous experimentation of new values, roles, and practices of public citizenship. For this reason, they have increasingly been considered a central but neglected urban asset, from both a social and spatial point of view, for improving socio-cultural inclusion and development within the city.

The activation of such marginal spaces by means of spatial design requires devising innovative tools and methodologies needed to build a new sense of collective belonging that can encourage people to look after these spaces. Such tools and methodologies frequently clash with the traditional parameters consolidated within the field of architectural and urban practices. Even though attempts have been made at a central level, top-down actions of reactivation have tended to recede in the recent past. Rather than large transformative processes, smaller urban catalysts have increasingly become a preferred mode for building and activating public spaces, by applying short-term, low-cost, and concerted forms of intervention in response to specific local problems to both initiate the process of regeneration and test the feasibility of possible future changes. Thus today, in most cases of regeneration of superfluous landscapes, municipal institutions prefer to fund small and temporary activation projects in advance, both inexpensive and participatory, to verify the social and economic sustainability of more demanding investments. From a design point of view, this not only entails a significant change in scale and in the way of looking at the mechanisms of urban projects, but also challenges the role of planners, architects, and other urban practitioners by

requiring an approach that can effectively mix top-down and bottom-up impulses and manage heterogeneous contributions.

This is what this chapter looks at: the approaches, strategies, and tactics by which designers and urban practitioners have faced the need for inclusivity to activate residual and neglected public spaces, both in terms of spatial arrangements and production processes. Its main objective is to individuate among them the “catalysts” for triggering spontaneous tactics of placemaking and translate them into replicable design indications – at first by framing the operative role of spatial design in relation to superfluous landscapes and urban interstices in a historical and critical perspective, and then by analyzing three paradigmatic examples, selected from the 80 investigated, which represent three different answers to the questions posed, epitomizing three distinct major lines of thought. The aim is to describe how designers, by means of their disciplinary tools, have devised new ways of enabling different forms of spatial appropriation of public spaces. Instigating a sense of collective belonging to these public spaces turns out to be central in these actions as it encourages people to take care of them, both as part of a universal right to the city and as an effective institutional – yet community-oriented – strategy of urban management. By means of new forms of spatial design, neglected spaces are transformed into places in which new social relations and thus new forms of belonging emerge.

The search for urban inclusivity

Since 2015, more than 80% of European citizens have been living in or around urban areas, and the awareness that inadequate planning and design can have a deeply negative impact on the possibility of promoting forms of integration, coexistence, and mutual interaction among people is commonly acknowledged. For this reason, the individuation of tools and methods for more open and inclusive urban design plays a very central role in the European agenda on research and innovation concerning social sustainability and resilience (European Council, 2013).¹ In this regard, an improved understanding of the design and use of public space within cities is internationally considered fundamental for improving socio-cultural inclusion and development in relation to new mobility patterns and migration flows (UN-HABITAT, 2012, 2013, 2014).

This is because public spaces can be recognized as the arenas in which key cultural interactions and societal dynamics take place, and where values, belief systems, memories, languages, daily practices, and social lives operate and evolve, in that they are spaces in which people recognize themselves as a public, but also where specificity, difference, and separateness can be maintained and asserted in productive ways (Madanipour, 2003). While recognizing that public space takes several forms and shapes, this chapter primarily looks at public space in the form of urban open spaces, or the physical areas of the city that are open and accessible to all members of the public in a society, in principle though not necessarily in practice (Orum and Neal, 2010, p.1). More precisely, we look at their being

“places”, or physical centres of meaning defined by one or more personal experiences that generate a sense of identity and mutual belonging with a certain space (Relph, 1976, p.45). Such physical places are characterized by the inescapable “encounter with others” (Norberg-Schulz, 1984, p.13; Massey, 1991), be they people, objects, or material traces of culture, which provide new opportunities for looking at multiple histories and identities within a diversified Europe. It is not surprising, therefore, that the physical definition of an open and inclusive public space over the last decade has been considered an essential precondition for the development of more sustainable and resilient urban societies (Delanty and Rumford, 2005, p.68).

Today, in this context, the urban areas that show major potential for the development of inclusive social dynamics are those represented by the so-called “superfluous landscapes” (Nielsen, 2002), the system of neglected in-between spaces resulting as an involuntary product of a certain mechanism of development (Tonnelat, 2008). They can be small, like informal parking lots, or large, like the vast agricultural areas bordered by the suburban sprawl; linear, like unused infrastructural facilities, or point-like, such as single vacant plots; temporary, like abandoned places waiting for a new purpose, or permanent, like unbuildable buffer areas; and they have been referred to in different ways, such as “*terrain vagues*” (de Solà-Morales, 1995), “dead zones” (Doron, 2000), “parafunctional spaces” (Papastergiadis, 2002), or simply “voids”. In any case, however, their main characteristic is that of being urban enclosures resulting as a leftover of one or more planning processes from which they have been indirectly excluded and, by consequence, of being surrounded, and thus defined only by difference, by spaces with an identity they are totally deprived of: urban “wastes”, in other words, involuntarily generated by the logic of abandonment (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996) or residue (Brighenti, 2013), which often end up becoming exclusionary places for minorities and migrants (Mitchell, 2003; Marcuse, 2009).

However, although their residual and decayed condition frequently reflects a lack of any public interest or collective engagement for which they have been interpreted as a failure of urban development or even as the prototype of “anti-public space” (Chevrier, 2011), they can also be seen as non-prescriptive spaces, liable to a continuous redefinition of social roles and values. In this perspective, therefore, they are not only places of social exclusion, but they can also represent possible incubators for people to experiment with new practices of public citizenship and to negotiate and renegotiate their sense of belonging to the city in the most absolute freedom (Hudson and Shaw, 2009). For this reason, since the mid-1990s, from both a social and spatial point of view, superfluous landscapes, especially in Europe, have increasingly been considered a central but marginalized urban asset. The regeneration of these landscapes may have remarkable potential for facilitating participation and improving socio-cultural inclusion and development (Madanipour, 2004), even though, from a design point of view, this implies the necessity to define new design tools and methodologies of reactivation capable of building a new sense of community within an inclusive perspective.

Learning from tactics

The problem of identifying a possible approach for activating inclusive public spaces from a spatial design standpoint lies in the fact that the need for specific tools partially clashes with the substantial inconsistency affecting this research field. Although current socio-economic trends have been pushing the concept of inclusivity towards the centre of the debate about urban resilience, today, architectural culture is still struggling to define a speculative approach to inclusivity, which could produce a differentiated set of operative indications. Until now, the focus on this topic, with very few exceptions, has been oriented in one single direction, with an almost exclusive thematization of physical or cognitive accessibility (Burton and Mitchell, 2006). And this has led to overlooking the fact that inclusivity, first of all, is a constructive factor based on the possibility of building a sense of belonging that brings people to feel part of a certain space (Basso Peressut, Forino, and Leveratto, 2016), and that spatial belonging, as an act of self-recognition, is essentially determined by the direct possibility that people have to control the space they inhabit, both from a concrete and a symbolic point of view (Lefebvre, 1968).

In this regard, the most interesting advancements have probably been achieved by the uncoordinated efforts of a significant part of design disciplines that, since the early 1960s, have aimed to identify some concrete tools that could enable different forms of placemaking (Carmona, 2003), in order to encourage people to reclaim their urban spaces and exert their sense of belonging, both as part of a universal right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968) and as an effective institutional strategy of urban management that is alternative to the growing phenomena of privatization (Zukin, 1995). Following the first seminal heteronymous works about the fundamentally social character of the city (Lynch, 1960; Jacobs, 1961) and the subsequent redefinition of the urban lexicon (van Eyck, 1962; Hertzberger, 1963; Gehl, 1971; Whyte, 1980), this position today focuses on the research of concrete tools for building richer and more democratic spaces in order to maximize the opportunities of their users by considering the possibility of spatial appropriation as part of the design process (Cooper Marcus and Francis, 1998; Shaftoe, 2008).

This implies specific attention towards the citizens' different and spontaneous practices of public space "domestication" (Jackson, 1988; Kumar and Makarova, 2008), but also towards the specific spatial scale within which those actions take place, thus informally defining a sort of convergence of traditionally distant design disciplines on to this field of research. The investigation in this area, in other words, develops around some key issues concerning the "inhabitable" dimension that projects should materialize, even in spatial contexts that are traditionally subject to a different functional and symbolic regime, like public spaces, defining a new way of approaching urban design, which involves greater attention to the human scale, not only as a metrical parameter, but primarily as the dimension in which people produce their space and thus negotiate their sense of spatial belonging. Both as a more responsive form of spatial design and as a less

demanding tactic of urban management, based on the informal and continuous care for places that an increased sense of attachment usually ends up inducing (Leveratto, 2019).

The result is that today, although attempts are still being made at the level of municipal and regional planning, top-down actions of urban design and management tend to recede (Gadanho, 2014). As cities have become denser and their functional programmes more variable, rather than implementing large-scale transformations unable to deal effectively with the dynamics of contemporary urban developments, smaller “urban catalysts” have pervasively become a preferred mode of intervention for public space building and activation (Oswalt, Overmeyer, and Misselwitz, 2013). Similar to what Vos has observed in the context of Southeast Europe (this volume), 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, making use of short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies (Lydon and Garcia, 2015).

Whether they are sanctioned or not by urban authorities, spontaneously arising from the streets, or emerging from given creative practices and professional specializations, they always represent a creative reappropriation of the contemporary city in the form of a diffuse and uncoordinated process of domestication, testifying to a new sense of place in relation to spaces devoid of any identity (Venturini, 2019; Lang Ho, Cramer, and van der Leer, 2012; Lerner, 2016). For this reason, today, in most of these cases, municipal institutions prefer to fund small and temporary activation projects in advance, both inexpensive and participatory, to verify the social and economic sustainability of more demanding investments, thus changing most of the design parameters in this field, both in terms of spatial arrangements and production processes.

From a design point of view, the sudden success of these forms of intervention has entailed both a significant change in scale, from macro to micro, and a new way of looking at the morphogenetic mechanisms of urban projects from a series of sequential operations to a simultaneous process in which various decisional agents interact to generate a complex spatial system (Leveratto, 2017). Moreover, it has shifted the conceptual core of public space design from a purely spatial dimension to a multi-layered one, which is also made up of immaterial factors such as participatory processes, communication projects, consensus-building mechanisms, specific regulations, and conditions of use (Sadik-Khan, 2016). In summary, the emerging attempts of tactical urbanism have challenged both the traditional parameters of public space design and the role of planners, architects, and other urban practitioners by requiring new tools and methodologies that effectively mix top-down and bottom-up impulses to trigger and foster a constructive and “progressive sense of place” (Massey, 1991). By doing so, these actors aim to integrate forms of socially located belonging with spatially located belonging (Eckersley, 2022) strengthening the reappropriation of public space.

The problem with this requirement of new tools and methodologies is that top-down and bottom-up processes of placemaking are not always compatible.

Whereas the former processes involve academic institutions, associations, municipalities, and other authorities in a multidisciplinary, inter-institutional project, in the latter, place meanings are made by inhabitants' negotiation of their belonging in a dialogical way (Bendiner-Viani, 2013). In other words, when managing the social regeneration of a complex territory, from a top-down point of view, the promotion of communitarian participation is obtained by communication strategies, procedures and targeted consultations involving the development of a network and significant autonomy and clarity of roles. By contrast, less is known about bottom-up and spontaneous forms of activation, in which stories play a fundamental role in how people assign value to a place and to an action. Thus, a key issue for research in this area is to identify the best practice examples of this spontaneous activity across different contexts (Ghibusi and Leveratto, 2019). For this reason, our research conducted in this field was developed through three sequential phases, aiming to analyze the topic according to different levels of detail and operational methodologies.

The first concerned the identification and the preliminary analysis of paradigmatic European examples of tactical interventions in public spaces, which have been mapped through literary reviews and indirect surveys. After having compiled 80 relevant cases, the second phase was to identify the best practices according to their ability to last longer than expected, generate sustainable change, or trigger further actions beyond the originally planned deadline and functional programme, which was considered evidence of the sense of place they were able to generate. This revealed a sense of ownership among the participants in this space caused by a sense of belonging to a community related to this space. This led to the selection of a restricted number of three case studies, which were further analyzed during the following phase by directly surveying the space, redrawing the project, and conducting interviews with the designers involved in the process of placemaking to make them identify the catalysts of success for the interventions taken into consideration. How did the planners, designers, and architects manage to create a place in which socially located belonging became combined with spatially located belonging?

The purpose was to arrive at a critical and dialogic definition of the production processes and spatial arrangements that have determined the success of the single interventions, which are presented, through three different tales, in the following paragraphs. Each one is dedicated to one single case, the *Iceberg* by Orizzontale, the stage by Constructlab, and the kitchen by AtelierMob, which proved to be successful in initiating effective and long-term processes of spontaneous reappropriation, and establishing a strong community presence, in the form of grassroots management and inclusive activities, after the completion of the design intervention.

The *Iceberg*

The story of the first one dates back to 2010 when a group of architecture students founded the Orizzontale collective in Rome, through which they began to conduct

some initial urban explorations aimed at the reconnaissance of familiar and marginal territories to question their condition. One of the areas of major interest was Largo Perestrello in the peripheral neighbourhood of Maranella, an empty and semi-abandoned lot in a state of considerable material decay, originally intended to be occupied by the stalls of the local market. After a first attempt to interact with the inhabitants by organizing an event in 2011, the right occasion to intervene on the site came in 2017 with the New Generations Festival, for which the collective proposed a temporary installation in collaboration with the social psychologists of Noeo.

The design process was initially developed by building a shared narration with the local actors through a series of meetings over three months, aimed at understanding the reason for the detachment from the site and the value that people attributed to the deserted space, and at envisioning a new meaning through a form of spatial storytelling. This strategy reveals similarities with what Głowacka-Grajper et al. (this volume) observed in relation to marginalized communities in the Polish context, namely that “belonging” often does not operate as a fixed, social identity, but rather as a discursive tool that allows groups to negotiate their presence in social space and life. According to Orizzontale (2020), as they have previously tested in other cases, the creation of a strong narrative through an exploratory and playful approach is what can help in getting to know people, especially in those situations when clear situated needs have not been declared yet. When a space remains undefined but not dangerous, citizens do not question it nor reclaim it (De Sola Morales, 1995). The intervention thus served to attract the attention of inhabitants by breaking the existing balance and triggering new reactions. For this reason, the choice was to produce a unique element or a pivotal object that could function as an activator for collateral activities and unintended meanings.

The studio, in other words, decided to develop a spatial device that could have a strong and direct visual character, which people could easily relate to without directly referring to the neighbourhood identity. The creation of a neutral background – which was open for interpretation – was thought of as a scenography for people to build their own narration and claim their role as protagonists belonging to that place (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). All of this was realized through the stylized shape of a small “iceberg”, which emerged from the first design phase and guided the whole production of the intervention towards the materialization of a somehow inhabitable sculpture which could offer many possibilities of use: both constituting a sort of entertainment on its own by engaging people on and around its physical configuration and opening a dialogue with citizens aimed at reviving their interest across the whole site.

In terms of construction, Orizzontale was committed to a collaborative self-building process from the very beginning, keeping the construction site open for people to join and passers-by to observe. In line with the principles of do-it-yourself architecture, the materials and techniques applied were accessible and replicable, allowing for the realization of a temporary and reversible structure: two modules, a small ziggurat and a table, with both structure and cladding in wood,

completed by a graphic painted finish, aimed at creating both an evocative and a domestic atmosphere, stimulating alternative visual scenarios and inviting inhabitants to explore, play, and perform. In this way, the collaborative act of building the object itself became a collective action on display, concretizing the abstract idea of spatial regeneration into a factual and accessible operation.

In parallel, collateral actions and reactions happened on and around the *Iceberg*, both the planned ones organized by the team and the unexpected ones: the openness of the project and of the related programme gave the possibility to people to intervene, interpret, and contribute at different levels, producing a sense of inclusivity among diverse publics (Basso Peressut, Forino, and Leveratto, 2016). It provided the people with the sense of participating in a community, which brought together heterogeneous actors “who might relate very differently if they met in other settings” (cf. Cornwall, 2004b, p.76). It did so by initiating the construction of new narratives and testing various initiatives led by local associations, which, after two years, led to another temporary installation by Orizzontale, titled *L’Argo*. In this sense, therefore, the continuity guaranteed by the work of Orizzontale over the years represented a concrete reference in the neighbourhood for the development of new meanings and interactions between place and people, which evolved after the completion of the projects and supported more spontaneous uses of the square.

The stage

Engagement is more about including designers and decision-makers in the life of people and learning the subject they are dealing with, rather than involving people in the design process (ConstructLab, 2019). This perspective on engagement, suggested by the German collaborative studio ConstructLab on the occasion of another fortunate tactical intervention, emphasizes the potential of design-led interventions to overturn roles and develop new practices of spatial production within urban regeneration projects. What design can do is question its founding principles, not only its uses and features but also the policies defining it, the responsibilities it generates, the social issues it can or cannot deal with, and the welfare services it could implement. ConstructLab’s project titled *Mon(s) Invisible* was precisely aimed at challenging the role of design and designer on multiple levels.

It all began in 2014 when the German collective was asked by the municipality of Mons in Belgium to think of a reactivation project for an unused park on the roof of a former army bakery, which could also activate a certain sense of publicness. Being promoted by an institution, the challenge was to develop the initiative into a fully community-led project, mediating between top-down strategies and grassroots resources (Bendiner-Viani, 2013). ConstructLab’s initial idea was to make a symbolic gesture to visualize the space as an egalitarian background, making a wide circle in the centre of the area. During a series of workshops, conducted together with students and local associations, the team built a big circular

stage of wood, a simplified amphitheatre open to the surrounding. Its shape was essential, almost bi-dimensional: a sculptural horizontal surface, blending with the morphology of the site, realized to make the space for speakers and audience interchangeable through a variation in the section of the decking, which allowed reciprocal observation.

The production of a stage recurs in many of the projects analyzed in the broader research, where it is usually used as a temporary or movable structure for concerts or performances. In *Mon(s) Invisible*, by contrast, it acquired a political and civic value that allowed it to resist for a long time, being maintained and actively used by the citizens of the neighbourhood. The stage primarily served as a listening space, offering a platform of debate for the people working on the project and for those interested in getting involved: it re-signified the park as an “arena of governance”, an “invited space” to train democracy (Cornwall, 2004a). Thus, the project moved from the creation of one single structure to the development of additional devices, addressing different needs and supporting the development of a programme for the park: a kitchen, a dining room, and storage spaces were built to be used by the community working on the site. This transformed the whole park into a place of encounter, inviting inhabitants and designers to explore, observe, question, and rethink it collectively. Later, a group of inhabitants took the initiative to create other structures, including an oven, a mobile beer brewery, a sauna, and a children’s playground, which were built on-site with the same construction techniques and materials usually applied by ConstructLab in other collaborative projects.

The presence of the stage and the domestic devices growing around it recalled the idea of the ancient *agorà* with its political and civic attributes: it aimed not only to reprogram the functions and redefine the landscape features of the place but to question its management; it puts at the core of the reactivation the potential of a community in terms of self-organization and self-maintenance which is often considered as essential for the instigation of a sense of socially located belonging (May 2013). Such focus on the right to participate, to be involved, as well as the right to be represented and seen by others (Eckersley, 2022), is very common in the projects carried out by ConstructLab, where the collective construction of a space for encounter becomes a mean to empower people in re-appropriating the space: each individual acquires a specific and essential role in taking care of the site, feeling entitled and responsible for its use, recognizing everyday practices as a form of attachment and resistance. It is not surprising, therefore, that after the completion of *Mon(s) Invisible’s* installation, a group of users involved in the process founded a non-profit organization named Jardin Suspendu and obtained a positive response to their request to administrate the park, which until now was successfully managed through a continuous series of events and laboratories.

The kitchen

If the previous stories are set in misused sites inside very consolidated urban contexts, the first being a metropolitan periphery and the second a small town, a

different scenario is offered by Terras da Costa, an illegal settlement located in the town of Costa da Caparica, south of Lisbon, developed from some farm buildings around the early 1990s, which is currently home to approximately 500 people. In 2012, the Architecture Department (DA/UAL) and the Architecture, City and Territory Studies Centre (CEACT/UAL) of Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa promoted a long-term project to collaborate with the community of the informal village and try to understand how their situation could be ameliorated. The Portuguese studio Atelier Mob was then asked to join the initiative, taking part in the workshop *Noutra Costa*, an articulated programme led by an association engaged in literacy activities in the area, also involving other local design practices like *Colectivo Warehouse*.

Following the intentions of Atelier Mob (2020), the group has primarily organized meetings with the residents to get to know their living conditions and find out their needs and what was lacking on the site. Understanding the precariousness of the constructions, architects were hoping that people would find a better living situation elsewhere. Thus, the intervention to be developed was never intended to be a permanent architecture or a facility to consolidate the settlement, but rather a temporary device that could improve the current quality of life in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, inhabitants were willing to fight for their “right to the place” to remain in Terras da Costa: the fact that they had built their own houses had created a strong boundary with the village itself, which represented the legitimation of this marginalized group as a community (Mitchell, 2003; Roy, 2005).

It was clear then, that improvement meant essentially legitimation and recognition: during the meetings with inhabitants, this manifested in the common necessity to access basic infrastructures. Bringing a water line inside the settlement was, therefore, a priority. Furthermore, it was evident that in this project, engagement mostly meant producing services and giving people tools to express their rights as citizens (Hudson and Shaw, 2009). Thus, the entire team finally decided to build a community kitchen, that beyond its final function, first served as a laboratory: in other projects, this typology had previously proved to be particularly suitable for marginal areas lacking a solid social structure or a strong consciousness of the place. Although inhabitants were not called upon to take part in the actual design, they represented the main actors of the construction phase in a process of learning-by-doing that started from choosing the specific spot to place the structure. The design served as a pretext to emancipate people and give them competencies while working on their area (Blundell Jones, 2005).

To allow the building to be self-constructed and follow the limitations of the budget and construction permits, architects opted for the use of wooden slats and boards, which were retrieved from another project that had just been dismantled in a nearby neighbourhood. The result was a partially open building with a simple C plan, organized around a welcoming and intimate shared open space, which had previously been absent from the settlement. On one of the covered sides, Atelier Mob located a big and fixed table for food preparation and dining, while leaving all the other spaces flexible and accessible for more informal uses, like gathering

and hanging out the washing. Only the main nucleus with the kitchenette and various tools was enclosed by walls to keep the equipment safe, whereas most of the space was organized as a flexible and permeable structure resembling a portico or a gallery. This familiar architecture was thought to give the inhabitants an opportunity to meet their personal and collective needs and to experiment with new practices of domestication within the settlements (Lerner, 2016). Central to this particular case is that spatially located belonging is nurtured by means of providing basic living infrastructures. Belonging emerges from the shared need for solutions and the provided agency to solve existing problems that involve the entire community in the marginalized space.

The shape of placemaking

In summary, despite many differences in terms of context, process, and formalization, the three cases analyzed can be seen as the epitomes of a similar approach to managing the regeneration of superfluous urban landscapes by facilitating people to negotiate their sense of belonging, which, during the last decade, has remarkably changed the common approach to placemaking in public space. Until 20 years ago, the direct interaction with the possible users that designers had to activate to implement such a process mainly consisted of inviting them, by means of different dialogical techniques, to express their preferences about the transformation of the space, to monitor the advancements, and to revise the solutions proposed (Blundell Jones, 2005). This, however, entailed the risk of disappointing the citizen's ultimate expectations because of a twofold inherent flaw of this kind of dialogue: that which brings people to ask only what they are expected to desire, or what they already know, with the not infrequent result of figuring either an idealized concept of public space, which was not really interesting to anyone, or a very private version of it, in which people considered public space an extension of their homes.² For this reason, the option exemplified by the three case studies has lately begun to thrive with the progressive shift from the idea of participation to that of engagement, which has strengthened the role of spatial design at the expense of traditional urban policies.

Ultimately, engaging means postponing the analysis of the social response after the phase of design, and even though a preliminary dialogue with possible users is still crucial, it is not meant to provide any indications about the future of the area, but it is aimed at tracing the existing social dynamics that revolve around it, which could be intercepted, activated and hopefully enhanced by means of a spatial project. This is usually articulated in a process that follows three macro-steps. The first is the mapping of the different actors, their daily practices and their cultural values by surveying their way of behaving and gathering in public, as well as that of representing themselves as part of different publics; the second is the design of a temporary structure that can not only be open to their different interpretations but also encourage new and unpredictable ones; and the third is the observation of people's reactions and the assessment of the nature of the

predominant uses and the meanings attributed to the space, capable of informing a grounded hypothesis about its possible future identity.

All of these actions are usually implemented by means of a form of design that, rather than solely concerning the space, its physical features, and its historical traces, mainly focuses on the construction of a “device” for its appropriation through a totally different approach from traditional urban design. The reason is that devices like those described in the previous paragraphs cannot be included in a typological catalogue as they represent simple means which are not meant to provide a product, but to activate a process (Peeters and Charlier, 1999). Thus, since this process concerns the engagement of its possible users in the regeneration of a superfluous landscape, the design quality of a device does not merely lie in its formal configuration, but in the kind of experiences that this configuration is able to suggest; also because it is not determined by its adherence to a predetermined function, but by the different uses it grants and the multiple opportunities of appropriation it enables, both functionally and symbolically.

This does not mean that the form of the device, or better, its architectural shape, is not relevant, or at least that it is less important than its “accommodating potential” (Hertzberger, 1991, p.150). On the contrary, contemporary interventions of regeneration like the three case studies examined have proven that their capacity to communicate is essential for activating the process of negotiation and inclusion. In other words, given the lack of identity of superfluous landscapes, the devices used for their regeneration are usually designed to suggest a story that can really engage people by making them protagonists of it. This story can be either given in advance or further developed along with citizens during the installation, but it must ultimately be embedded in an architectural shape that, on the one hand, leaves no room for symbolic misunderstanding and, on the other, can be liable to any form of misinterpretation in terms of use. This is why, for instance, it is not infrequent to see in these cases the recurrence of particular devices recalling specific spatial typologies, like stages or playgrounds, laboratories or vehicles; because, while being clearly identified in terms of iconic form, all these prototypical spaces are always characterized by the centrality of users’ active roles in the process of their placemaking. By providing the users of the space with ownership over the space they also directly and indirectly engage in practices of belonging to that space as they become part of the social relations that determine this space.

This, however, is not the only recurrence. Whereas, for example, 20 years ago engagement was achieved by means of interactive terminals, sinuous surfaces, bright colours, and, more generally, a formal repertoire deeply influenced by visual arts, design, and digital graphics, today, by contrast, there is a clear preference for recycled materials, urban ready-mades, and simple scaffoldings; and even though most of the contemporary interventions in this field entail an idea of spatial construction that is more than architectural, as it is also made up of multiple and heterogeneous processes, their material dimension is still crucial for their success. The reason is that many of the designers that work on superfluous landscapes make use of a strategy based on a laboratory approach, to both

reduce the distances between the actors of the production process and combine the phases of research, design, and construction. Thus, choosing poor and common materials, “dry” constructive systems and elementary tectonics represents the optimal solution to build temporary set-ups that could be assembled and dismantled in a few hours by almost anyone, as the final aim of these interventions, in general, is not to build a space, but to encourage different practices of spatial reappropriation, which could restore the idea of publicness where this idea is completely absent.

This explains why, over the last few years, spatial design has taken on a renewed relevance if compared to the urban policies that were previously dictating most of the attempts in this regard: precisely because of its being a more effective tool to figure out the possible nature of a place that gives no hints about it, by defining a spatial construction that enables new practices of citizenship from very diverse and heterogeneous publics. Thus, today, citizens’ engagement and the sense of belonging that this is expected to generate unfold from a design standpoint in a dimension in which public space construction increasingly recalls a form of art direction, both in terms of mediation and performativity: on the one hand, because of its aim, which is to set a stage for the actors involved to enact an urban dramaturgy that is not given but has to be scripted from scratch; and on the other, because, in pursuing this goal, it usually makes use of the tools, methods, and languages of set design to build spatial devices that could be characterized not only by a high performative value, but also by a flexible and continuously reinterpretable form, allowing for temporary, multiform, creative, and self-directed events to take place in reaction to it (Amendola, 2014).

Conclusions

The city is not a stable and definite organism but usually lives on the claims and contestations of belonging over certain spaces, which initiate both inclusive and exclusive processes (Madanipour, 2004, p.239). There are some public spaces, however, somewhat superfluous, over which no one seems interested in advancing any claims or contestations, and which therefore lack any identity: no one feels to belong to these places as much as they do not seem to belong to anyone. And this often triggers a vicious circle of disinterest, decay, and abandonment, which only worsens their material and social conditions, thus risking turning them into exclusionary places for minorities. Their lack of predetermined identity may have a remarkable potential for incubating new practices of public citizenship and allowing different and heterogeneous publics to negotiate and renegotiate their sense of belonging with greater freedom. For this reason, over the last 30 years, in the field of urban studies, superfluous landscapes have increasingly been seen as a remarkable but neglected urban asset for facilitating participation and improving socio-cultural inclusion when dealing with new mobility patterns and migration flows. And their regeneration, by means of spatial design, has been increasingly re-evaluated according to this position, which has been considering the sense of

spatial belonging as a constructive factor determined by the actual possibility that people have to control, and thus take care, of the place they inhabit.

In the recent past, as a consequence, top-down actions of design and management have receded in favour of low-cost, short-term, and tactical modes of interventions, aimed at representing generative inputs of a process of reappropriation of these superfluous spaces. Designers have progressively begun to devise their reactivation not from the point of view of their quality and its improvement, but from that of their identity and its definition, trying to understand what kind of places they could become or what kind of people could recognize themselves in them as a public. In other words, they try to connect processes of socially located belonging to spatially located belonging. In so doing, they not only have reconsidered the urban project from a series of sequential and spatial operations to a simultaneous and immaterial process in which various decisional agents interact to generate a complex spatial system, but they also refined consolidated tools and strategies to better address this form of interaction. From participation to engagement, from intermediation to interpretation, all their operative shifts have tried to match a sense of place that cannot be defined in advance but must be built from scratches by means of new narrativity, as well as a sense of spatial belonging that is not only determined by institutional discourses but is also made of the everyday practices aimed at reclaiming public space by simply inhabiting it.

This ultimately explains the renewed relevance of spatial design for the regeneration of superfluous landscapes, which, until 20 years ago, was mainly carried out by means of urban policies. Whereas planning applies established procedures to solve familiar problems within a clear framework, design is meant to devise a framework for solving those problems. And the real effort that this kind of regeneration requires is not problem-solving but problem-setting: setting the conditions for citizens to negotiate and renegotiate their belonging to the city's public dimension.

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Notes

- 1 The political relevance of the theme for community institutions was first sanctioned in 2000, when the European Commission in Nice agreed on some common objectives which could be used to fight social exclusion (EC, 2001). From that moment, the aim of providing equal possibilities of access to public spaces has been one of the key factors for improving urban sustainability and resilience, and marginal public spaces have been considered a strategic asset in this regard (Madanipour, 2004).
- 2 The inherent problems of participated strategies have often been highlighted, especially in recent years. However, the best identification of these issues is probably that which has emerged in some research on urban planning (Balducci and Mäntysalo, 2013) which proposed to overcome them, through the disciplinary translation of Peter Galison's scientific concept of "trading zone" (1997), by focusing planners' attention not so much on the correctness of their choices or their adherence to explicit requests, but on their ability to propose a plan that was a "boundary object".

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