Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper: towards an Urban Activism Manifesto

Luisa Bravo*, Camilla Carmagnini** and Noa Matityahou***

At the beginning of the new Millennium global transformations of urban territories have opened the way, quite inevitably, to more and more complex and profound considerations about the places that surround us, the places that we have built, the opportunities we have missed, and those ones we must, instead, learn to grasp. Common ground, common places, common people, common sense, common tradition were the declarations of the 13.International Architecture Exhibition in Venice in 2012. It is by now a widely shared fact that cities are a common good, so actions devoted to its transformation, requalification and valorisation should involve everyone. Ideas coming from citizens, associations, residents and ordinary people are easily available and shareable through the virtual world, thus causing drastic changes in the way of thinking and acting in the urban realm. We witness a raising phenomenon of initiatives and ideas in urban planning and design as an expression of that «knowledge society» defined by UNESCO World Report (2005).

We are in the midst of an unprecedented moment in planning. Although signs of hardship are all around, we see the emergence of a powerful, networked, creative movement of people who demonstrate that place-based and people-oriented actions are possible, despite economic or political obstacles.

Reconnecting citizens to public life in Bologna: the Via Emilia project

The present work tries to examine these emerging issues and to develop a proposal for the city of Bologna, always been known for its innovative approach towards urban planning and design.

Like many other European and Italian cities, Bologna is characterized by the presence of an historical *core* with a recognizable collective value and a sprawled, suburban area which is considered as a quite anonymous entity. The image of the suburban environment could be described as a patchwork of a multiplicity of urban settlements, varying in characteristic, density, function and identity.

The major criticism related to suburbs is the lack of identifiable public spaces, or their failure in creating functional social places. While in the city centre the square represents the most traditional and identifiable form of public space, designed for that precise purpose, in the periphery this role has been mainly given over to green and residual areas within the new residential settlements. The set of these dispersed suburban publics, despite sometimes lacking any designed purpose, is embedded with hidden potentialities, as the Everyday Urbanism (Chase - Crawford - Kaliski, 2008) movement declares. Instead of criticizing the absence of social qualities in these existing spaces, or suggesting the realization of new ones, this work tries to embrace the new bottom-up concepts in urban planning and design and to take the challenge of creating a network of urban sequences: using only the spaces we already have, every public place can be reinforced by participating in a wider system and through the use of «lighter, quicker, cheaper interventions», as defined by the non-profit Project for Public Spaces organization, based in New York.

We argue that it is nowadays essential for urban planning policies, aimed at regeneration activities, to keep considering people as the main reference point. Society and its needs are continuously changing and updating, so that any fixed solution is no longer achievable. The only way to maintain the rhythm is to use people and communities as the primary resource for developing and discovering the best solutions to accomplish their desires. The prescription's system and big intervention projects have to be substituted with a lighter, less strict and more flexible approach, capable of understanding the changeable needs of the 2.0 society and to transform them into acupuncture interventions.

The PSC (*Piano Strutturale Comunale*), adopted in 2008, shows an innovative interpretation of the city of Bologna through the image of the «Situations». The most significant aspect of this innovative form of urban subdivision lies mainly in the fact that the situations are proposed as an alternative and a different description of the territory in order to overcome the outdated morphological and functional aspects in favour of a more detailed description which highlights, in particular, social, historical and identifiable characteristics of the urban territory. The morphological and administrative boundaries in fact, ignore by their nature the intrinsic differences of the urban environment, especially the social aspects, which are instead taken into account by the «Situations».

XXVIII INU
XXVIII Congresso
Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica
Salerno
Palazzo di Città
24/26 ottobre 2013

The urban regeneration proposal in Bologna takes place along the 12 km of the urban segment of the Via Emilia, as a symbolic and representative axis that crosses the city, recognized also as a backbone for the whole regional territory. The Via Emilia in Bologna crosses eight PSC «Situations» which were taken and used as the starting point of the project.

This work struggles to discover the embedded potentialities of the Via Emilia's public spaces. The urban strategy aims to improve the existing public places, intended as any place worth of value, such as green areas, bicycle paths, parking lots and infrastructures, creating active networks that would stitch the dispersed tissue of the area in a way that its flaws would become its virtues.
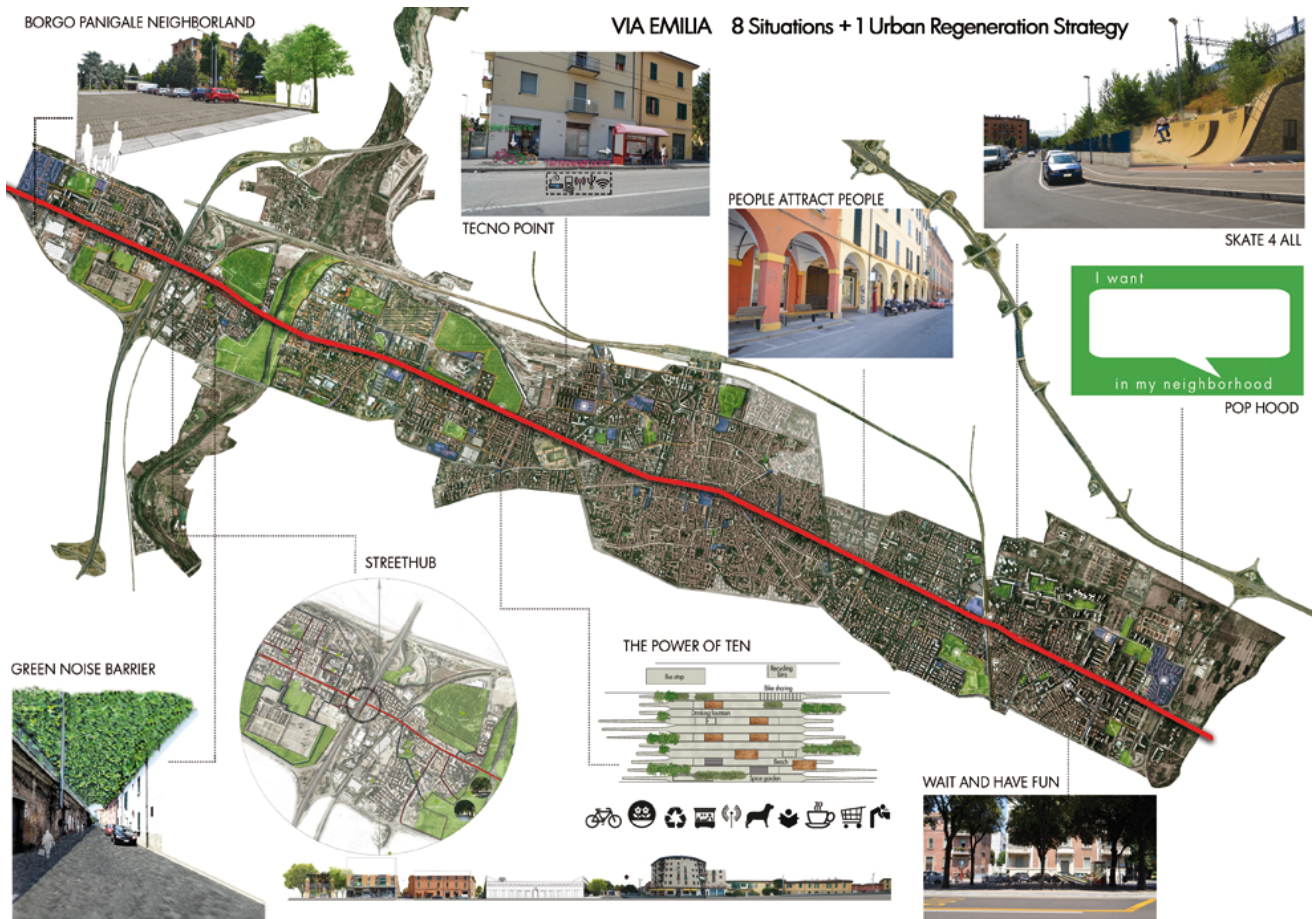

Figure 1 - The Via Emilia axis in Bologna. The public space network was created selecting potentials and opportunities of different places, applying the «lighter, quicker cheaper» method and using references from existing successful examples such as Neighborland association creative proposals.

In order to bring back citizens to their public spaces it is necessary to create the favourable conditions so they could recognize them as a shared good and have the possibility to improve them. A successful example of these kind of interventions is the Dutch concept of *Woonerf*, and its international parallels such as the English *Home Zones* or the American *Complete Streets*, which aims to the transformation of neighbourhood streets from vehicular based conduits to pedestrian friendly places, where social life could spread as widely demonstrated by Jan Gehl's studies (2010).

New connections within the city space could also be generated by using neglected and abandoned infrastructures that are not being perceived as functional public places, transforming them into new neighbourhood techno-hubs. «Infrastructure can be discovered by designers, worked on by them, and framed into a mode of appreciation» (Ingersoll, 2006). This is also an opportunity to demonstrate to municipalities that welfare services could be perceived in new forms: instead of consolidated needs, basically referred to standards and measurable facilities, such as green spaces, to be put on a map, we should start thinking on new desires expressed by contemporary society. Local communities need not just physical but also spiritual, social and technological services. This means to employ a new methodological approach that connects new

media, community intervention and urban studies paradigms (Foth, 2009). The resulting cross-disciplinary framework, designed to stimulate socio-economic innovation, will lead to urban sustainability and healthier local economies. It will also develop knowledge of how social, cultural, economic capital can be of service in encouraging public consultation, civic engagement and debate, and assist people to be creative and innovative in everyday life. This will lead to greater social inclusion, fair access to and smart use of local information and services.

Embedding an innovative approach into ordinary practices

Nowadays it is quite evident that public administrators and architects have to adapt their procedures to a different way of action, based not only on urban design activities but highlighting what makes that design activities successful. This means a new way of thinking about the urban realm, mainly based on contexts and places, to be explored not looking at a map but through in-deep site analysis and investigations, able to reveal potentialities and opportunities (Lydon, 2011) and to promote smart urban visions, based on an updated set of contemporary community needs and values. Bottom-up processes of transformation, made by people, are then developed not following consolidated rules, but through real participating events made by sharing and appropriation.

Results of this kind of approach are not outside general requirements of urban plans and codes. On the contrary, they could be a significant tool of the *Piano Strutturale Comunale* for the city of Bologna, embedding, in what they define as "Situations", practices of social engagement as a means for regeneration processes and for public space networking enhancement. Public administrations should hopefully embrace such urban trends, as an antidote to the crisis of the contemporary world, through an innovative sustainable action of governance.

So the present work is just a starting point of a wider research aimed to define «Urban Design and Placemaking Guidelines in Bologna», for the urban and the suburban city, containing a general strategy able to generate places, acting on local and social capitals, towards a renewed urbanity (Bravo - Crawford, 2013) and a more comprehensive urban experience.

Notes

* Department of Architecture, University of Florence, luisa.bravo@unifi.it
** Department of Architecture, University of Florence, camillacarmagnini@hotmail.it
*** Department of Architecture, University of Florence, noayahoo@gmail.com

References

Bravo, L. - Crawford, M. (2013), *Publics and their spaces: renewing urbanity in city and suburb*, in *ISUF 2012 – New Urban Configurations* conference proceedings, TU Delft (forthcoming)

Chase, J. L. - Crawford, M. - Kaliski, J. edited by (2008), *Everyday urbanism*, Monacelli Press, New York

Comune di Bologna (2009), *Bologna. Leggere il nuovo piano urbanistico*, Edisai, Ferrara

Foth, M. (2009), *Handbook of research on Urban Informatics: the practice and promise of the real-time city*, Information Science Reference, New York

Gehl, J. (2010), *Cities for people*, Island Press, Washington DC

Ingersoll, R. (2006), *Sprawltown. Looking for the city on its edge*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York

Lydon, M. (2011), *Tactical Urbanism 2. Short-term action, long-term change*, Street Plans, Miami-New York, available on line

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2005), *Toward knowledge societies.* UNESCO World Report, Imprimerie Corlet, Conde-sur-Noireau, France