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PUBLIC URBAN SPACES AND OPEN SPACES: COMMON GOODS. NEW ENHANCEMENT PROJECTS AND PROCESSES. ITALIAN AND SERBIAN EXPERIENCES.

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ABSTRACT

Over time, the idea that the regeneration of the world’s residual, intermediate suburban spaces plays a strategic role in testing new models of participatory processes has gradually taken hold. Cohesion, inclusiveness, sharing and integration are the basis of such processes. They are the concepts that lie at the heart of the documents produced at an international level over the past 30 years, particularly the 2030 New Urban Agenda, as the five ‘P’s: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership.

In such a scenario, the extent to which an open urban space can be recognised as a common good becomes the focus of trials and projects of interest in the derelict parts of previously urbanised areas: with Patti di Collaborazione (‘Collaboration Pacts’) in Italy and with an educational multidisciplinary programme entitled ‘Public art Public space’ (PaPs) in Belgrade (Serbia). We argue as the open spaces benefit daily urban life and play a vital role in creating healthier, more sociable communities is changing attitudes, policies and actions.

Keywords: international policies, open and urban spaces, common goods, processes, projects

INTRODUCTION. THE FIVE ‘P’S: PEOPLE, PLANET, PROSPERITY, PEACE AND PARTNERSHIP.

One of the problems that require urgent attention at a global level is that of protecting and guaranteeing the well-being of the people who live in cities by, among other things, regenerating or creating a suitable environment that can foster cohesion, inclusiveness, sharing and integration processes. The documents produced at a European and international level over the past 30 years stress the importance of activating sustainable social innovation processes through the direct involvement of stakeholders, local leaders and the private sector, as well as the search for ways of involving and motivating all categories of citizens. The concepts of cohesion, inclusiveness, sharing and integration as regards suburban areas lie at the heart of such documents: from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015 MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), up to the UN HABITAT III summit that took place in 2016.

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The UN Sustainable Development Summit, which took place in New York in 2015, launched the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015-2030 (UN, 2015) based on five ‘P’s: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership.

It was a significant step that saw the term ‘sustainability’ become an integral part of development: from MDGs to SDGs. Goal 11 aims to ‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’ and is broken down into ten targets, including: ‘By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries’ and ‘By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.’

The eleventh goal was the focus of the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, or HABITAT III, held in Quito: the first UN global summit on urbanisation since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It was in Quito that the New Urban Agenda ‘which set global standards of achievement in sustainable urban development, rethinking the way we build, manage, and live in cities through drawing together cooperation with committed partners, relevant stakeholders, and urban actors at all levels of government as well as the civil society and private sector’ was adopted, after a year of sessions and preparatory documents. The New Urban Agenda states: ‘We will support the implementation of urban planning strategies, as appropriate, that facilitate a social mix through the provision of affordable housing options with access to quality basic services and public spaces for all, enhancing safety and security, favouring social and intergenerational interaction and the appreciation of diversity... We will support the provision of well-designed networks of safe, accessible, green and quality streets and other public spaces that are accessible to all, free from crime and violence, including sexual harassment and gender-based violence, considering the human scale, and measures that allow for the best possible commercial use of street-level floors, fostering both formal and informal local markets and commerce, as well as not-for-profit community initiatives, bringing people into public spaces, and promoting walkability and cycling with the goal of improving health and well-being... We will strive to improve capacity for urban planning and design and the provision of training for urban planners at national, subnational and local levels.’

In densified European cities, ‘with the failure of the great urban utopias, contemporary planning is inclined towards the recovery and reuse of city fragments, a careful use of soil and built spaces, towards preservation and improvement of environment quality’ [1]. Open spaces are fragments of this kind that, as detailed later, whilst assuming a number of different connotations and variations can nevertheless be improved with urban regeneration programmes using participatory collective practices as a tool for achieving social integration, cohesion, inclusiveness and sharing.

OPEN SPACES AND PUBLIC SPACES: DEFINITION AND POTENTIAL

Now in the early 21st century, urban theory and policy throughout the world is returning to the issue of open spaces, particularly to public open spaces. The fact that open spaces benefit daily urban life and play a vital role in creating healthier, more sociable
communities is changing attitudes, policies and actions [2], in the sense that open spaces have been recognised as one of a number of extremely important common goods with a crucial impact on quality of life in general. The terms ‘open spaces’ and ‘public open spaces’ are not synonyms. These terms are related in many ways, but they do not mean the same thing. The term ‘open’ can be taken to mean a number of things. To be properly understood, the ‘openness’ of open spaces has to be related to, and explained by, a very specific definition. The definition put forward by Benjamin W. Stanley and his team in 2012 [3], for an open space is ‘any urban ground space, regardless of public accessibility, that is not roofed by an architectural structure’. We define an urban open space as any urban space that is permanently open to the open air on at least one of its sides. Our main aim in proposing such a definition is to attempt to include in the enhancement of open spaces not only the prestigious ‘Mona Lisas’ of open spaces such as squares, streets, parks, coastal areas, agricultural land, gardens and so on, but also an endless number of forgotten ‘micro’ open spaces, such as roofs, roof terraces, balconies, passages, gaps between buildings and other ‘junk spaces’, even building facades. Therefore, in this sense, there are many areas of intervention that can improve a city’s health. The matter of ‘urban open spaces’ is highly multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, and different fields have different points of view.

We can notice several types of approaches to researching and defining the ‘openness’ of open spaces: the landscape approach (greenery / environment / horticulture), the formal approach (morphology / physical appearance / shape / size), the functional approach (functions / types of activities / mode of use), the cultural approach (public life / community / politics / identity / pride / human rights) and the economic approach (investments / money value).

In contrast, the term ‘public’ mainly relates to public or communal ownership, or the public use of open spaces. Moreover, many open spaces are privately owned, though there are many examples of private open spaces in public use.

No matter how one defines the term ‘public space’, the definition has to take into account the public’s right to access it and its right to participate in its use, on an individual and collective level (as groups and communities). Ideally, a public space is one that everyone has a right to enter without being excluded on the basis of their economic or social conditions and use it freely for any activity that does not conflict with the rights of other groups and individuals who may be using it as well; while a broader meaning also includes places such as cafes, trains or cinemas where anyone who pays may enter, as long as they abide by certain regulations.

Public spaces do not necessarily only include urban agoras. For instance, in Norway, Sweden and Finland, all-natural areas were (and are) traditionally considered public spaces, thanks to a law that categorises them as Allemansrätt (‘everyman’s right’) and are now used for tourism. In the United Kingdom, particularly Scotland, there is the legal notion of a ‘common’ (or common land): a piece of land where people could exercise one of a number of traditional rights, such as grazing their cattle there. In modern English, the word ‘commons’ has come to mean any set of resources that a community recognises as being accessible to all its members, including various types of creative cultural resources.

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The openly accessible nature of public spaces is particularly stressed in the German term Öffentlichkeit, which is used to denote ‘the public sphere’ as the context of public spaces.

In the book by Jürgen Habermas in 1962 [4] this notion acquired its main academic use, which is still discussed in most contemporary writings on public spaces. Here, Habermas describes a moment in the social and political history of Europe in which a rising bourgeoisie was able to gather in public spaces such as salons and cafés to discuss various matters that were of public concern and formulate public opinion on many different issues: from trade to politics, from culture to social issues.

According to Habermas, the public sphere as we know it was founded in the 18th century as a kind of fourth sphere, distinct from the family, the economy and the state, with the power to mediate between the former three, and this particular notion has retained its currency in modern-day debates in the EU surrounding the issues of citizenship and identity. Later criticisms and revisions of this model – such as those of Calhoun in 1992 [5], Fraser in 1993 [6], and Hauser 1999 [7] – have focused on the public sphere’s exclusivity and its dependence on a culturally-specific set of discourse practices that made this sphere, although theoretically open to all, an arena for a small, privileged section of the public, while, as Miriam Hanscn claims, the explosion of many new forms of ‘publicity’ in the following decades has forced us to redefine ‘the spatial, territorial, and geopolitical parameters of the public sphere’ [8].

As a ‘public good’, open spaces can be seen through the ‘value system’, the system of established values, norms or goals existing in a society, which obviously reflects on the matter of the ‘current value’ of open spaces. The ‘current value’ of an open space is the basis for any further research and calculations. It is related not only to the value of the land (built up or undeveloped), streets and infrastructure, but also to the presence of the other valuable goods, products and attractions and moreover to the specific value it has as regards people in generating cohesion, inclusiveness and integration.

Out of all of them, we decided to point out a short list, a sort of typology, of the ‘open space’ values enumerated by Fausold and Lilicholm, 1996 [9]:

- The Value of Open Space as a Natural System: ‘Open space often supports natural systems that provide direct benefits to human society such as ground water recharge, climate moderation, flood control and storm damage prevention, and air and water pollution abatement.’

- Use and Nonuse Values of Open Space: ‘1. “consumptive uses” such as hunting, fishing, and trapping; 2. “non-consumptive uses” such as hiking, camping, boating, enjoying scenery, viewing and photographing wildlife, etc.; 3. “indirect uses” such as reading books or watching programs on open space-related resources or activities such as wildlife and travel (ibid.).’

- Production Value of Open Space: ‘Lands valued for open space are seldom idle, but rather are part of a working landscape vital to the production of goods and services valued and exchanged in markets.’

- Revenues Generated by Open Space-Related Activities: ‘Activities directly or indirectly associated with open space may generate significant expenditures and provide an important source of revenue for businesses and state and local governments: hunting,
fishing, hiking, bird watching, nature photography, snowmobiling, skiing, and mountain biking.'

- Intangible Values of Open Space: Earlier ‘types’ of values, which focused only on open space values of high interest to humans and which came from humans, are the only values that can be expressed in economic terms.

Open spaces are vibrant, living systems that undergo constant change. As a system changes, its values also change. Nowadays, those changes are carefully monitored and mostly well planned and managed. Given that open spaces account for a large proportion of public goods, the main aim of these activities is to protect public goods, i.e. the public interest (as well as private interests), and to offer new opportunities for ensuring new, greater benefits for the future. Open spaces are providing a wide range of opportunities to achieve desirable benefits both for the community and the private sector.

RECOGNISING A ‘COMMON GOOD’ SO AS TO LAUNCH ENHANCEMENT PROCESSES.

At present, the debate surrounding tangible and intangible goods is influencing the issue of urban open spaces as well. The common good is not a public good; it is a good acknowledged as being important to the life of the community and cannot be the object of any private appropriation [10].

Taking our cue from that principle, we have illustrated below the processes and projects underway in Italy and Serbia that have led to the regeneration of open residual spaces, using different methods but all with a common aim.

In Italy, so-called ‘Collaboration Pacts’, based on this principle, are spreading on the basis of Article 118 of the Italian Constitution. Article 118 identifies the principle of subsidiarity, i.e.: ‘The State, regions, metropolitan cities, provinces and municipalities shall promote the autonomous initiatives of citizens, both as individuals and as members of associations, relating to activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity.’ By applying the principle of subsidiarity, citizens can thus exert a new form of participation that has objectives of general interest, i.e. tangible and intangible goods. One of the first municipalities to initiate a Collaboration Pact was that of Bologna, which with a bylaw passed in 2014 has identified the various areas of intervention, including tangible assets such as roads, squares, porticoes, flowerbeds, parks and green areas, school areas, buildings, etc. The procedure it envisages is a call for tenders for the collection of proposals from citizens’ associations for the provision of spontaneous, voluntary and free energy, resources and skills serving the community. Relations between the council and organisations are governed by a partnership agreement that identifies several aspects: shared care goals and actions; the object of the proposal; ways of collaborating; the reporting and assessment of accounts; forms of support from the administration; and duration, suspension, revocation and liability. Currently, out of the ten collaboration pacts now underway in Bologna, four concern open spaces such as parks and residual green spaces.

In Italy, there are a growing number of associations that work towards the common good, as well as borough councils that are setting up collaboration pacts, and they are proving to be a resource that fosters the improvement of areas and buildings that have
been neglected and forgotten, revitalising them through an inclusive and participatory process and projects. These associations can all count on the expertise of a range of professionals: architects, town planners, sociologists, cultural mediators and others. One example is the Labsus network, a subsidiarity laboratory, which has launched the first collaboration pact with the city of Turin (2017) for the Hortus Conclusus project in Parco Dora park, designed to regenerate part of an area that was once occupied by the steel rolling mills of Ferriere Fiat, i.e. an old building located on Via Nole that no longer has a roof or partition walls. This has become an urban allotment and a space for holding various activities that are open to the public.

Another example that was not instituted through legislative means but was the result of the 'Public art Public space' (PaPs) educational interdisciplinary programme run by Belgrade’s Faculty of Architecture – which aims to integrate art into public spaces and city life as a way of improving their quality and inclusiveness – is the project to regenerate the area along the Sava river, launched in 2003 (see http://www.publicartpublicspace.org/).

In an entirely neglected and dangerous part of the city, there were the remains of buildings that had been used for port business. As part of a ‘places making and learning by doing’ approach, the PaPs launched a project that was divided into two different phases. In 2003, ‘Step to the River’ aimed to attract people from the city centre to the riverbank by using a public art densification strategy. The experimental project was designed to be a simultaneous presentation of the results of 13 workshops, conducted by interdisciplinary teams of students who worked with a team of mentors, the local community and officials. A wide range of public art installations and performances included a turf (grass) labyrinth set up on the streets leading to the Sava river, choral concerts, plays, children’s workshops, the redesign and reuse of local trams, video art, fashion and music shows on train carriages in old Sava Port, waterfront parties and boat tours. After decades of oblivion, old Sava Port belonged to the people once more, at least for one day. By increasing the density of events, the intensity of the urban experience and recognition of the place increased as well. In 2014, the second project entitled ‘the Belgrade Boat Carnival’ began as an experimental project influenced by the realisation that neither citizens nor experts recognised the Belgrade Aquatorium as a public space. At the same time, although various institutions had separate jurisdiction over this area, the absence of care was visible everywhere: a polluted river and its banks, stranded boats, abandoned houseboats. To solve this problem, it was not enough to hold a number of small public art events. The intensity of the (public art) action strategy was important in order to effect fundamental, long-lasting change. The goal was to hold an event that would celebrate the rivers of Belgrade (the Danube and Sava); in the end, it proved to be a memorable occasion that changed the meaning of the space and strengthened the relationship between the city’s residents and its rivers. The Belgrade Boat Carnival has since become an enormously successful event, held on an annual basis. After the first edition, the area started to redevelop: the range of public art projects and activities, the number of visitors who attended the Step to the River and Belgrade Boat Carnival events and their broad public promotion confirmed the importance and vast development potential of the old Sava Port. As a result, private investors – as well as city and state governments – were stimulated to invest in the reconstruction of buildings and public spaces in the port area.
CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note how these projects discussed, though adopting different approaches, are based on the same principle: the recognition of a common good as an opportunity to restore it to the community using participatory practices that involve the community. Both projects undoubtedly involve an approach to the management of people's participation in innovative common goods that clearly has strengths but also weaknesses; the latter are determined by various aspects, such as their temporary nature, the absence of a universal, overall strategy that links them to other projects taking place in the same city and a lack of a cost-benefit analysis that should be assessed over the long term.

What we would like to point out is that, in participatory processes, urban planners and architects play a new role as mediators of participatory processes and facilitators of implementation processes. Of course, we cannot ignore the local characteristics of culture and different societies, there are no models that can be exported, just as there are no general process management processes, however we can identify open methodologies and innovative management models worth trying, where architects become their mediators as part of a wider interdisciplinary joint effort. Thus, a new role for architects is emerging, a role whose potential should be developed in different ways, including in the training courses run by university faculties of architecture.

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