8. Design of plural public space

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8.1 The context

Within the research carried out by the Polimi DESIS Lab (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability), there has always been ample opportunity for design experimentation and research in the public arena, attempting to intersect the design skills of spaces with those of service design, working on the overlap between the two sub-disciplines (Fassi, Galluzzo and De Rosa, 2018).

Within the broader design framework for social innovation, design is intended as an activator, guide, and facilitator of societal transformations and changes to improve the current situation. In these processes, it seeks to support, strengthen, and make the ongoing transformations more impactful using the discipline's tools.

The methodology adopted in these cases is that of action research, working on specific situated contexts (Haraway, 1988), and mainly founded on extensive involvement of stakeholders active in that specific territory. The structure of our collaborations always involves strong engagement with residents and local associations

interested in improving that particular place, our group of researchers, often our students, and almost always the participation of the public administration governing the territory in an attempt to build a stronger dialogue between bottom-up and top-down processes.

The strong involvement of local actors is often ensured by a series of co-design workshops (Sanders and Stappers, 2008), usually based on the following:

- observation of the place subject to possible transformation;
- Analysis of the uses made by urban populations (Martinotti, 1993) passing through it daily and of the activities hosted there;
- sharing and discussion of the sensations and feelings that residents experience in those places;
- selection of some inspirational examples of best practices to look at with interest but also with a critical eye;
- envisioning work on possible future scenarios;
- grounding some desired outcomes developed through shared mood boards and floor plans;
- staging some aspects of the project through spatial and service prototyping (Galluzzo *et al*., 2019).

These workshops generally involve a small group of participants who represent, to some extent, a diversity of perspectives, but naturally this cannot be exhaustive and often fails to capture and represent everyone's experience fully.

Hence, the initial question arises: Who participates in the proposed participatory processes? Consequently, is there a way to make these processes more inclusive?

8.2 The design of public space

The design of public space operates within an intriguing interstice between the disciplines of urban planning, architecture, and design. Over the past decades, interior or spatial design has increasingly focussed on urban interiors (Attiwill *et al*., 2015), and public interiors (Pimlott, 2007), advancing the idea that looking at a smaller scale – not only at domestic or service spaces, but also at public space –

could bring an improved quality to our cities. Additionally, the designer's perspective, enriched by a focus on the human being, the inhabitant, the user, and the community, inherently leads to greater care in public space design.

In recent decades, design has increasingly engaged with cities through a multidisciplinary lens, akin to that of humanities and social science developments. Designers endeavour to adopt a cross-pollinated approach, strengthening interventions in complex and intricate systems such as contemporary cities.

Feminist urban planning has in the past (and also in the present) emphasized how the gaze of planners and architects has been predominantly male-centric; this stems not only from the fact that designers, planners, and administrators have predominantly been white, cisgender, able-bodied, and economically privileged men, but also because the target demographic in design has often aligned with these characteristics.While there is an increasing body of research on this topic (still not enough), it typically operates at the scale of the city as a whole, reflecting the perspective of urban planners. The results often highlight deficiencies such as inadequate ac-tivities in parks, absence of spaces for *light sports*, lack of public services, and inconvenient accessibility features for those engaged in caregiving activities (in Italy, women undertake 74% of unpaid caregiving activities) (International Labour Organization, 2023).

Some of these insights have informed public space policies in Scandinavian countries, Vienna and Barcelona, occasionally adopting a gender mainstreaming perspective. There is still a significant delay in addressing these issues in Italy, with only sporadic interest from governing institutions in aligning with research findings. However, there is undoubtedly a growing awakening among more active citizens regarding these issues.

Even at a smaller scale, public spaces are never neutral, as they have historically been designed, conceived and administered accord-ing to a *norm* that coincides with the concept of *masculine universal* thus ending up supporting and facilitating traditional gender roles, erroneously assuming that this represents a neutral universality. More importantly, it does not offer a plural and richer view of multiple perspectives on public space, its design and use.

The role of design is central for there to be reflection on the accessibility and accommodation of urban space at a small, detailed scale.

An appropriate urban environment should instead be accessible, plural, inclusive, safe, and able to accommodate all the different forms of life that inhabit it, promoting social cohesion among the city's inhabitants. This leads to the second question: How can public space be designed to consider a plurality of perspectives?

8.3 The queer city

These reflections have given rise to the need to explore the dimension of public space as a space of political presence, a meeting platform where differences become possible and stimulating points of encounter, not isolated and erased but emphasized and valued as elements of richness in our urban ecosystems, remembering the importance of the presence of bodies in public space, and not just bodies conforming to a uniform model dictated by others' norms. The heteronormative, macho, and patriarchal culture of violence, which allows for little tolerance and acceptance of diversity and minorities, undermines the ability to coexist within cities, which are traversed daily by a wide variety of different people.

For queer individuals, occupying physical space in cities, claiming it, and reclaiming it, both metaphorically and physically, is a crucial theme in political debates, media, academia, design, urban planning and its streets, in order to move beyond the closet of heteronormativity and the gender binary system where queer individuals feel on the one hand invisible and on the other too *bulky*.

The shift from the concept of inclusive space to coexistent space (Ye, 2019) is crucial in this new vision of public space: the word *inclusive* always implies that someone is including someone else, whereas in the meaning of coexisting or co-habiting, there is greater reciprocity and emphasis on collective action, particularly on the sharing of existences, spaces, and experiences of all and each individual.

Moreover, the approach to coexistence should be taken in an intersectional way (Crenshaw, 1989), without forgetting the layers and intersections between the different facets that make up citizens'

identities: class, origin, religion, sexual and gender orientation, and skin colour. This can happen primarily through a cultural paradigm shift, as well as through the creation of public consensus on these issues even in parts of the city that are less *literate* in these kinds of instances, providing spaces for individuals and LGBTQIA+ associations to express themselves, and contributing to the education of future designers who can design with a more plural, transfeminist, queer, and inclusive perspective.

From here, we have decided to undertake a doctoral research project on the theme of the Queer City, in collaboration with the Participation Department of the Municipality of Milan, some educational experiments, and an action research project funded through Bando 57 by the Fondazione di Comunità Milano in the public spaces of the 9 municipalities of the city of Milan, together with 10 LGBTQIA+ community associations.

The desire to act on these issues stems from some unfortunate premises. According to the Rainbow Map & Index 2023, Italy ranks only 34th out of 49 European countries in terms of safety and rights for LGBTQIA+ people, a position that is dropping every year. Furthermore, according to data from 2019 elaborated by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights on the condition of LGBTQIA+ people in Europe, regarding Italy specifically, in 48% of cases, homolesbotransphobic hate attacks occur in public spaces such as streets, squares, parking lots; This is not only a matter of safety but also of knowledge, sharing, and dissemination of these issues.

Specifically, these projects aim to promote greater awareness of the values and demands of the queer community, as well as concepts of inclusion and identity through interactive and luminous installations, urban games, sports events, and workshops; activities that aim to raise awareness and sometimes also to educate citizens who live in those places.

These various activities allow us to explore possible responses and the many questions about the plural design of public space.

One can speak of a queer city when, both in its centre and its margins, it can be considered plural and accessible, leaving no one behind. Moving beyond the idea of gaybourhoods that characterize contemporary cities, and above all, not thinking of designing public

spaces for the LGBTQIA+ community or with the same community, but rather questioning the more intrinsic meanings of a plural approach to public space design. An approach that is based on the intersection between queer studies and design studies, which is in search of a new epistemology, hybridization of methodologies, a queerization of participatory processes, and particularly in questioning the centrality of perspective, accepting error and failure even in the design process itself, and naturally moving beyond a binary logic in favour of a plural logic.

To better understand this, let us introduce the term *queer*, which was initially used in Anglophone countries to indicate something odd, negatively weird, and then as a harmful slur for LGBTQIA+ people, as the opposite of *straight*. It was then claimed by activists in the US at the beginning of the 1990s to encapsulate the experiences of those who exist beyond conventional norms.

Nowadays, we could try to define queer as an umbrella term, fluid and ambiguous, that describes any sexual orientation or gender identity that is not heterosexual or cisgender.

What is the relationship between queerness and space, and mainly urban public space? Moreover, why is it interesting to study queerness in relation to cities?

In academia, the topic of queer space has been dealt with primarily by geographers and sociologists, who have been open to a connection with Queer Studies for several decades. However, the intersection between the latter and the world of design and planning remains to be explored, particularly in the context of the urban spatial dimension. What is the state of the art, what good practices exist, and what are the challenges for the future?

8.4 The pluriversal public space

Starting from these premises, one can easily push oneself to reflect on who truly inhabits public space from a non-anthropocentric perspective, considering how non-human agents that inhabit the urban ecosystem have never been taken into consideration in the design and participatory processes. The one-world paradigm,

or the assumption of a single reality that aims to subjugate all other worlds to itself or non-existence, is challenged by the idea of the pluriverse. While acknowledging the existence of multiple realities living in complex and interconnected ways, the pluriverse does not validate any one reality as the only one.

This viewpoint seeks to provide new ways of thinking and behaving that value multispecies diversity, in contrast to Eurocentrism and intellectual colonialism, by recognizing cultural, ecological, and ontological diversity (Escobar, 2016).

According to the philosopher Coccia (2022), the city is just a simple group of people living steadily in a section of the Earth where everything considered alive (apart from pets and decorative plants) is confined to the outside world. This idea feeds the perception that civilization, technology, and humanity are absent from areas outside cities. As a result, the myth of the natural and wild is produced due to what the city is not – that is, what opposes the notion of the citizen.

As Escobar (2019) says, it is urgent to approach the city with a pluriversal perspective, characterized by a fixed attention to the relationships and interdependencies between the different beings that inhabit it. When designing a space, it is essential to ask what type of inhabitants are there, how they live there, and how they interact with each other, trying to neutralize the power dynamics.

It is challenging to accomplish this perspective change since, historically, people have learned to feel that they are morally and ethically superior to other creatures. They now perceive themselves as *moral agents* who impose their decisions on *moral patients*, that are described as mute.

The idea is to comprehend that there is another way to live in a city that reduces the anthropocentric division between the natural and urban worlds, treating people as mere occupants of the land with which they share an interaction *ethos* of complementarity and reciprocity.

Cities must become pluriverses; they cannot *belong* to people; instead, they should be extensions of the terrestrial ecosystems they currently are. Recognizing all living things as fellow citizens is essential to breaking down the mental barrier separating humans from the Earth's basic nature.

How can a public space centred on a new paradigm be designed with these premises in mind? What can pluriversal public space mean?

8.5 Between queer and multispecies approaches

The paradigm shift also leads to questions about the relationship between designing the city with a more plural, transfeminist, queer and inclusive perspective and pluriverse design. What is the relationship between an inter-species approach to urban ecosystem design and the queer city?

At this point, having presented both the queer city theme and the theme of pluriversal public space the relationship between the two themes seems clear.

One constant is surely the desire to overcome an exclusive vision of public space that takes into account the needs of the most fragile groups and is far removed from design to date. The premises of *designing with* and overcoming *designing for* also lead to the question of how to involve the most vulnerable groups that have not participated in city planning and design to date.

The central theme of *the right to the city* naturally arises (Lefebvre, 1969) and through this lens children, animals, sex workers, migrants, the homeless, adolescents, and so many more are united by an alienation from public space: it remains still for the few and of the few. The role of design is also central in terms of the participation that human and non-human agents can bring to bear on the co-construction of public space as a political platform, characterized by the presence of bodies, as a physical and mental occupation of the public thing.

This relational dimension of design has aesthetic value but also countless ethical repercussions that the discipline itself must place at the centre of the design, starting from the initial questions: Who inhabits public space? Who participates in its design? Do those who occupy it with their bodies have the right to express themselves about it? Inspiring group discussion about prospective futures, speculative design has the ability to «highlight the re/creation of worlds

based on the horizontal relation with all forms of life, respecting the human embeddedness in the natural world» (Escobar, 2018). By proposing fictitious scenarios that have the potential to fundamentally alter our perception of reality, design-speculative thinking can stimulate the imagination and inspire new ways of being. Thinking of design as a way to extend the potential of who we can be through our materials, locations and bodies, is one way to approach the subject. In particular, the object of speculative design in this case is plural public space: meaning, future scenarios, and possible definitions. Design not only has the capabilities but, also and most importantly, has the ethical responsibility to tackle issues related to inclusivity, coexistence, alterity, otherness, differences and queerness, since it influences the contexts, cities, places and, more generally, the entire world in which we live.

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