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Communicating parco Ottavi

Benta Wiley

Is communication a fundamental ingredient in the design process or a rhetoric key for possible exploitation. In the case of parco Ottavi it seems that the first hypothesis may be true: in Reggio Emilia the project for the master plan has been possible thanks to a delicate dosing of the component-communication. This 'sensitivity' in the various phases of the project has fostered some particular synergies that have consented that parco Ottavi (beginning with the initial idea of the owner developer over 6 years ago) to be approved by the city council and it is actually in a phase of construction. In the story of the design and planning of the parco Ottavi project, communication has had a central and relevant role in the entire process. This is important above all if considered within a national scenario where many large urban projects have real difficulties in realising themselves in the first place or later completing themselves in an adequate way. The design and planning of the master plan (up until approval) has so far concluded itself in a relatively short period and with substantial consensus from all the actors involved, and it is this perhaps the most interesting characteristic of the 'communicative' process undertaken up until this moment: The diffused awareness that communication must play an emphatic role and that it is able to add value to the different phases of the planning and creative process. Beginning, as is the case for parco Ottavi, with the organisation of the contents of the competitions guidelines and of the choice of the designers that should be invited. This

understanding that communication can be adopted as a true work method, has accompanied the projects development; a way for the architects and administration to explain both choices and content, and thus becoming a decisive component in the design and planning choices made.

This method of 'design communication' adopted in the beginning by the project manager Ccdp (Reggio Emilia) does not configure itself as a clear example of 'participated design' or yet as an approach of urban marketing, rather it is a work method able to transmit a clear and structured view of the transformation process of the area. Certainly the time will come when, for the economical viability of a real estate development of this size, an adequate and efficient operation of promotion will be fundamental. Up until now however, the process of communication and design for the parco Ottavi master plan has not necessitated a strong implementation or strategy of real estate marketing. Reflecting on the experiences so far characterising the situation, we can attempt to identify some critical passages fundamental in the 'communicative process' that have characterised the first phase of the project for 'Parco Ottavi'.

Communication for consensus

Communication as a method for arriving at consensus and mutual agreement between constructors-developers and the public administration for the development of an area. In this case the choice to appoint a local office (Ccdp) as project managers was an important passage guaranteeing to the entire process of development and integrated coordination of the overall plan, ensuring coherent choices of both

method and approach, in line with the declared objectives of quality pre announced. The role of the project manager as sole interlocutor between the developer and the public administration, as is the tradition in many Anglo-Saxon countries, revealed itself decisive.

The first fundamental steps in the communicative 'story' for the area was the study and articulation of the competitions guidelines, the choice of the architectural offices to invite and the revision in progress of the designs as they evolved, all these elements helped guarantee that in the final phase of the competition the architectural projects that had been elaborated by each office were all truly characterized by a certain 'feasible quality'.

The project manager, had also the explicit role to communicate to all the actors involved, the different passages of the planning and design process, organizing meetings with the public administration, before even beginning to elaborate the initial draft of the competitions guidelines. This attention allowed that the needs and expectations of the developer and the public administration were quite explicitly and obviously expressed within the competitions guidelines: a first step and very significant when assumed within an optic of evaluation of the communication between architect-citizens-owner-developer and public administration.

Certainly to it should be mentioned that such a detailed set of guidelines, specific in its qualitative and quantitative requirements influenced the architects (participating offices) in their design approach, and their methods used to interpret and respond to the series of regulations and expectations clearly outlined within the document. These guidelines were however all coherent with an urban

philosophy backed in the past in different occasions by the towns administration, starting with its important studies for urban planning commissioned to the arch. Campos Venuti.

The different designers all adequately interpreted the indications specified in the competitions guidelines, translating them into interesting solutions. The three proposals presented, each different to the other, but each able to communicate in a clear and strong way their particular choices and strategies, all very clearly characterised by a significant and 'feasible quality'.

Communication as a method for design adaptation (adjustment) and to maintain quality

The second phase of the project was articulated in a period of time lasting some two years, from the declaration of the winning project; by studio Isola, up until the end of a period of overall adjustment and adaptation of the winning design, where in the initial plan become an executive project (this phase was coordinated by the project manager together with the public administration and designers). The willingness of Studio Isola to both listen and reinterpret their original ideas, above all in this very difficult moment of delicate and open discussion and 're work' of the 'Masterplan project' was critical.

This was the moment in which between all the parties a true network of internal relations was developed, necessitated by the ever growing need to verify continuously the choices as they were made and to monitor the coherence between the expectations expressed in the first phase the development process and the master plans transformations as they became growingly articulated. Between Studio Isola and the Ccdp. It

instinctively entered into use a specific type of work method to better communicate and transmit the different solutions and designs. A method that allowed the parts to overcome the situation where, in this phase, the project was being elaborated by many different people in many different places: Turin and Reggio Emilia above all but also through consultants in Bologna, Firenze and more recently in Parma, etc. It was natural too in this phase the transformation of the role of the Ccdp from sole project manager to codesigner together with Studio Isola. An evolution in its role related to the complexity of the choices and technical solution required and specifically related to the site with all its problems and solutions that slowly one by one surfaced. This 'conceptual correspondence' between the different actors, and the continual dialogue and confrontation between designers, developer and public administration generated an important pile of graphic material. Images and sketches. Each designer was called on to express their own opinions using a language that could be easily understood and adapted to this phase. The interesting result, developed by the equip was clearly the evolution of the communicative process as it adapted itself, not into an architectural Esperanto, but rather into an ever more clear and almost basic communicative design language, of easy and immediate interpretation. This was important not only for the developer but for all the participants in the process, citizens included (the Ccdp organised a series of meetings with the citizens of the different suburbs that bordered the site to illustrate the projects articulation). From this point of view, it could also be said that the

project for parco Ottavi saw an almost strange but true revisitation of the role of paper, drawings and painting utilized to translate a re-elaborate problems and solution through the communication/illustration and systematic discussion of each strategic choice.

Communication as a method to verify quality

Parallel to this phase of adaptation and verification, and whilst waiting for final administrative approval of the definitive design, a series of opportunities and offers arose. The first being the invitation to the developers and designer to present the project at the festival of architecture in Parma, and so began in an almost spontaneous way an operation of external verification of the design choices far beyond that of the local audience (the towns residents by know completely aware and well informed on all aspects of the plan). Specific attention came from the academic world, real estate developers, architects and urban planners from both Italy and Europe. Resulting from the accordance between developer and designers regarding the communication of the project and the delicacy and importance of this ingredient, the decision (for the festival of architecture in Parma three years ago) to prepare an exhibition focused on illustrating the design evolution of the project from the competitions beginning until council approval was taken, and thus the itinerant exhibition was planned and built. The exhibition after Parma was presented in Rome guest of the Darc (Direzione generale per l'architettura e l'arte contemporanea), and again in San Marino thanks to the Fondazione della Cassa di risparmio. The exhibition includes a series of videos and dvd renderings. The

choice however to invest in the preparation of a film documentary with a series of interviews was particularly based on the desire to tell the story of the projects birth and evolution and not merely as a descriptive tool of design promotion. The creation of the documentary was also an important instrument for the conservation of a period in the projects evolution. Different requests from local administrations and architects boards have subsequently arrived testifying the interest that the parco Ottavi project is evocating in particular when related to the delicate rapport between perequation, project, town plan. The interest on the other hand from the academic sphere and other cultural and scientific bodies has been above all in relation to the particular method and processes so far adopted.

All this attention has had a two fold result, the diffused attention regarding the project has contributed in guaranteeing, above all at a local level, a sense of communal responsibility in bringing to term with success the master plan. By now we could almost acclaim it as a type of best practice at least nationally, and at least for those aspects related to the quality and coherence in the designs evolution and communication. On the other hand too the communicative process for parco Ottavi has influenced the behaviour of the developer, greatly 'responsabilised' by this attention and encouraged to maintain the quality of the design in line with their initial declarations. A situation that will most certainly help in the completion, of a project so long and complex. In the next few years it is also obvious that the methods and ways of communicating will evolve progressively towards the

specific need of the developers as the construction in the area reaches conclusion and the commercialization of the building becomes necessary. It will hopefully remain of central relevance the important dialogue between developer, citizens and the town council regarding the communication of the sites construction. It should also not be forgotten the strategic importance of this project above all for its dimensions in a city like Reggio Emilia. The knowledge that a strong 'image' of the project has slowly evolved through out the years and that can be counted on together with the precious communicative experience at its base, to guarantee transparency and quality as the main guidelines for the future evolution of the project.