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Partisan Collectives as Breeding Grounds for an Active Citizenry

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This paper proposes some examples of partisan collectives that work as breeding grounds for citizenry that actively participates in space construction, examples of possible innovation of the consolidated role of the designer. The designer that finds a new dimension beyond the usual enclosure of his action and that, divesting himself of the auto-referentiality, is able to capture the sensitivity present in the urban and to structure it, and to constitute a guidance in the orientation of attention and care for receptivity. Lastly, those questions on the innovation of roles, requirements, tools and implements of the professionals of space construction are presented that were raised during the debate on inhabited landscapes.

But what kind of designer can become a catalyst of the positive energies of that “non-homologated and anaesthetized civitas that nevertheless exists and acts”? (Cellamare, 2011, p. 127). What requirements do they have to fulfil? With what tools do they have to equip themselves?

New paths for professionals dealing with space construction

The figure of today’s designer, who acts mostly in a decisive and drastic way, does not leave space for “different expressions” of the user-inhabitants, unless in the form of a response to a predefined stamp of functionalist usage¹. It is a concept of “function” that does not leave space in a project for anything but the executability in function of the usage the designers themselves define.

While in modern architecture form follows function, in modern contemporary society in the context of the 21st century, in which function loses power in its continuous developments, it seems inevitable that “form” must follow “culture” i.e. the new social context it is integrated in.

It is necessary that, in order to be able to answer the requests of the active citizenry (Cecchini, 2007); designers reconsider it all thoroughly and redesign the coordinates among which their space of action can be found, that they discover new paths to express themselves, divesting themselves of the auto-referentiality through which they normally operate. Leaving space for something different from the consolidated culture in which one is acting, permits the definition of new roles capable of answering the requests of our society in transformation.

The newborn collectives, the saprophyte associations, as the *Collectif etc* likes to define itself, being able to feed on waste and to transform it in humus, offer some answers to the issues raised. The *Collectif etc* is actively experimenting methods and tools in order to give the citizens back the right place in the factory of the city (ETC, 2012).

These are collectives of flexible geometry, composed of various professional figures on the basis of the required type and place of action, that act together with and for the inhabitants, building together a space full of meaning that meets the desires of the inhabitants. Their aim is to create spaces of proximity less dependent on private economic interests and on centralised political mechanisms, unsuitable for the territorial mobility and for the actual social models.

In France, *Bruit du Frigo* (BdF) has been sensitising and mobilising the citizens to the issue of urban transformation for years, in order to promote ideas and projects built with the inhabitants, with the help of the well-known “*Atelier d’urbanisme utopique*” which works as a factory of urban fantasists in a circle of free development open to everyone.

A hybrid of a workshop of urban projects, a creative collective and a structure of popular education, whose components – professionals of various fields – dedicate themselves to the study and of and operation in the city and in the territory, by means of artistic, cultural and participatory initiatives (A+T 38, pp. 142-151). In the programme “*Les Lieux Possibles*”, BdF tries to make the inhabitants aware of the creative potentials of the urban empty spaces and of the improvement possibilities. They use few resources and sometimes present provocative “unusual usages” as in the case of the bathtubs positioned on the quays of the river Garonne in Bordeaux that become places of relax and that, considering the type of “destabilizing tools” used, originate from the “*Park(ing) Day*” of Rebar that, since its first edition held in San Francisco in 2005, has gained worldwide fame (Figure 2) thanks to the webpage available for everyone. It is an event that, for the type of space usage, introduces destabilizing elements in the norms of usage, forming an interruption in the *habitus* (Hou, 2010).

1 The functionalist term derives from the function of mathematical sciences. Its use in the field of space construction should make us think about “the idea of interdependence between two quantities in such a way that the value of a quantity depends on the value of the other one” (Gregotti, 2008, p. 128).





Figure 2 | Unplanned stop. Park(ing) day in Alghero, Italy (C'è un'Alghero migliore).

In the “*Ateliers pédagogiques d'exploration urbaine*”, BdF involves students in a creative process of exploring the possibilities of planning of urban spaces, following an active pedagogic principle that encourages the participants to assume the responsibilities and become authors and protagonists of the projects (BdF, 2010). Various forms of sensitising and educating the look dulled by the sight of everyday space are collecting more and more approval and adhesion even in the Italian primary schools, also in the insular reality, as for example in the “Cortili Aperti. Il giardino che non c'è” (Open Courts, the non-existing garden) and “PortaColori” (Picture 3) in Sassari where, lead by a group of professional activists of TaMaLaCà (TaMaLaCà), children took part in a creative process of spatial exploration that lead to the elaboration of the possibilities of the new. By “depicting” the possible, the imaginative potential of the children opened a path to the transformation of the existent.

As a light-caster on something that is hidden, a designer has to *ex-duvere*, to be a par excellence Charon of meaning, becoming a ferryman by his ethical commitment to the education of the sight, to the awakening of consciences and of the awareness of possibilities, following the path of landscapist such as Le Balto in their experiences of “*field studies*” (Pouzol, 2010) in which explore re-significations on the landscape. Here, the collective dimension takes form in the shared experience of new views on the landscape: an experience of orientation of the attention and of care of the receptivity, lead by the landscapists themselves that, with slight interventions on the landscape, remove the everyday places out of the indifferent sight, giving place to new significations. Project devices that are able to work as vehicles of attention and creative stimuli towards the emotional part of mankind, today in a state of mental lethargy, as Lidia De Candia has brilliantly demonstrated in her works. In our society that controls and projects even behaviour, the designer can also participate in this, not in order to create agreement and to give birth to behaviours composed of automatisms of imposed cultural models, but to encourage projects that, by using important devices, generates “spaces of open meaning” towards the projective use of the inhabitants.



Figure 3 | Il “PortaColori” (The ColourBearer). Space construction produced in the Pedagogical Laboratories of Spatial Exploration: “new views on the schoolyard”. Sassari, Italy (TaLaMaCà)

The “active citizenry” manifests itself in multiple forms of expression and indeed, by looking after public spaces it has showed even in Italy to have armed itself with operative language and tools, in respect to the situation of a decade ago², thanks to the intervention of more and more numerous professional collectives that structure such forms of urban resistance, enrolling themselves as partisans, and to their increasing spread that assumes a strategic dimension by getting in the net and by the sharing of know-how, and tool-kits for action as in the manuals of Place Making, City Making, Tactical Urbanism etc, or again in the web platform PEPRAV (*Plate-forme Européenne de Pratiques et Recherches Alternatives de la Ville*), a network of collectives constituted by various professionals.

Thus, questioning the public space means searching for answers to these new claims of the inhabitants, to the collective needs concerning the quality of life, it means shaping a space, by means of a project, that corresponds to the imaginative world of “urban desire” that reflects the society in transformation.

In the past twenty years, many suburban districts have become scenes of active experimentation by the inhabitants (Verdier, 2009) that participated in the transformation of the city under the aegis of European and national “urban regeneration” policies, that were aiming at involving the citizens in order to reduce existent

² In 2002, in “Aventure Urbane”, Marianella Scavi suspected «that in Italy the citizens do not care for «public spaces» not because of an excess of “amoral familism” but for lack of languages and of organisative and decisional methods that would be fit for making communication about community environment, property and rights operative and thus effective» (Scavi, 2002, p.11).

conflicts and to handle social, urban and environmental decay, in residential areas chosen by public initiative. These areas were results of politics of segregation and confinement of depressed social categories to the then borders of the city, with the endorsement of the planners.

The participation in the transformation of the urban environment often ended in failing to overcome the consulting process and in technicalities unable to play an interpretative role by means of effective operative tools or, even when it did give positive results, the lack of systematization weakened the outcomes, contrary to the French reality where there is a consolidated experience in this sector (Verdier 2009).

A new season is opening, that of the active citizens participating in space construction and managing. A new configuration in the design that restores power to the bond between living and building, that reduces the measure of detachment between those that build and those that live the space, between inhabitants and designers; it repairs the relationship of man with space, which is a necessary condition for activating responsibly practices of use and care of the space (Heidegger 1980; Norberg-Schulz 1984).

The age of technology has dematerialized the relationship between man and space. It is the designers' task to overcome the technical-professional apparatus developed following the logic of the jurisdiction of a modern state (Bourdieu 1994, Schon 1983), even if wearing the costume of a phronetic facilitator, in order to meet the needs of the contemporary society in transformation.

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By courtesy of SYN (Picture 1), C'è un Alghero migliore (Picture 2), TaMaLaCà (Picture 3).

