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Milan. Another city

Francesca Cognetti, Paolo Cottino, Gabriele Rabaiotti

The question behind our interpretation of the city of Milan is associated with the role played by social actions which are not part of government practices in the process of producing the city and dealing with its problems.

This partial journey through Milan, this look at it, guided by the places, experiences and voices of what we have met, brings out an opaque layer of the city, that stratum that does not conform to the standard logic of urban consumerism and of accelerating change but which gives life to a plurality of life styles, projects and actions.

There is still a gap between these initiatives and the institutional city and the model that its action tends to create: it is a cross between the two different types that can be seen, the trajectories of a larger, more permeable and more thoughtful city.

De facto public policies

The initiatives succeed with their action in designing new structures, even without intending to. They contribute to a redefinition of the traits: they are *de facto* processes which introduce and/or support new relations in the community (and therefore make a mark on the geography of 'local' relations); they are initiatives which seem to be associated with a potential for innovation and effectiveness in dealing with public problems.

Geographies of 'local' relations

The geography of collective relations is defined by single initiatives rather than being a given starting point that directs its content. If the outline of the

relationships is used as one of the ways or reordering the materials produced by the different experiences mapped as examples, two types of 'ties' can be considered:

- one first network may be interpreted as supporting a process of cultural identification. This network consists of the system of connections that holds together the experiences promoted and animated mainly by young people and is constructed starting from pre-existing interpersonal relationships between those who animate the different projects. Leoncavallo, Metropolix, the self managed Torchiera farm, Cantieri Isola and the Ciclofficina are part of an urban mechanism for diffusing information and tell a story of different ways in which young people can be active collectively in the city. This network is not interested so much in constituting a sort of unified urban movement as in rewarding specificities and in creating the character of its different parts. The construction of a tie between initiatives allows each of them to be recognised and to recognise each other. There is a glimpse of a micro-culture at work;

- a second network introduces the subject of local reconstruction. Through that initiatives act as local catalysts and trigger for processes that (re)define communities (a square, a block, an area, a neighbourhood). What makes them interesting is the type of challenge that they propose and sustain. They are networks that construct a position, an issue, a 'social argument': the Molise-Calvaire-Ponti tenants committees, the Villaggio Barona and the Parco Trotter are projects and processes that have constructed their own local context, from the starting

point of being present in a determined place.

Geography of policies

The potential for innovation is often associated with alternatives and often with completely new ways of acting that are brought into play to tackle public problems and collective questions.

Many of these interventions were started as protest actions, accusations and demands. The battles for the right to housing conducted by the Molise Calvaire tenants committee or the ecological battles of Italia Nostra and the Diciannoverde were expressions that voiced feelings of protest as compared to traditional forms of public (non) intervention. The local context was a pretext for manifesting discontent and a more general dissent, to then raise the conflict to higher level.

With time the action of pointing out the failings and limitations of the institutions fuelled a desire to undertake demonstrative action directly in the field.

The activists started to weigh up the idea of translating the initial feelings and orientations into projects.

More recent actions have been moving in this direction.

These forms of civic, social and community commitment are now showing an interest in dealing directly with some of the problems that affect the city. It is the result of very strong, almost obsessive, motivation not so much to achieve specific long term goals as to open up ways of dealing with questions that appear irresolvable. What seems to be a lack of strategy and rationality is in fact the key to the construction of the first answers.

The capacity expressed by many self-organised experiences to act

appropriately and effectively in the identification and treatment of new needs as well as old problems should not be overlooked when rethinking public action in the government of cities. Is there any exchange of ideas and any overlap in the field of action of social practices and the area of educational policies? And if so, on what subjects and in which directions?

From an operational viewpoint, a few processes that act from the 'bottom up' have found space for interaction, although not without difficulty, starting from openings and opportunities connected with 'top down' instruments. It is the case of the Molise-Calvaire-Ponti Committee which from a situation of open conflict with the institutions has found itself in recent years as one of the main actors in planning changes to the neighbourhood promoted by the public administration.

This occurred firstly with the project Città Sane (healthy cities) and now with the neighbourhood contract. From the viewpoint of partnership instruments, a series of experiences have found the language and means of inserting themselves into the institutional circuits that address difficult problems and have become one of the internal parts of the public planning and administration/implementation process. At times the relationship with these experiences tends to produce changes in the procedures that govern relations between the institutions and local actors. This is the case of the group Italia Nostra which saw its mandate to manage the Boscoincittà (woods in the city) project at the nearby Cave park extended, or of the Villaggio Barona where the broadening of functions compatible with standards was introduced

for the first time to include social housing through the permanent change of the area to public use. From the viewpoint of local learning, it was found that the organising groups had gradually acquired the capacity to use participatory spaces and instruments usually reserved for the use of very selected groups and highly structured interests. The Cantieri Isola association for example participated, in the group directed by Giancarlo De Carlo, in the international competition for the Porta Volta public gardens. It intervened in the urban design of the Garibaldi-Repubblica area, the source of conflict between the association and the Municipality of Milan. Here again there is the use that many of these actors have made of 'community finance' provided by the Cariplo Foundation. These groups conduct dialogue with the municipal administration in different ways and some of them remain in open conflict. It occurs for different reasons. There are the 'radical' experiences that have no intention of retreating in their demonstration that the city can be interpreted and inhabited differently. These forms of resistance are explained more by the history of relations and politics that have set local groups against the public administration rather than in ideological differences. They lead more often than not to tension and in any case damage the chances of coming to even the slightest agreement. One example is the self managed Torchiera farm where the municipality has refused to show any interest in the 'collective' plan to refurbish and preserve the building, just as it ignored the application to connect the old farmhouse to the water mains. Generally speaking we can

make an initial assessment which sees an attitude to make demands and put forward proposals that do not merely make demands but are the beginning of a new way of relating to institutional actors; which brings innovation and rethinking. Listening and taking experimentation from the bottom up as material for defining a different frame of intervention and a different manner of public action does not represent a secondary, less powerful strategy. It points to a possible way of working, a way for public institutions to interpret their role in a plural and complex context. If the city is constructed in the fluctuating space between public sector intervention and the social action of individuals and groups, it is perhaps worthwhile opening up avenues of research and work that move more convincingly in this direction. Approaching this city is probably one of the first steps.

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