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Italian Piazzas, an Old Story for New Scenarios

Włoskie place: dawne dzieje, nowe scenariusze

Abstract

Focusing on the relation between open spaces and housing estates in Italy, the article describes how Italians have been changing their way to live such public spaces during the last century. After a prologue on the different ways Italian have to describe the piazza, the writing illustrates other category of public open spaces that occur in the Mediterranean Peninsula. As in Italy the nowadays-social use of common spaces as piazzas and urban gardens depends on several interlocked factors, only adaptive and multidisciplinary projects can obtain valuable results. Four recent projects completed in the Northeast Regions contribute to define some new scenarios and methods for the future of Italian public spaces.

Streszczenie

Skupiając się na relacji pomiędzy przestrzeniami otwartymi a osiedlami mieszkaniowymi na terenie Włoch, autor niniejszego artykułu ukazuje metody, jakimi mieszkańcy tego kraju zmieniali swój model życia w tego rodzaju przestrzeniach publicznych na przestrzeni ostatniego stulecia. Po wstępie dotyczącym różnych sposobów, w jakie Włosi opisują swe place, tekst ilustruje inne kategorie publicznych przestrzeni otwartych występujących na Półwyspie Apenińskim. Ponieważ we współczesnych Włoszech społeczne wykorzystywanie przestrzeni wspólnych, na przykład placów czy ogrodów miejskich, zależy od kilku sprzężonych ze sobą czynników, istotne wyniki dać mogą jedynie projekty elastyczne i wielodyscyplinarne. Cztery projekty zrealizowane niedawno w regionach północno-wschodnich pomagają nakreślić nowe scenariusze oraz metody z myślą o przyszłości włoskich przestrzeni publicznych.

Keywords: Italy, Piazzas, Contemporary Open Public Spaces.
Słowa kluczowe: Włochy, place, współczesne otwarte przestrzenie publiczne.

Everybody knows that the Italian noun '*piazza*' can be a synonymous of 'public space'; but if someone talks with Italians can comprehend that for the Mediterranean Peninsula people this equivalence it's not so simple to do. Piazza, coming from the Latin "*platea*" that means 'large street', is a lot more than this for Italians, and sometime something less. Piazza is the place where for centuries all the social relations (meetings, markets, law courts, protests) took place and at the same time it was the scene of most part of the private citizens' life. In fact, just listing the different ways Italians have to name the public spaces inside the urban fabric, they well express the importance Italians give to those common urban places and their little remarkable differences: *piazza, piazzetta, piazzale, largo, slargo*… A common place, that's not always public.

Piazzas are very special and peculiar ingredients of Italian towns. Actually some piazzas were 'private', some other were 'public'. Some of them designed to have a public role inside the city and its life, some others just created by the town growth, building after building

in that kind of mathematical formulation recognized by Christopher Alexander in his essays[1]. Piazzas are part of the urban pattern, with several roles related to their dimensions and positions. A 'piazzetta' (a little piazza) could never be a market place, but could be very ancient and often it 'belongs' to the little community that lives beside it (but it's not the French square, neither the English one); a 'piazzale' (a large piazza) is a modern version of the piazza, designed by an urban plan (so it dates after the Italian Napoleonic period); a 'largo' is actually a modern road that really becomes very wide, but it can never be confused with a piazza, as its space is more open and very fluid. In the Italian towns old maps (XIX century) one can find the *Piazza Pubblica* (the public square) indicated as the new civic place in opposition with the *Piazza del Mercato* or *Piazza*

delle Erbe (the market square), that by centuries had been the place dedicated to business. And it's not to forget that kind of piazza that in every Italian town lays in front of the church, a sort of special place where sometimes all the features that have been listed before find place, or maybe not. At the very end, we have to add another ingredient, introduced for the first time by the Austrians in Milan in 1770 with the construction of the Via Marina as a 'public green open space' and, then, with the *Giardini Pubblici* (Public Gardens): the "public green spot" put inside the (old) urban fabric and open to all. All the Italian towns that are real towns must have a Public Garden. The reason for this long foreword is to try to understand why Italians in the last one hundred years lost part of the notions about open public spaces, actually using them in a way more and more different from the past, causing some shortcuts that make poorer their lifestyle.

In fact, the Italian rationalist urbanism ('20s-'40s) gave to all the towns a public piazza and a public garden, but after World War II the urbanism devoted to zoning and standards put more emphasis on the public roads (for vehicles) and housing (for residents), avoiding to think about the public space (both kinds, piazzas or public gardens) and its relations with the other parts of the urban system: during the '50s and the '60s public spaces in the newly growing towns came out from the cuttings of a "well planned" urban design. It's rare to find public spaces related to new housing estates thought during the Italian economic boom: roads, condominiums, and "*villette con giardino*" (little villas with private garden) were the dream and the obsession of new wealthy Italy.

In the '70s, the architectural and social rhetoric intended to find better solutions for these new residential parts especially developed at the outskirts of the Italian towns, often occupied by commuters with a very low census. Designers tried to improve the aspect of many spaces remaining still void and without any use. They introduced a new component: the "*parco pubblico*" (public park), a space that, mixing public garden and piazza, should help sub-urban inhabitants to get together, opening the ways to new relations. So, besides the hinterland housing estates, in pieces of land forgotten and derelict, architects and planners built these new spaces to stimulate the social integration inside a social fabric became poor, selfish and very fragmented. The amount of raw concrete open-air amphitheatres built in the middle of green fields dates from that age. It's really difficult nowadays to understand why at that time designers were thinking that open-air theatres could set commuters free from their social condition. Surely, it was a kind of collective utopia that became real, but was also useless.

The arrival on the scene of the '*parco pubblico*' or '*parco urbano*' (urban park) produced as a by-product a new unwritten rule, operative from the late '80s thanks to a lot of ecologist designers: new piazzas and all new public spaces should have had greenery within them, it didn't matter their size or their function. According to this new rule, most part of the Italian piazzas that Camillo Sitte studied and described in his famous essay[2] as icons of a designed perfection became simply 'wrong', as they were missing trees, yards or flowerbeds. Some historical piazzas arrived from the past working so well without any kind of greenery, during works of restoration or renewal had decorated with trees and flowerbeds that never had been supposed to be there[3]. This was the rebound

of the sustainability approach, in which the lesson taught by the time -open spaces like piazzas can be fine without green- has been cancelled by extremist excess – open spaces need always some kind of greenery to be eco-friendly-. What a mistake, this is a false truth.

Nowadays Italians inherit all these typologies of public spaces, all of them related also with the residential urban fabric, in a moment of great social transformation, especially in the large metropolis where, in the recent years, the newcomers from all the world introduced new ways to live the public open spaces. Actually Italians discovered they knew no more how really to use properly the public spaces, often wondering why people coming from so far away could find their place, make 'their' place in piazzas and public parks the Peninsula inhabitants usually saw more as a 'perfect scenery' and no more as a place where to live.

Thinking about the tomorrow-Italian town, the scenario is a picture in motion, where all these factors count. More and more urban plans, inspired by the "smart city concept", are proposing new ways to interpret the public open spaces, reading them as the real bone-structure of the town. A texture of series of public spaces organized in hierarchical patterns that can extend the borders of the citizens' life from home to neighbourhood, from neighbourhood to district and then to all around the town. The challenge is to create a sequence of 'common grounds' where all, old and new Italians, can find their place, adapt it, adopt it, be part of it. To do this architecture and planning have to apply interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary protocols, learning to listen to all the voices (technical, social, local and global) that can influence the final project and its result.

In the following projects it is possible to recognize the seeds of this new public space evolution in Italy. All of them related to housing estates, they lay in little communities in the Italian North-East, where, in the recent years, the most advanced experimentation on architecture took place. In all the cases, the sense of community is the key for to understand the project. Open spaces besides the housing buildings become places where to meet, to play or simply stay combining vary functions. Private spaces are fading first with semi-public ones and then with public ones with scale passages to whom are corresponding several grades of control. Spaces to live and to express, just like in the ancient urban patterns that celebrate at its best the Italian town.

In the housing project in Caldaro/Kaltern[4], the designers of Feld72 Architekten organize eight buildings as an agglomeration developed along a 'Gartenweg' (garden lane), a kind of green corridor

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il. 1. and 2.: Caldaro: Views of the Housing Settlement by Feld72. The 'garden lane' is the common public space for the local community (photos by Hertha Hurnaus)

il. 5. San Biagio: An aerial view of the Contrà Leonardo housing estate, showing the complexity of the open spaces (photo courtesy Studio Semerano)

that creates a common public space connecting the little condominiums to the mountain landscape. The internal street passing through the houses changes in shape and direction, according to the several features that contains the playgrounds for the children of the community. The open spaces placed as solution of continuity between the housing buildings are green slopes suggested by the natural topography of the plot. The buildings' shapes combine differently, describing from a distance the image of a village completely absorbed in the calm landscape of the historic village of Caldaro. The garden lane is the settlement backbone, a big intelligent public space Feld72 obtains without compromising the structure of intervention. Just adding more functions to a scene able to embrace them all.

In the second project, realized in Pordenone, entitled by the architects Carlo Cappai and Maria Alessandra Segantini (C+S Associati) "Urban Lake Houses"[5], the open space opens over the mirror of a little artificial lake that once gave power with its water to an electrical station just in the centre of the town. The housing settlement, that is in part new and in part coming from the restoration of historical buildings, embraces the water space donating new perspectives to the cityscape. Long bridges connecting the opposite banks where green grew up profusely in the years of abandon cross the little lake. The open space has different levels. The inner one, around the water, is semi-public, open to visitors during the day, the outer one fades with the piazza that lays in front of the Saint George's Church. An extreme smart project that combines private and public, transforming a forgotten spot into a beautiful scene donated to the city.

In the third example, "Contrà Leopardi"[6] in San Biagio di Callalta, the architect Piergiorgio Semerano decides to abandon housing typologies and their replica attitude to experiment a complex variety of several residential units, one different from the other, that draws a pattern similar to the one present in the ancient Italian villages. The quarter has only pedestrian spaces that form a kind of network built up by streets, lanes, and little piazzas where green merges itself with the one existing in the private gardens. Meanwhile the houses inhabitants control public open spaces, the privacy of apartments and private gardens is guaranteed. No introspection is possible between the units: common spaces, fences and tall trees constantly cover the inner views. The concept of this settlement seems a perfect application of the Bill Hillier's Space Syntax theory[7]. The passage from the public to private space passes through different stages of 'segregation' without creating any *cul de sac*. The proportion between the various kinds of open spaces, their volumetric dimensions and the houses surrounding them permits to the visitor to find his way easily, even if the context is very dense. Actually Semerano designed spaces that merge one over the other, overlapping them like it happens in the mediaeval urban textures. It's incredible how this kind of pattern, so ancient and so distant from the contemporary mental structure can define a so pleasant experience. And fantasy can fly to Venice, from where this settlement – even if completely un-Venetian- seems to belong.

As last example of new Italian public space, something very different from the other three presented in this article. The '*Giardino Pubblico*' (public garden) by Cino Zucchi Architetti[8] in San Donà di Piave, completed in 2004. The most evident diversity stays in the fact that this project was the result of a competition with the purpose to realize a new public space at the outskirts of the Venetian town, in a location where new housing estates were planned in the future. After few years, the Giardino Pubblico, that had a very warm welcome on the international architectural press, shows its limits. Or better, it demonstrates how a good project can't be saved from disaster if something gets wrong in the architectural and planning process. The Giardino Pubblico, with its white surface of apparently fluid concrete celebrating the typical white of the River Piave stones and its constructed green slopes, calls the future. A system of specialized spaces, from the open-air amphitheatre to the skateboard track, organizes without any solution of continuity other unspecialized places where users of any age can find something to do, together or alone. But the public garden architectural concept was devastated by the housing settlements built beside it in these last years. All of them so distant both from the architectonical language and the planning intentions of that open space designed to be the spine of a new neighbourhood. Walking through this space nowadays is like passing through a living anachronism, where the first built park seems a star-ship coming from the future.

The lesson learnt is that without a common concept and a common plan realizing new open public spaces that really serve the surrounding housing estates is very difficult. Better, it's almost impossible. And this lesson is valid not only in Italy.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Christopher Alexander, A pattern language, Oxford University Press, 1977.

[2] Camillo Sitte, Der Städtebau nach seinen Künstlerischeren Grundsätzen, Wien, 1889.

[3] In Milan, in example, it happened in several places, one of the most controversial the new look created by Paolo Portoghesi for the Piazza La Scala, or Piazza San Fedele both piazzas in the historic centre of the town. A big controversy was also caused in 2009 by the Renzo Piano and Claudio Abbado's project to plant 1,000 trees to create a sort of wood from the Duomo (Milan's Cathedral) to the close Castello Sforzesco (Sforza Castle). Fortunately this idea aborted in 2010.

[4] Housing in Caldaro/Kaltern (Bolzano/Bozen, Alto Adige/Südtirol), a project by feld72 Architektur und Urbane Strategien (Mario Paintner, Richard Scheich, Anne Catherine Fleith, Peter Zoderer, and Michael Obrist; the last two are Italians), the Viennese practice won the 1st prize of an invited-entry competition and completed the complex in 2011; client: Arche KVW; landscape architecture: PlanSinn; structures: Obrist & Partner; building services: energytech; plot area 5,173 sqm; net dwelling area 2,456 sqm. Photos: Hertha Hurnaus, courtesy of Feld72, Wien. For other info: www.feld72.at.

[5] "ULH-Urban Lake Houses" in Pordenone (Friuli Venezia Giulia), a project by C+S Associati (Carlo Cappai, Maria Alessandra Segantini with Carolin Stapenhorst and Guido Stella) completed in 2010; developer: San Giorgio S.r.l. (Rizzani de Eccher S.p.A. / Prospettive JV); General Contractor: Rizzani de Eccher S.p.A.; Gross Floor Area: 11,000 sqm; Site Area: 75.000 sqm. Photos: Luca Casonato, courtesy of C+S Associati, Treviso. For other info: web.cipiuesse.it.

[6] Contrà Leopardi, in Olmi di San Biagio di Callalta (Treviso, Veneto), a project by Toti (Piergiorgio) Semerano with Stefano Antonello, Giuseppe Apollonio, Mauro Aschedamini, Carolina Bozzi Colonna, Valeria Crasto, Luigi Cremonesi, Ludovica Fava, Iride Filoni, Clémentine Gautreau, Joao Loureiro, Marta Montinari, Andrea Piscopo, Sergio Rollo, Simone Romaro, Giuseppe Scarabello, Gunar Thorn, Caterina Zaccaria, and Stefano Zanardi; Client: Canova srl; completed in 2009. Photos by Carlo Carossio, courtesy of Studio Piergiorgio Semerano, Padova. For other info: www.semerano.com.

[7] To obtain more info on Bill Hillier and his Space Syntax theory developed at the Bartlett School of the University of London, please visit www.spacesyntax.com.

[8] For more info please visit: www.zucchiarchitetti.com. Photos by Luca Maria Francesco Fabris (August, 2012).

il. 3. Pordenone: The lake, surrounded by semi-public spaces, is the centre of this housing estate (photo Luca Casonato)

il. 4. Pordenone: The public spaces merges with the semi-private one without solutions (photo Luca Casonato)

il. 6. and 7. San Biagio: views of the opens spaces and their use by the children (Photos by Carlo Carossio)

il. 8. San Donà di Piave: a panoramic view of the Giardino Pubblico, in the distance the new housing estates (photo Luca MF Fabris)

il. 9. San Donà di Piave: the entry at the Giardino, backwards the new completed housing. The anachronism between the two architectures is self-evident (photo Luca MF Fabris)