Looking at public spaces in contemporary Rome: an anthropological perspective on the study of cities

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Abstract

Through the presentation of two case studies this paper aims to engage the theoretical debate on the persistence of public space in the contemporary city, and focuses the attention on the way people practice these spaces and on the policies which are regulating their uses.

Starting from the description of different ways in which some urban spaces in Rome (Italy) are used by two different communities of people, one mainly composed by immigrants and the other by young city users, and the diverse ways in which their different practices are seen and tolerated, the aim of this paper is to reflect on public spaces. Observing how city users practice public spaces, and analysing the way in which these practices are considered, are particularly exciting perspectives that can offer an interesting vision of the spatial and social reality of the city and of hegemonic relations which govern it.

Keywords: public spaces, urban practices, urban policies, immigration

Looking at public space

It is quite common, walking around the central area of Rome, to meet busy and lively public spaces.

This should not be a novelty or a strangeness. Italian squares and piazzas are well known as typical examples of public urban spaces. Worldwide planners and architects are formed on the idea that Italian piazzas, such as 'Piazza San Marco' in Venice and 'Piazza del Campo' in Siena, represent the perfect example of public space where inhabitants transform the physical space of the city in public arena. What are the elements which determine the success of urban public spaces? Which are the practices that characterize these spaces?

The fact that only some of these spaces and not all of them are truly used and populated should not be given for granted and, instead, deserves some reflection. The recent transformations that are associated to the transition from the modern to the contemporary city are undermining the very concept of public space. As many scholars such as Z. Bauman (1998, 2000), R. Sennet (2006), M. Davies (1999), M. Castells (2000) argued, policies of privatization and security, and a more general

tendency to consumerism and individualism, are some of the main threat which this kind of space is nowadays facing. In many cities around the world public spaces have been abandoned and urban inhabitants have been discouraged to use it.

As a consequence, in recent years the main debate about public space has been focusing on the persistence of this kind of space in the contemporary city. Is it still possible to name piazzas and streets as 'public spaces' even if their nature has changed? Is it still possible to give them the same connotation of 'public' even if they are not anymore used as political arena rather mainly as spaces of consumption? These are only few of the main questions raised by the discussion.

The debate has developed in two different positions. The first claims the 'death of the public space', arguing that the transformations, which characterized this contemporary era, destroyed the political dimension of these spaces, and in so doing their very essence. Public space is not anymore, in this sense, corresponding to the definition H. Arendt (1964) gave of it, as the place of presence, of appearance and of political actions and deliberations. According to this perspective public space is now only a place of presence and appearance.

The second position agrees with the idea that the public space has undergone a process of transformation, but keeps sustaining its essence as the social arena of the city.

This debate, which actively involves architects, planners, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and all the people who are studying the city, seems not to touch and not to have direct consequences on the way cities are planned. While theoretically scholars are questioning the difficulty, or even the possibility, to attribute the sense of 'public' to a space, the way physical spaces are organized and built seems, in fact, not to be challenged.

Whatever public space is or means today, it is still strongly associated to a higher quality of urban living (Colarossi, P. 2002) and it is still linked to its original nature of space of justice and democracy. Or, in other words, to what S. Fainstein (2011) considers to be the most important factor associated to a 'just city': diversity, democracy and equity. Public spaces and squares are generally used as indicators of urban quality as it is considered that their presence should assure the possibility for citizens not only to have access to the physical space of the city, rather also to its public life.

The very presence of a piazza on a master plan of a new district or the simple fact of mentioning public space in a developing project is generally considered to be sufficient to guarantee the political will to promote a 'just city' with a strong sense of community among its inhabitants.

But are we sure that this is true?

As if the simple physical dimension of a space should be able to create its social and cultural dimension, the attention remains principally focused on the physical aspect of these spaces rather than on the policies which regulate it or on the practices which characterize its 'public' dimension. The social, cultural and political dimensions of this kind of space are a very difficult construct which seems not to be necessarily related to its material existence rather to behaviours and policies.

Unsuccessful piazzas, which are not used, not lived and often abandoned, demonstrate that the physical dimension alone is not sufficient to create a public space. At the same time the many examples of improvised and informal public spaces, intensively used by communities of people show that are the practices that make a space "public".

And here we come to the central topic of this contribution which is the study of social practices acted in public spaces. As we saw, the purpose of public spaces should be to accommodate public social practices or, to say it in other words, to give the possibility to people to meet, discuss, match, celebrate etc, outside their private spaces.

The way in which it is possible to do so is mediated and regulated by an infinite number of rules, norms, prohibitions and impositions that determine what, who, and where it is possible to do or not to do. Clearly the sense, the meaning and the importance of these practices depend on different factors and have changed over time. According to historical, political, economic, cultural and social logics, some spatial practices have been forbidden while some other are allowed and encouraged. Despite the enormous differences that can characterize its practices, the way public space is planned is usually based on the idea that it will be used by stereotypical social actors in very stereotypical ways. Independently from their location, identities, cultures, socio-economic status and by the political realities in which they live, social actors are, in fact, expected to use public spaces following same logics and acting in similar, if not same ways worldwide.

Regardless of the location of the public space involved, whether in a poor city in Tanzania, in a rich Italian city, or in Singapore for example, urban plans are generally representing standard public spaces animated by standard human figures doing standard, and in some cases unrealistic, actions: happily walking families with shopping bags and balloons for children, eating ice-cream, driving a bicycle and chatting.

There are enormous differences among the way public spaces are practiced. It is not a case if among other diversities, what makes a city special and particular in relation to other cities is the way its public spaces are used, lived, animated and what do they represent.

Given these assumptions it can be easily understood why analysing urban practices represent a useful perspective to explore contemporary public spaces.

Besides the interest in knowing and having an idea of what is really happening and going on in these spaces, the study of public social everyday practices represents a useful help in understanding the way in which contemporary social, technological, political and economic processes are transforming contemporary cities.

As S. Low (2000, 2003) suggests, the study of everyday urban practices can help to connect the discourse on experience and practices to a more general discourse on the structure. It is only through a deep attention to everyday practices and their meanings that we can have access to a more detailed analysis of the way inhabitants react to the dynamics that generate, govern and characterize the organization of the spaces of the city (De Certeau, M. 2001). In other words we can understand if the ways city's spaces are planned and organized are able, or are not, to reflect and to respond to the needs of those who live them. An analysis that consider the ways in which citizens use urban public spaces enables us to evaluate the outcome, success or failure, of urban planning.

What are public spaces today? What is their meaning and what practices are they hosting? Which policies govern them? Are these spaces really open and available to all urban citizens? Are all practices permitted? Are these spaces really public? And last but not least: is it still possible to consider the very presence of this kind of space as a marker of urban inclusion and urban justice? All these questions can find an answer in the 'practical' analysis of its realities. It is still possible to observe what public space is and how it is lived in our cities.

And here we have to go back to the starting point of this paper: 'it is quite common, walking around the central area of Rome, to meet very used and alive public spaces'.

Observing everyday practices in public spaces

In Rome it is possible to encounter many public spaces that are used by inhabitants as social arenas for their meetings and for their social activities.

These spaces have changed over time and some of them are today characterized by a significant presence of commerce and are mainly used as consumption sites while some others are still free from any commercial presence and are used as public arenas in many and diverse manners.

The two case studies that are going to be presented, which are the result of different studies conducted in the last years in the city of Rome[1], aim to describe some practices which characterize these two typologies of public spaces and to underline how the authorities dealt with those practices.

The practices that are going to be described are quite similar to each other, but are acted by diverse communities of people in different urban contexts. The first case study concerns some practices that, since a decade now, characterize the way in which a central park of the city, the Parco della Resistenza dell'8 Settembre, is used. The second one concerns the practices which are put in place by those who go to Pigneto, a new 'cultural district'[2] of the Rome.

Despite their differences, these two cases are interesting for similar reasons. The practices that are carried out are based on non-traditional logic that transform the image, the role and significance of the places in which they take place.

Comparing two cases: 'Parco della Resistenza dell'8 Settembre'and Pigneto.

'Parco della Resistenza dell'8 Settembre' is a small park in the central area of the city of Rome. It is at the borders of different neighbourhood, Testaccio, Ostiense, San Saba and Aventino and it is a typical roman parkland with many green areas, large trees, various types of plants, flowerbeds, and a playground for children. The spaces of the park are divided by walkways with many benches. And, as in other parks of Rome, there are a fountain and a summerhouse, called 'Café du Park', famous for its ice-cream. In recent times this park has undergone a deep transformation that involved its social reality more than its physical and spatial characteristics.

During the end of the '80s and the first part of the '90s, from having an important role as social meeting space of local inhabitants, 'Parco della Resistenza' has begun to be seen as an unsafe area and to represent a place of marginality where irregular practices could be carried on. In that period drug addicts started to use secluded areas of urban parks as locations for selling and consuming drugs. Just as other parks, also Parco della Resistenza started to be frequented by addicts and to become a meeting point for their community. The very presence of this particular category of people, and their way to use this space, was enough to discourage other people to attend the park. Local inhabitants started not to bring their children to play there anymore and gradually not to frequent the park. Slowly the park became unused and remained unused even when addicts stopped using that place.

[1] Postiglione, Monica. *Lo spazio degli incontri: mappe prossemiche in un parco romano,* Tesi di Laurea in Antropologia Culturale, La Sapienza Università di Roma, 2004 and *Usi sociali negli spazi della città contemporanea,* tesi di Dottorato in Tecnica Urbanistica, La Sapienza Università di Roma, 2011

[2] *Cultural district* are those areas of the city, or urban villages, specialized in offering leisure and entrateinment. A cultural district is a place capable to embody vocational experience of the city (Bavone 2005) and represents a strong economical growth potential in the post-industrial economy (S. Annunziata 2008.)

Than something changed and the park returned to life becoming an important aggregation point for communities of immigrants, and in particular, of recently arrived immigrants.

Today the park functions as a reference point for many immigrants mainly arriving from the Philippines and East Europe. At times of maximum attendance the park is frequented by hundreds of persons. Regardless of the seasons and temperatures, in these occasions the park is transformed in a 'village' where community members can find a variety of services: hairdressers, doctors, tailors, real estate agents, travel agents and even priests celebrating mass. Regardless of the logic according to which those spaces were designed and the purposes according to which they were designated, every walkway, every bench, every corner and avert wall of the park host a different practice: some benches become tables where exotic food are served, other benches hosts hairdresser and so on. These same places are also used as political sites where community members discuss their ideas, share their problems and, together, try to find solutions. The different communities that populate the park are structured in such a way that its members can find there all the services they might need in order to organize their lives in the foreign city. Also the coexistence of various communities who live and use the park is discussed and contracted. Philippines and the diverse eastern European groups who frequent that area organized themselves in such a way that their practices do not disturb each other. In this sense, Parco della Resistenza, represents a traditional example of public space in its socio-political sense.

The other case study that is mentioned in this article concerns the way public spaces are used in the Pigneto area. Once considered peripheral, this district is now undergoing a phase of urban renaissance which is giving it a new role in the geography of the city. Apart from the explosion of a typical example of gentrification process, the renaissance of this area corresponded to the opening of many clubs, bars, art galleries, restaurants and to the transformation of its public spaces in meeting points for many young people. From being a poor and socially problematic district where nobody, except for its local inhabitants, wanted to go, Pigneto became an interesting place where many young people want to go.

The plenty supply and variety of its social catalysts have been able to stimulate many people attendance. The streets of this area are today full of people who meet, chat, consume drinks and food and who, with their presence, create social relations.

Even if 'non regular' practices are in this case less evident than those acted by immigrants at the park, also in this context, public spaces are not always used in an 'orthodox' way. It is possible to observe diverse spatial practices that reshape public space.

Many visitors who attend the social life of this district do not follow the logic by which its spaces are organized and find new and diverse ways to experience this area and, in particular, its commercial logics.

Despite the presence of many 'dehors', outdoor tables, chairs and other spaces devoted to consumption, it is quite common to see groups of people who escape from spatial logics of consumption by sitting together on the street pavement, perching on shops and sidewalks stairs while eating and drinking or just spending some time together chatting and playing music. Spatial behaviours acted by these people come out and change the pre-determined logics according to which public spaces should be experienced, and propose a new possible order where accessibility is not necessarily related to consumption possibilities.

As in the case of immigrant communities, also at Pigneto public spaces are used as meeting points where social practices take forms and where, through these practices, socio, political position, desires and needs are represented. Pigneto streets and piazzas can, in this sense, be named as public spaces.

The significance of spatial practices and their regulation.

In order to better understand the importance of practices in the analysis of public spaces another element should be considered: the meaning, the significance and the sense of social practices.

Apart from the value of understanding the social reality of these areas of the city and the social needs of the communities which frequent these places, the study of what happens in the park and in the busy streets of Pigneto allows us to underline aspects that generally remain barely visible and that are often ignored by professionals who deal with public space.

Immigrant communities and Pigneto's city users are not just displaying a different use of public spaces; rather through their practices they are also communicating their urban needs and their urban desires.

In the case of Parco della Resistenza, the same existence of the above described practices is symptomatic of the difficulties faced by new city's inhabitants at the time of their arrival, may these be economic, logistic, linguistic and cultural. Any activity that takes place in the park corresponds, to a particular need of community members. Implemented practices represent answers to how the city is organized or unorganized to welcome its new inhabitants. The absence of indoor structures, the impossibility to afford a rent, might it be of an apartment or a center for the community, as well as the rigid working schedules and the absence of employment agencies for new immigrants are only some of the elements that may emerge and that should be at least addressed if not completely solved.

Driven by different needs from the ones just described, also the alternative uses of Pigneto spaces are symptomatic of particular urban requests. Using the space in unexpected way corresponds, in this case, to break out the consumption schemes of the urban life and the permitted protocol of socio-spatial behaviors. Through their 'irregular practices', young citizens are trying to re-transform consumption sites in real public spaces where accessibility is not related to economic power and consumption styles. The discriminating power of leisure consumption emerges as problem which should be considered and regulated in order to rethink a more just city.

Furthermore, through the observation and the description of the dynamics that take place in these two contexts, also other factors are called into question. Social, political, institutional and economic factors that determine the way the space is organized and regulated emerge.

Only by taking account of migrants' cultural origins, of immigration laws, of existing (or missing) reception facilities and of economic activities in which normally new arrived immigrants are involved, it is possible to understand Parco della Resistenza social practices. In the same way, it is only through a deep understanding of what are the rules on the use of green urban spaces, of what theoretically is possible to do and what is instead forbidden, that it is possible to focus on the innovations that these practices entail.

In the case of Pigneto, a deep analysis of mentioned spatial practices necessarily takes into account the economic and social role and the meaning of urban leisure in the contemporary city. As already mentioned, described urban practices represent a reaction to the consumerist logics that invades the city by imposing fixed manners and consumptions.

Also in this case, in order to understand the way in which these practices represent an 'indiscipline' (De Certeau, M. 2001) one must take into consideration what the discipline is, the set of rules and regulations that define which uses are proper and which, instead, are improper. As the mere description of these practices can be used to highlight the needs of a particular social group, it can also be considered as an indicator of the way in which the space of leisure is organized, for which typology of people and for what purpose.

Only by taking into consideration the logics that are at the bases of the specific ways in which the spaces and spatial functions are organized, it is possible to understand the alternative ways that new practices propose. It is from the contextualization of these practices that it is possible to capture their sense and the way in which they are inserted in the contemporary city.

Regulatory policies for public spaces seem to have, in this sense, an extremely important role in defining, structuring and sponsoring ordinary and non ordinary spatial practices.

Another important factor that can emerge through this approach to the study of the city and of its socio-spatial practices is related, in fact, to the regulatory policies for public spaces. The double standard by which the park practices and Pigneto district practice have been treated is, in fact, emblematic.

Through the analysis of these two examples it is possible to highlight the diverse measures by which similar practices have been treated and addressed in the two different contexts. On the one end, in the case of the Parco della Resistenza there has been a typical example of repression of an alternative spatial practice, while, in the case of Pigneto alternatives practices have been not only tolerated but also exploited. The 'diverse' uses of Pigneto's street, its 'diverse' practices have been used to promote the district as an open and alternative district.

Knowing the type of repressive attitude on the themes of immigration which have characterized Roman municipal policies in the last decades it is not surprising to find out that the needs expressed by the immigrant communities of the Parco della Resistenza have generally been ignored or even suppressed. In order to stop the 'disordered uses' of the park more controls have been established and last year, in order to prevent the entry to the park at night, the entire perimeter of the area has been fenced. From being an open and free place, the park has started to be a controlled space where not all practices are allowed and not all groups are welcomed. Some people started to use differently the green spaces of the park and some others decided to abandon it for other more open and available places.

While the picnic and meetings of immigrants at the park have been treated as 'disorder' and as a problem to solve, the similar practices acted in the contest of Pigneto have been seen as an opportunity to make the neighborhood more lively and vital and, in so doing, to re-launch the image and the economy of the neighborhood.

By analyzing the transformations which have been characterizing this area of the city it is possible to see how these kinds of disordered and innovative spatial practices have become an important aspect of new urban development strategies. Like many other popular neighborhoods, since the beginning of 2000s Pigneto has undergone a process of gentrification where, attracted by its particular architecture, its urban dimension and by the convenience of its real estate market, new generally young and richer residents started to arrive and to replace the old local population. Social and cultural needs of this new population have been drivers for new and alternative ways of use urban spaces. It is clear how, the encouragement of particular practices have been used to promote a re-signification of the local culture and of the image of the Pigneto.

Conclusions

Contesting the idea of the death of public space, this article suggests the persistence and the importance of this typology of space in the contemporary city. Many are the elements which determine a transformation of the way public spaces are today lived, perceived and used by city's inhabitants. However these spaces are still representing an important, if not essential social space. Its definition may not be associated anymore to H. Arendt's definition of space for political action and political deliberation, nor of political education and political membership construction (E. Scandurra 2007). However public space still represents a fundamental place of encounter and of exchange where citizens learn and acquire the capacity to cope with each other and it is still the place where tolerance can be learned. The role of public spaces as meeting points, the type of frequentations and of sociality that they host make these spaces the principal social arena of the city. Even if the experience of being in a public space is today often strongly characterized by leisure and consumerism, it still is an essential moment of social construction and of social participation to urban life (Scandurra 2007, Bianchetti 2003).

Public space existence can not be confined to its physical presence. Social practices are public spaces' soul and only their study can tell us about the existence and the persistence of a public dimension in the city. It is, in fact, not only to the physical presence or to the physical absence of public spaces that one has to look to understand if a city is open to diversity, if it is equal and democratic, or, to use S. Fainstein (2011) words, if it is a just city. Rather, it is more important to pay attention to social practices. The study of public spaces should focus also on the policies which govern the way urban spaces can or can not be used. The existence, the permission and the tolerance of possible diverse uses can tell us a lot about the reality of a city. The analysis and consideration of spatial practices as greater freedom spaces and as space for the expression of unanswered urban needs offer the opportunity to develop a deeper knowledge and a better understanding of the complex urban landscape that we face.

In the analysed roman contexts two different regimes of policies emerged: one repressive and the other more permissive. In the case of Parco della Resistenza, the non correspondence of the alternative spatial practices of immigrant communities' members to what was considered the 'right way' to use and to live a green urban park led the institutions to intervene through restrictive policies. In the case of Pigneto, the new and diverse territorial practices have been accepted and encouraged.

The diverse treatment, the diverse policies applied, and diverse level of tolerance for different groups of inhabitants tell us a lot about the political guidance of the city of Rome. To be encouraged are those attitudes and practices that can be expendable in the direction of the economic development of the city, while, being repressed are the practices which, if taken into account, could lead to the creation of a more welcoming and just city.

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