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Design the possible
The construction of devices for the modification of critical contexts

Architecture as 'social practice'

Cities appear like complex images made by various enclaves, some with remarkable qualities, others are characterized by their criticality. Moving images. The coexistence between excellence and places of waste seems unstable because their nature is unstable. What it is critical it may seem like a resource if observed from another point of view, a condition that changes over time. Bauman reminds us that contemporaneity is characterized by "turbulence and uncertainty", the condition in which "the most things could happen - maybe all of them - but nothing it can be surely done" (2016, 13).

If the idea that the future of the city depends on the construction of the city within the city is shared (Secchi 1989), the traditional project and its tools no longer seem to offer convincing indications. Since the end of the last century, it has been thought that the great urban transformations could be the leverages for the entire city. Often, they are disused industrial and infrastructural areas. Based on strategic images, the project has habitually appealed to the design of celebrated architects to solve the critical issues. With the course of initiatives and the outbreak of the crisis, it has always been more difficult to achieve the desired results (at least in Italy). The reasons are many and vary from case to case. Simplifying, on the one hand, because the architectural design is limited to a technical service according to a decision-making process driven primarily by functional, speculative and political desires. On the other, due to the length and uncertainty of the design-authorisation-realisation process. When it ends it often built something that no longer meets the needs and expectations of the moment. In reaction to this practice, we have seen the emergence of bottom-up initiatives, punctual and temporary, which seek to activate those situations excluded from major transformations, but which also put project questions. Initiatives that are often described as *tactical urbanism*[1](Lydon Garcia 2015). These actions seem to respond more effectively to local questions but rarely manage to structure larger networks and visions. They also appear fragile in duration. At the same time, innovation issues are recognised in them as the focus on actions in space, the ability to work for projects, to compete on calls, to develop partnerships and engage territories.

The project becomes an extended process where the architect is one of the players involved or expected to be involved. Architecture is restated as a social practice. Nothing new, in 1969 Giancarlo De Carlo stated that "architecture is too important to be left to architects".[2] TEAM X, Aldo Van Eyck, Habraken, Jan Ghel and others moved on similar positions. Also today, several studios act similarly: Rural Studio, Urban ecosystem, Atelier d'architeture autogérée just to exemplify. They draw regeneration projects that connect the design of spaces with the management of processes, imagine synergies between public and private, integrate urban policies and invest in social quality and community innovation. There is a shift from *subject-author* to *object-project* in a much more collaborative approach where agents act with, and on behalf of, others. On this shift a debate is open inside the architecture (Shön; Cuff; Awan, Till, Schneider; Armando, Durbiano; Ratti)[3] and in knowledge at the borders (Latur, Yaneva).

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[1] The phenomena is varied, in their book Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia offer a history of the movement and a guide for aspiring practicioners. Update guides and a catalogue of practices are available on http://tacticalurbanismguide.com/.

[2] Said in a lecture given at a conference in Liege in 1969, the text with the title "*Il pubblico dell'architettura"* was published in italian periodical Parametro, I, 5 (1970), pp. 4-12 (with an English translation).

[3] Recently a new Italian magazine, Ardeth, concerns "on the power of the project". It aims to debate on the documents, drawings, texts and apparatuses that together structure the design project and to propose models for action. www.ardeth.eu

Two stories

With the storytelling of two practical experiences of which I was part, I'll try to explore empirically the *nature* (one of the possibilities) *of the contemporary project* in realms of complexity. It'll be a dialogue with the debate about how architectural design can equip itself to become one of the key stages of transformations in critical contexts. The focus is on the process followed and on the products made. The aim is to find a method to combine *strategy* and *tactics* as tools of equal value.[4] Recalling that we are called to operate in a situation of radical poverty of the public, in a period of redefinition of economic, political and social processes and in contexts that are increasingly coexistence and not sharing.

#01 - Prison Architecture: from Space of Detention to Place of Relationship.[5]

8 January 2013 The European Court of Human Rights with the judgment 'Torreggiani and other' condemns Italy for the malfunctioning of its penitentiary system. The critical problems listed are overcrowding and inadequate conditions for decent habitability of the structures. In 2015 the Minister of Justice, forced to act, organized the States General on the penal executions to open a wide reflection. Articulated in 18 thematic tables, the first, "the space of punishment: architecture and prisons", underlines the need to start an articulated reflection involving architecture and other knowledge. Behind quantitative parameters rise numerous qualitative factors of the spaces that deeply influence this "heterotopic place" (Foucault 1984). It is a place suspended between civil society and military structure, pushed to the edge physically and not. A place of ideological tensions: a container where faults can be isolated or, on the opposite, an institution to be eliminated for its ineffectiveness.

In 2016, a research group from the Politecnico di Milano applies for a two-year grant for university research[6] about prison requalification. They were driven by the desire to give continuity to a series of initiatives carried out in Milanese prisons and by the interest in contributing to the ongoing debate. In February 2017 the research starts.

The studio investigates both the civil role of the space of punishment in society and the possible changes of the spaces that have always manifested as inadequate. The *relation* is the glance through which categorise a set of guidelines for punctual qualifications of the existing structures. The studio programmatically uses urban and architectural project. The design activities are practised in multiple ways, at many scales and engaging different players involved in the penitentiary world.

The aim was to draw a strategy of analysis and design of modification of spaces, understood as *a place of relationships*. In an institution designed to isolate its inhabitants, the relationship becomes a tool to bring back prisoners into a constructive environment of sociality. The research practised the relationship programmatically. It has attempted to build the network needed to connect many pieces of the complex prison universe. The analysis and design activities were carried out with the prisoners. It was possible by the involvement of existing groups, such as the Group of Transgression[7], the representatives of the Opera prison sections and the Culture Commission at Bollate. The research involved students of architecture, through a design studio experience of two-year at the master degree course. Both student and inmates collaborated to experiment with hypotheses on practices and related

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[4] The magazine *A+T* in its Strategy series in the number 38 deal with it.
[5] https://farbdastucarcere.wordpress.com/
[6] FARB2016, a call for basic university research by the Department and Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano.
[7] It is group of prisoners, free citizens, students and scholars led by Angelo Aparo. Their aims are to foster communication between prison and society, to promote the evolution of convicts through interaction with external society. www.trasgressione.net

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Milano-Bollate prison

a meeting of the workshop

the *Casetta Rossa* and the pergola

places that can transform the 'waiting time' into a 'time of project' for the imprisoned. It has activated a close dialogue and work with the administrative and supervisory staff of the Milan penitentiaries. The relationship became also necessary between the different academic disciplines, both at the Politecnico di Milano and at other faculties.

The prison in Italy are often obsolete building and we witness the impossibility of developing a comprehensive redevelopment policy. The research, therefore, uses the specificity of the cases studied and the projects elaborated to develop a method that frames the plurality of unexpected opportunities into an 'open' and long-term strategic plan. The tool chosen is a set of *guidelines for action*. They would be an operational knowledge applicable to the multiplicity of prisons - located in different places and with diverse typologies but characterized by similar problems and resources.

The device is designed for those who, every day, work to make Italian prisons more humane and habitable. It is structured in a *catalogue of actions* and design solutions reasonably achievable with the scarce resources and materials available. Actions are described by a title, a diagram and a short text that describes the general nature. The real declination is described by a localized project. A series of *principles* frame the actions in a broader design perspective: *the prison is a place of the project; the prison is a place where affectivity is regarded; etc.* A *matrix* helps to put in relationship places, practices and themes. Many entrances are possible in accordance with an emerging need or opportunity.

Research also tries to practice realization. A workshop - "Traces of Freedom" - has been activated, conducted at the prison of Milano-Bollate, from October 2017 to January 2018. Students and inmates have developed shared projects for the institute. This experience led to the design and realize[8] a small building as a result of an internal competition. The "red house" is a pavilion intended for meetings between prisoners and their children. A small wooden volume, located in the open space of the meetings, was built during the spring thanks to the contribution of a donation and the work of a cooperative of craftsmen. The pavilion is part of the experiences exemplifying the guidelines. At the request of the security staff, a pergola was made the following year in the meetings area.

#02 - West Road Project.[9]

In June 2017 the Polisocial Program[10] announces its annual award, the theme is marginal areas. At that time, the non-profit organisation Italia Nostra- Milano Nord was discussing with a group from Politecnico the possibility of connecting the parks of western Milan to the city centre with a slow mobility path. Via Novara, a historical radial of the city, is the logical direction. The prize appears as an opportunity to develop the idea. The West Road Project received the grant and started its activities in the spring 2018.

The research elaborates a project about the form of the public space from the matter of network for the slow mobility. It is thought as a tool of urban and social regeneration of marginal areas. The investigation area hosts some excellence - three large urban parks, the stadium and a hospital - and strong challenges issues. Via Novara is one, a road that generates fractures and situations of environmental degradation. Other critical are isolated residential areas and social housing neighbourhoods. These places, though different, make up an archipelago of degradation and abandonment of common spaces.

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[8] It was a request/suggestion by Angelo Aparo: "I'd like to leave a trace of our relationship".
[9] https://www.facebook.com/WestRoadProject/
[10] Polisocial is the social engagement and responsibility programme of Politecnico di Milano. It combines social engagement with the two traditional pillars of academic activity: teaching and research. Every year it finances some multidisciplinary society-oriented projects on a specific topic. The award is financed trough the 5 per mille IRPEF mechanism, a share of taxes on personal income that Italian taxpayers decide to allocate to the Politecnico di Milano.

The assumption is to develop the research inclusively. It is not a new network of cycle paths but the experimentation of a tool able to coordinate the episodic and punctual transformations that occur with an urban view. The issue of the cycle along Via Novara is reformulated by widening the scope of the project by addressing the theme of the right to "*I move well*". The occasions (the arrangement of a sidewalk, a public garden, the initiative of a citizens' committee, etc.) are recognized by the research group as opportunities, but ambition is that the occasions are also the result of the project's gaze practised and shared.

The attempt is to develop an *adaptive masterplan* capable of investigating the contingency and transforming the specific occasion into a tool for dealing with the general. It is a habitat where interactions, exchanges, choices and specific formalisations of local players converge and confront each other with the mechanisms of government. The network of "moving well", consisting of nodes and lines, is configured as a process conducted with degrees of approximation and pieces that negotiate, case by case, their positioning. A tool that is both descriptions and actions of the latent tensions, experimenting with new forms of shared management, administration-citizens, the transformations. The masterplan is thus composed of texts and drawings that draw a relevant and pertinent representation of the urban area. It is in constant updating. The device is articulated in an atlas of the conditions of habitability, a set of synthetic images of opportunities and criticalities, a catalogue of potential places of transformation, called swarm, and an archive of the transformative processes realized.

Crucial is the ability to activate coalitions between different stakeholders. Case by case they may be partners, supporters or beneficiaries. In the writing phase of the program, the *Politecnico* and *Italia Nostra* group has collected contributions from the *Tuttinsieme cooperative* and the association *Il giargdino degli aromi*, the sponsorship of companies[11] that have provided materials to ensure experiments and the support of city institutions[12].

The network over time has been enriched and modified, particularly during the experiments as in the case of *via Quarti.* A neighbourhood of public housing in the suburbs of the City. Built in the '80s, overlooking the *Parco* delle Cave, today 450 families live in 7 towers. Known for phenomena of widespread illegality in recent years it has seen the development of several projects to activate and strengthen social ties. In this framework, the WRP equipe has activated a dialogue with local and institutional stakeholders and it has coordinated a participatory design process with the inhabitants. The objective is to regenerate some collective spaces recognizing the Park as a resource.

The main intervention is focused on the end of *via Quarti*, a road that cuts the complex and allows access to the Park. The aim is to transform it into a significant place for the people living there and recognisable from the outside. Are planned its partial pedestrianisation, the painting of new coloured surfaces for playing and the insertion of new trees. The discussion with municipal offices has revealed the possible synergies with a real estate operation in progress. The project was thus redraw in two phases. A temporary, self-financed, which will be carried out between September and November 2019. A permanent phase that will be realized by the construction company in the next years as a compensation of the real estate operation. The project has been the background for the elaboration of other projects of social nature that are candidates for other public funding.

Other experiments are starting and others are being included in the masterplan. The desire to share the project operatively led us to experiment with the masterplan as a digital platform. A device that can be modified in a selected way as a multi-author project tool.

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[11] Vestre AB, Tovo Gomme, Serge Ferrari, Canobbio and Pati
[12] Comune di Milano, Municipio 7, Associazione Interessi Metropolitani, Mare Culturale Urbano

a social activity in via Quarti

a meeting of the workshop

a project view of via Quarti

Relational device

The experiences share two intentions: architecture as a 'social practice' and collective space as a 'space of relationships'. Architecture as a social practise means placing the relationship between the inhabitants and the need to modify the space at the core. Placing the theme of 'space of relationship' at the fundamental seems to be a possible key to renewing the *social mandate of architectural design*. It moves from pure technical performance to a responsible path in which practice a continuous inquiry of the meanings of work in the contingency conceived as an opportunity (Till 2009).

Isabelle Stengers' notion of "ecology of practices" is inspiring for developing an inclusive design method.

> "What I call an ecology of practice is a tool for thinking through what is happening, and a tool is never neutral. A tool can be passed from hand to hand, but each time the gesture of taking it in hand will be a particular one (…). Here the gesture of taking in hand is not justified by, but both producing and produced by, the relationship of relevance between the situation and the tool." (2005, 185).

The ecology is a learning habitat where diverse ideas and practices could cluster and jostle alongside each other. But not all could be included, the challenge of partaking depends on a "creative act of problematization" (Stengers 2014, 193). In this step, we shift from a problem-solving approach to a problem-setting approach.

The project assumes the form of a relational process, a contingent and relative 'social object' (Ferraris, 2009). It opens to the contribution of different actors and knowledge, professional and common. In the pushing and pulling at constrains the practitioners recognise their limits and also push against them, to re-establish them again and again. In this habitat, the specific contribution of the architecture project is the proposition of *tentative forms* (Barbieri 2017,135), an explorative prefiguration of the conditions of transformation. The designer becomes an activist as described by Hirschman "it is not my aim to predict trends; rather, I apply myself to trying to understand what is possible and to calling people's interest in it" (1994, 62). It turns out that the project is not so much an image of a future state of the world as an orientation to action and "continuous work on potential effects" (Pasqui 2018, 99).

As a place of negotiation and conflict, the project must equip itself with 'choral' methodological devices to manage the actions: promote, orient and record. "la tet bien faite" of Morin (1999) it seems a helpful concept to define the device's character. Is it possible and useful to design 'a well-done device'? [13] In our case, it is a set of documents, objects and places that place the individual occasions - tactical actions: the red house and so on - within an overall scenario that grows and fits over time. A 'light' device that captures, coordinates and orients the action of the multiplicity of actors (public and private). It is structured as an inclusive and updatable 'palimpsest' (Corboz 1985), sensitive to changes in demand, in accordance of defined long-term strategic structure - "activating places of relationships"/"I move well".

The aim is to design devices capable of distinguishing and merging, recovering the original meaning of the term complexus: what is woven together (Morin 1999, 91). A rhizomatic tool that connects the scales, the temporalities, the different degrees of generalization and specification, that become a shared place of work. Here coexist the interactions, the exchanges, the choices, the specific formalisations, conflictual too. Here the multiple thrusts and the tools of an adaptive training process are expressed. The process advances by approximation and by parts whose positioning is agreed from time to time. In this way, an open device is configured, a selective openness, it's necessary to share its orientation. Stangers spoke about the technology of belonging.

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[13] Device in the Agamben's definition "anything that somehow has the ability to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control and ensure the gestures, conduct, opinions and speeches of living beings" (2006,21).

Aware that many questions are still open (when does the process start and end? Who menage the device? the opportunity are all opportunities equal? and others), this intervention is to be considered only a first attempt to use what can be learned from the opportunities encountered.

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