Research Article

Urban liveability for social cohesion (The Benches)

Abstract

Our world is increasingly complicated. Globalization has immersed us in the chaos of people, markets, information, publications, but ultimately, we are always more alone. We listen to the radio, television, we go to the cinema, we spend more and more time on social media, we respond to strangers who don't care about us, but, in this way, we lose the true friends. It becomes difficult to open up ourselves or understand the others. In fact, a very sad phenomenon is appearing. People, especially VIPs, talk about their sexual tendence, about their illnesses on the social media; it appears also a lack of respect of others, because many speak only to gain notoriety. These words fall on deaf ears. We need lively participation, especially in societies that undergo a very rapid ageing processes and a phenomenon of intense urbanization. We need to return to the "village" where everyone knows each other, where everyone is interested in common problems, and where the support is always mutual.

It is possible to regain the sense of proximity in the large cities, regaining the common spaces, frequenting the squares, the gardens, even going more along the streets. The focal points of interest in public spaces are the benches. For this reason, several happy cases are reported in this article, cases found all over the world of places with different styles of benches that allow interaction, observation and even the recapture of the common meaning of life. The present work aims to study how the revaluation of public spaces can lead to a better liveability and social integration as a solution to the current economic-political and social crisis.

Keywords: liveability, social integration, globalization, economic-political and social crisis

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Introduction

Italians, like all Europeans and Americans, are reviewing their consumption patterns and lifestyles. After the emphasis placed on the first house that had attracted so much attention from investment, the boom has doubled itself, drawing attention to the second house.[1] The proliferation of buildings, from an initial factor of progress, which allowed to have a property housing to people who came out of the war with nothing, has led to a devouring consumption of surfaces in the most beautiful areas of the planet, to get to eat territory even in virgin areas and in developing countries.[2] The assault on the territory has swallowed up even marginal places and public lands under a justification that called for their closure due to their marginal, if not neglectful, status of use.[3]

The crisis has changed the perspective, shifting the focus from the private to the public. The cost of private goods leads to increased interest in the commons; Shops are closing, and new forms of itinerant trade are opening. The cost of maintaining cultural capital also redistributes interest in the so-called minor heritage. "Everything finds a dignity within the spaces inhabited by man" asserts Marcello Balzani, director of the magazine "Paesaggio Urbano". Balzani confirms that urban centers and historical nuclei, as well as being made up of prestigious emergencies, are also made up of minimal units, but possessing the ability to spread the urban image and to set in motion the power to process identity aspects in the metamorphosis of the widespread city, that contributes to forming its peculiar climate.[4] The minimum units represent the "dissolution of fragments" in the geography of places strongly characterized by clear mono-functionality, therefore able to make significant contributions, also thanks to what can be called low-definition architecture "AABD", to use an acronym of.[5] From the house to the park having a home of your own is one of the main desires, but also one of the main concerns that absorbs and accumulates into it many other anxieties of civil life and political or financial uncertainties, accentuated by a crisis that has led to a progressive taxation, that affects not only the built environment, but even the basic utilities.

An indirect effect of housing issues is the decline of the sense of hospitality or "receiving", the latter aspect is linked to modern times and previous decades of strong economic development. Space is a cost that needs to be reduced, which is why the crisis acts as an earthquake that pushes people into the streets. In the heyday of growth, institutions offered a roof to those who did not have it or set up social centers for those who had missed the train of the building boom and had not reached the minimum standards for either social or private housing. An impetus for the creation of social centres had come from an "accelerated" pension system that voluntarily or forcibly pushed workers to rest at a relatively young age. Someone also found in it a new reason for interest and new life. Right now, however, it is precisely this system of solidarity, linked to public institutions, that appears more penalized by the lack of funds than private individuals are. In some rural villages, where local organizations did not have the means to structure the free time of citizens, pensioners found themselves in bars, perhaps consuming even a single coffee in a whole day. This costume was not allowed, for example, in Germany where evidently the cost of consumption must be commensurate with the time of staying, and the use of spaces and place's accessories. You are invited to go out, at the discretion of the conductor, according to what you have consumed. Even in the Mediterranean countries in these times, using dining rooms at one's discretion has become a luxury that the managers of places, open to the public, can no longer afford, so much so that they institute "shifts" even in restaurants. Alternatively, the unemployed find themselves in fast food restaurants that offer a warm shelter on long winter days, where there is still no systematic control of the temporal use of tables.[6] Fortunately, in some cities, the use of libraries has increased, as noted by the mayor of Florence, who has opened twelve new ones (RAI interview, March 2013).

A solution to leisure time and the need for a receptacle has been found by immigrants who, as soon as they are out of work or on days off from commitments, find themselves in public gardens. They also find themselves having picnics there, especially on Sundays, when they are ousted from the accommodation in which they are hosted during working days. In these places, in particular, the "caregivers" usually congregate, the public gardens are their living room, surely better than sitting on the floor as happens in the rich countries of Asia, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, where immigrant attendants from the Philippines sit on the ground in the squares - not even in the streets - because there are many, so many... So many that they can't get into the employment offices and have to wait for the opening of the following days, sleeping on the street. For these poor emigrants, even squares are not enough, and benches would not be enough.[7] Public garden as a spatial extension of the private gardens have also become employment offices in Europe because those looking for an impromptu or occasional worker know that they will certainly find one there, immediately available. Parks, gardens, avenues have become the meeting point of the various communities that rediscover and revive the sense of national identity as they feel that it is lost in an ethnic interaction that is not easy, but above all, forced. Recalling an expression of the architects Ferrarese and Ronconi, "it is in public gardens that character and fruition methods can be increased".[8]

In this action and interaction, in a territorially and temporally unlimited environment, the reviled bench once again plays a role, recognized by,[9] who documents the transition from a negative perception to a positive one of an icon that frames the public and private role of an emergency of inhabited centers.[9] Tackles the subject with a graceful irony: "Today, being on the bench is a social anomaly, because those who sit escape not only the unwritten rules of productivity and efficiency, but also the gaze of others. If you are not elderly, pregnant or in wheelchair uses, if you are an adult, male or female, you are disreputable, at the best, an unemployed, idle, reserve life to be ignored. But in another passage he finds himself: "On my bench I felt alive and present. A good bench makes those who sit on it feel sheltered, and makes his idleness to appear as an activity that is not only legitimate, but of superior quality, for connoisseurs. A perfect bench is like a free zone, liberated or saved, where simply sitting down is already a meditation in itself" (idem, p. 8). Quoting Sebaste, one could also say that all benches today seem to be on the verge of extinction. As if their gratuitousness (their grace) in the new horizon of welfare were absolutely to be banned. "Bandire", "to ban", the same word from which banlieu, banished place, comes from.[10]

"Abandoned by the resident population, a receptacle for those who had no home, no job, no employment, in the collective imagination, park benches have become the symbol of the homeless bed, so much so that some municipal administrations eliminate them to hide from the view, but not from reality; the social degradation witness to the imperfection of the economic boom which, in its current fragility, sees the solution to the crisis only at the end of a tunnel that appears longer and longer year after year.[11]

From being a symbol of the wastler and the marginalized, of the loner who read the newspaper of those who sit next to him because he don't have the money to buy one, the bench has become the emblem of socialization and its function is rediscovered, thanks to immigrants who, in this case, also rise to mediators between the different foreign ethnic groups and the resident population for which they work. Aware of these new needs, the administrations have redefined public squares and lands with a view to preparing new forms of aggregation, based on new social demands. In some cities, where there is a greater attention to the social issues or strong pressure from foreign workers, original tendencies have emerged to promote integration between old and new residents, through a redefinition of urban boundaries. Pierluigi Giordani, who has a long history of socio-historical research, having worked for the new settlements of the agrarian reform, suggests paying attention to the spirit of times (2010).

Luca Rossato talks about new socialization relationships. The city of Reggio Emilia is a pioneer in this, followed by Parma, cities that have intuited forms of urban planning that border on art, in an attempt to offer "economic happiness".[3] They have been followed by other cities, even by the small Rovigo in the Veneto region. In the urban recovery of Rovigo, the architects Ferrarese and Ronconi have tended, with their work, to give back to the citizens an environment not only to be "admired and admired", but to be experienced daily. The two architects, commissioned by the Rovigo administration, have, as they claim, expanded the dimensions of a geographically flat area, creating "a wavy and articulated orography, thanks to the insertion of ramps and stairs; the scene, "changeable and rippled like a body of water" allows you to obtain seats of different heights, designed to satisfy users of all ages, as an invitation to stop in a rediscovered place..."[8] The successful urban planning solution intends to broaden the social milieu by expanding physical relationships. Urban environments can offer a free and continuous fruition if they become livable or "habitable" places. What makes a public place "habitable" is, in the opinion of the writer, the bench, demonstrated by the fact that the homeless use it as a bed and immigrants as a table during the days of celebration or freedom. It also fits into a public relations framework, because you meet among people who are similar in nationality, employment, or age and gender. It is a new form of use that is part of the accredited but obsolete system of relations of the city, an outdoor area, that replaces, expands and improves an interior that one cannot have or from which one is expelled.

Foreign examples

However, it is clear that our cities have transmuted a concept that already existed in colonial cultures, where the need for integration was part of the cultural background and the high standard of the social system makes it possible to offer public services of quality. An excellent example is Chicago, where the public backgrounds imitate the model of the private scenario. In Australia, benches are generally placed in the green, in large spaces, as the country allows.

The images of the campus of the University of Wollongong, near Sydney, and the original seats on the port of Wollongong are significant. Benches and seats may also have an aesthetic function and a cultural appeal, like the installations prepared by the city of Vienna as a magnet for cultural tourism, having been named European City of Culture.

Social cohesion

The political crisis has come as the apotheosis of the economic crisis and requires, as a solution, greater social participation. The disappointment caused by the failure of Western democracies that have renounced their role, to the point of making the political class abandon the clothes of duty, leads to the demand for what international institutions believe is the only thing capable of bringing soothing wounds, namely social inclusion.[12] At the height of the crisis, especially in the Mediterranean countries, the need for a "new democracy" is felt. As in ancient Greece, the value of democracy had flourished in the agora, it seems almost obvious that we must retrace that path. It means that we need to start again from the square of the cities, because globalization manifests itself also and above all in a

network of local realities, albeit minuscule. The Internet is a virtual square, but social cohesion is achieved more concretely on a real square. In fact, someone has vulgarly called communication on virtual sites "last-minute passions".[13]

The crisis of democracy takes place in the streets, but rebirth also arises in the streets. But what is the unifying element of squares, parks, public gardens, boulevards? What is the element that acts as a "bridge",[14] between the private and the public, between the house and the square, between the domination of the individual and the control of all, between the retreat to solipsism and the observation of the behavior of others? Is it perhaps the bench, the harmless, humble, deprecated, even devastated, symbol of social participation? Perhaps, we need to review its role and centrality.

For some elderly people, sitting in gardens has become a daily ritual, indispensable, the only moment of socialization in a society of old people that marginalizes the elderly. The Work Programme 2011 - Cooperation Theme 8 of the European Commission's group of projects based on "Socio-Economic Science and Humanity" (2010),[15] provides that, in the context of the growing needs of citizens, and restrictions on government spending, new and improved means of providing social services will be identified, to meet needs at reduced costs, improving accessibility, quality, reducing injustices, since services such as education, health, social welfare, are fundamental needs of human development and it is therefore their availability that creates the possibilities of well-being in a society.

Planned social inclusion and benches

One of the obvious effects of the taxes paid by the citizens that turns into a service, are the benches and, as such, they must be used. It is a service that does not manifest itself noisily, that many do not appreciate, that do not even consider, but that could be re-evaluated in the light of a new form of governance. Many administrations have acknowledged this need, perhaps felt primarily by artists, by architect-artists who have prefigured the new trends of a sociality trampled on by short-sighted urban planners.[14] Identifies building with inhabiting and dwelling with belonging to the human community, from which it can be deduced that every architectural construction exalts the possibilities of man, so that even the smallest emergency can perform this miracle, because to dwell means to be under the sky, in front of the Gods. The architect Nicoletta Setola notes that it seems that in our cities there has been a loss of attention to the key elements around which our civilization has developed, that are, "the street" and "the square" (emphasis of the author, 2010, p.56). In the article Space Syntax – A vision of architecture as an essence of relationships, architect Setola describes the use of software that makes it possible to investigate the connection between the architectural dimension of spaces and the social-cultural dimension and therefore the relationship between space and society, analysing the community and collective dimension of urban structures and relations. The architect clarifies that the term Space Syntax "indicates, at the same time, the methodology of the working group of a spin-off of the University of London, and a set of techniques that deal with the synergistic analysis of space".

The team concluded that syntax, or spatial configuration, contains social information and influences human behaviour.[16] Setola asserts that the new Space Syntax method studies the space that connects other spaces, creating a new type of "urban accessibility", dependent on relational configuration (ibid.). One of the happiest results of the working group is to be ascribed to the construction of a staircase that connects the National Gallery in London with the square below. The staircase has become an element of aggregation, relaxation and meeting, rising to the exaltation of individuality in a common space and time.

"What means space? Is it possible to know its essence? Is there a relationship between space and human behavior?" asks Setola. An answer can be found in the interview with two survivors of the L'Aquila earthquake who remained to live in the city.[17] "After the earthquake we were randomly divided and merged... We struggled to communicate, in fact, we tended to become enemies. The most important thing was missing, a square... We came up with it, "Piazza d'Arti", an ordinary place in the new bizarre geography that surrounds the city, a concrete square overlooked by various associations, a theatre, a museum of contemporary art...... and the new permanent library, the library-house, which is located, like almost everything now, in L'Aquila, inside a container, but has everything, books, computers, tables, a bar and, above all, the square. You go out, smoke a cigarette, have a chat. You sit on a bench....... We don't have a city anymore; we don't have anything of what we used to have. If we want to imagine that we are still a community, with all due respect, we would like to start again from the squares, not from the shopping malls." This can be linked to the London experiment, where the reinterpretation of the staircase of the National Gallery has become a meeting point, while, at the same time, it is expanding the framework of the square in front of it.

Interpretations of the public space

Architect,[18] recalls the need to create multidisciplinary environments, as considered necessary to explain the new phenomena that urban planning techniques and classical studies on cities do not have the opportunity to address. It is a matter of supporting, he says, (cit., p.67), the new process of coexistence, which does not necessarily open up to conflict, anarchy, the loss of an ideal society, but can be understood as the condition for refunding the new city of the future, through accessibility to knowledge, food, information, work, sustainability, well-being - a necessary condition for coexistence to be possible and feasible. He takes his cue from the Fourth Rotterdam Architecture Biennial (5/9/2009-10/1/2010) entitled Open City: Designing Costanza, which has drawn interest to the interaction between man and space, interaction understood as life in increasingly complex environments, characterized by asynchrony of family and spatial processes, in which architecture can intervene where institutions fail. A section of the exhibition, called "social engineering", bears witness to the new complex phenomena that territorial planning must take on.

In fact, this complexity is reflected in the theory and practice of the greatest architects in history, such as Le Corbusier, who expressed the tendency to pursue a social utopia and not a simple planning on a physical level. His is a vision aimed at designing the "new man" who needs better living conditions that can be allowed by public greenery, as a connective element of the city.[19] The Bauhaus also intended to "form the new man in a new environment".[20] Gropius had focused on the themes of this discussion in a series of works with very topical titles such as "Integrated Architecture", "Architecture and Society", "Apollo in Democracy", "For a Total Architecture", expressing ideas that are still reflected in the works of geographers and sociologists,[21,22] in a holo-disciplinary vision that is synthesized by urban architects, because the urban landscape has its own grammar and syntax that is recognizable and socially usable.

The famous architect Daniel Libeskind can also interact in this view, interpreting architecture as a social and collective art, capable of creating feelings of community through a scenography designed to give everyone a voice. His expression: "Architecture cannot be

separated from the community and the architecture in a city is the ideal stage to provide that voice",[23] can be attributed perfectly to the inhabitants of L'Aquila who expressed that need in the words of the interview cited.[16]

Conclusions

The urban grammar of the benches follows the rules of functionality and the integration of the individual into the social environment. Syntax, which corresponds to spatial configuration, contains social information and influences human behaviour,[16] states. The syntax of the urban landscape directs the relationship between the bench and the physical environment, in particular, it frames the man in the natural environment that constitutes the focus of all public and private attention of modern feeling. The benches are spaces that connects other spaces. The natural, social, and the built environment thus find a unity of functions and interests that only need to be rediscovered and revalued in a new society that must host a new community.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the present work.

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