

Social Balances in the Design Space

Francesco Armato and Stefano Follesa

Università degli Studi di Firenze, Firenze FI 50121, Italy

Abstract: A socio-territorial balance settles and develops through the diversity of ingredients that participate in new forms of sociality: new ways of living and expressing everyday life: new technologies conceived with alternative mobilities, new systems of aggregation and shared participations, just to make some examples: car-sharing, co-working, social-spaces, ..., places of sharing, physical or virtual, social media online, or other places where people meet to satisfy their needs and exigencies. The project must have a complete vision, in order to clarify the various scenarios that arise from time to time, continuous interaction between things, people, and space, in order to address and solve problems, such as health, education, poverty, and climate change. The local daily principle of sustainability and self-sustainability, each territory must find its identity dimension in its own historical and cultural stratification, a dimension which for Alberto Magnaghi is based on indissociable fundamental principles: cultural, social, economic, geographical and ecological. The new solutions must be less impactful and with greater attention to the social reality: localized, intercultural, flexible, innovative and participatory, only this way it is possible to obtain a strategic design that focuses on an integrated whole: products, services and communication .

Key words: Smart urban design, sharing, interaction, contamination, urban regeneration.

1. Design and Territory

Today, designers, in order to trigger new relational, social, productive, distributive and environmental systems, which change society and territory, have expanded their range of action and address issues that belong more and more to society, territory, environment, product and services.

In order to create a better and livable environment for society, the rapid expansion of urbanization brings new methods to deconstruct the lifestyle of the existing city. In accordance with the trend, the city becomes not only a study area, but also a specific research field for society and for the activities it carries out, together with architecture, urban planning and social sciences.

A project engaged in searching new socio-spatial balances gives greater value to socio-global ties and solidarity without ever losing any contact with the identity of the places, especially in this historical moment: movement of peoples who carry with them

bags full of culture, traditions and lifestyles. These events contribute to the development of projects related to multiculturalism and interculturality, creating processes which interact in the relationships among different cultures and territories.

“... that the distinction between the territory as a scale of intervention and an approach for design begins to become blurred and nuanced and better reproduced in that synthesis of constraints/opportunities that open the way to a ‘condition’ of a new and original project” (Maffei and Villari 2005), as already mentioned: “for the contemporary design, the territory primarily means the context of the project of transactional, relational and production chains, distributed in a hybrid space, between local and global, of goods and knowledge¹”.

A design is not only an industrial product, linked to the production and marketing of the same, but it has a much wider transformation and evolution, which not only sees the products as protagonists but even the

Corresponding author: Francesco Armato, architect, Ph.D., professor.

¹ Lupo, E., and Campagnaro, C. 2009. “Formare comunità e in-formare territori. Designing connected places: fare scuola di design per il territorio.” *Tafer Journal* (15): 2.

territory, organization and services (Manzini, 2015), which participate in the growth of society every day.

A socio-territorial balance settles and develops through the diversity of ingredients that participate in new forms of sociality: new ways of living and expressing everyday life: new technologies conceived with alternative mobilities, new systems of aggregation and shared participations, just to make some examples: car-sharing, co-working, social-spaces, ..., places of sharing, physical or virtual, social media online, or other places where people meet to satisfy their needs and exigencies.

A balance which is structured on sharing triggers a system that gives the possibility of creating individuality with an open, participatory system, so that everyone can contribute to transforming the world around them; where people, groups, communities and associations plan to put their ideas into action through their skills to define strategies for a better life (Manzini, 2015).

Just think of the interventions that are based on participated planning, being part of a group, an organism, a community, where the various actors share and contaminate each other for a purpose, for a shared result. They elaborate concepts and projects through the exchange of ideas to create new forms of habitability; each member of the group is a designer and operator, becoming a link between the various systems that are acted out to achieve common solutions.

2. Environment and Social Actions

The city is not only a Euclidean geometric space, it is also a container full of social activities, an anthropological space (Brugellis, Pezzulli, 2006), where each person daily carries out his actions to find a physical-psyche balance within his own social and territorial dimension, comparing and relating to the physicality that surrounds it.

The lack of participation and grouping by the people reduces the performance of social actions

within the space, making those who live there lose the sense of belonging to the places, creating transitory spaces, without identity, a place is like another.

Urban structures necessary only to move, movement related to people and things, areas in the city where people meet even without coming into relational contact, temporary places, where individualism finds its most complete environment; a physical-material system, an urban network, where individuals are guided by a single thought: to consume and accelerate daily functions.

This causes disorientation, lack of listening, the emotional loss of the people, sharing, an important phase to decide together the possible actions to be put to the socio-urban system; by excluding the participation of people, one leaves the field free to expert design, oppure. Freedom of action is left to the expert design, with the risk to transform needs into sterile functions.

Expert design is practiced by those who have knowledge and training on the project (Manzini, 2015); certainly it is a way to qualify future interventions and scenarios for the future society, projections which might not be shared because they are not very inclusive. A completely different situation is when we find ourselves in a condition of great social cohesion where everyone participates and plans: individuals, associations, groups and communities.

Without an effective and active contribution from those who will use or live the new proposed scenarios, the spatial articulation and the richness of communicating one's individuality, making it public, making it known to the others, measuring yourself with a wider audience, would be lost, if this energy was not conveyed in an exchange of ideas and proposals, the risk is to create environmental and social imbalances.

Sharing a place or a network gives the possibility to use, together with others, a resource both material and immaterial, which is a fundamental need of the individual.

Tim Kring, the American director who signed the Touch TV series, says: “we have the innate impulse to share our ideas. The desire to be heard responds to our need to be a community: this is why we continue to send signals. And for this reason, we look for them in others”².

New On-The Ground projects relaunch new community energy to support socio-economic development. Projects focus on citizens’ needs, implement organizational models and international good practices, for a smart, inclusive and sustainable growth (Horizon 2020).

Promote the connection, focal nodes located in the urban fabric, a link that allows communication between different entities of public and private spheres, between citizens of different cultures, to promote initiatives that can develop cultural, social, environmental and economic welfare which is common to all. These assumptions can shape an evolutionary and balanced line of the action of design on the territory, in which individuals spend their time and are immersed in a fluid quantity of information and relationships (Bauman, 2006), where their action is limited to consumption, without any individual production.

The future scenario of society cannot be seen as a system which calculates its own choices, where relationships and contacts are consumed for pure material satisfaction excluding the emotional part of knowledge and deepening of the parts, because when a relationship has been consummated, it is over.

Each city has its own particular existence, buildings and spaces each with its own color, smell and specific functions, which could influence a person’s impression and feeling towards the city itself.

“The society of individuals shapes the individuality of its members and of the individuals who shape society through their vital actions and the search for plausible and feasible strategies within the socially

constructed network of their dependence.”

A continuous interaction that is shaped by the need for questions and exigencies that individuals define a social community, is the need that drives you to interact with others to achieve some goals: social or individual (relationships, commerce, sharing, ...)³.

Individuals interact and combine in space because there is a favorable spatial condition which gives the possibility that all this can happen.

“These statements highlight the complex network of interrelationships between the spatial and the social form. The first is absolute, it ‘contains’ people, things and events, but without them no structure would make sense; it is therefore, at the same time, also relative and dependent on the social form. The latter, then, cannot disregard a sensitive, material configuration, located in defined spaces and times that contribute to strengthening and crystallizing social processes”⁴.

There is a balance between the parts, the physicality of the space is connoted and acquires a dimension of real belonging to the place because it has been anthropized and morphologically modeled to carry out certain actions where individuals can live in it to meet their needs.

3. Physical Relationships and Space

In balancing the relationship between physicality and space, it is important to take into consideration the animated bodies that inhabit it: individuals, considered as a physical reality in relation to other physicalities whether they are inside or outside of them.

“Design is a creative activity aimed at adapting technologies to human needs. For this reason, it plays an important role in determining cultural and economic exchanges in society. In fact, design defines the structural, organizational, functional, expressive and economic relationships which form the social structure in order to meet people’s needs.

² Kring, T. 2019. “Elogio della condivisione: pro e contro.” Non di sola tecnologia. vscarfia.com.

³ Bauman, Z. 2011. *Modernità liquida*. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, p. 271.

⁴ Severino, M. 2017. “Spazio e spazialità nell’opera di Simmel e Durkheim.” *Quaderni di sociologia* 75: 43.

In contemporary society, the pressure of social problems is increasingly relevant. Traditional actions seem to be inadequate to resolve important issues such as social exclusion, poverty, discrimination, inequality and environmental impacts. The author is unable to redefine the global balance. Long-term efficiency solutions must include new radical social structures and social innovations. The latter represents new ways in which communities act to solve problems and generate new opportunities. These new solutions are based on a different and better understanding of social reality; in fact, they are innovative, interdisciplinary, flexible, localized and participatory. In this reference framework, strategic design emerges as a key resource for the social contribution of design and to promote participation, access and inclusion⁵.

People share spaces because it is an innate need in the individual, being together with others is a need to know and get to know each other, exchange ideas and things. Fundamental relationships to define the concept of society, interactions based on a simple contact of knowledge and individual and collective growth, this interest often moves towards the economic aspect, becoming the driving force to establish, in a negative and consumeristic way, a relationship of closeness between people.

The contacts that are measured as well-being are not only “embodied” in commercial exchanges and unbridled consumerism, but above all by the quality of individual and collective production and by the physical contexts in space.

It is the balance that is created when the interest of being together is common, and if it is not, the result is to get places without a participative mood and without identity, that is what Mar Augé defines, Non-lieux.

The new solutions must be less impactful and with greater attention to the social reality: localized, intercultural, flexible, innovative and participatory,

only this way it is possible to obtain a strategic design that focuses on an integrated whole: products, services and communication.

A design that has a complete vision and that manages to specify the various scenarios that are proposed from time to time, an interaction between things, people and space, in order to deal with the resolution of far-reaching problems such as health, education, poverty, and climate change.

By working on the different disciplines of competence it is possible to achieve, through design, a balance between the things that inhabit the space and, at the same time, the various opportunities are highlighted to improve the aspects of the problem and the conditions of daily and local life.

The local daily principle of sustainability and self-sustainability, each territory must find its identity dimension in its own historical and cultural stratification, a dimension which for Alberto Magnaghi is based on indissociable fundamental principles: cultural, social, economic, geographical and ecological.

The social-cultural content often shows very complex forms as the actors often come from different cultures and must coexist in the same territory, triggering phenomena of multicultural consistency.

It is fundamental the openness towards the other, not closing in an individual condition, but trying to mature an attitude of welcoming new experiences and new conditions that can come from very distant “worlds”, inserting them with a critical knowledge in the stratification of one’s own culture, “giving space to receive space”, as Alberto Pirni writes in the introduction of his book: *The Challenge of Coexistence*.

For Lazzarini the public territorial sphere will never be indefinite and neutral, it is a set of physical and social factors that compensate and permeate each other to obtain a unique territory between the center and the peripheral system: “public space will never be a neutral space, as it represents a multiple point of

⁵ Del Gaudio, C., Oliveira, A. J., and Franzato, C. 2013. “Applying Strategic Design in NGOs: The Challenge of Time Divergences.” *International Journal of Design* 6 (2): 91-109.

convergence: historical, formal, linguistic, symbolic, economic, political. It refers to the whole city, to the specificity of its experience and condenses some fundamental reasons.

“Compared to the changes underway, it is clear that any possibility of rethinking the public space and redesigning its forms will only be able to face the tension between the logic of flows and the logic of places. Faced with global re-socialization, which plans different locations and relationships between centers and suburbs, the recovery or reinvention of public spaces must be confronted with the fact that the territory simultaneously contains local nodes and global networks”⁶.

The territory is a mixture of energy, creativity and experimentation ... and in this panorama design stands as the most suitable discipline for reading and writing in the contemporary multiverse city, giving a significant contribution to the design of the urban public space, flexible design is an advantage to satisfy the physical conditions for the development of social innovation.

For Andrea Branzi, the “territory” is not a place characterized by its buildings, it must be a place measured by people’s feeling. The experience that people feel about the quality of the environment comes from an emotional result on interposition and temporary contexts, the city, the furniture “small landscape settings” were systematic and duplicate products, today they are gradually composed of different products with a complicated design, creating different dynamic metropolises and becoming a place that meets the different needs of different people (Branzi, 2007).

“A look at the fate of the contents of life, which flow under our eyes, unequivocally shows this conformation: we renounce the absolute truth, which would be against every kind of development, and we credit the continuous transformation, the growth and

correction of our knowledge since the emphasis placed on experience in every area means nothing more than this. The species of organisms are no longer valid as eternal thoughts of creation, but as points of passage of an eternal evolution. From the inanimate to the most other spiritual formations there is the same trend; modern science teaches us to see an infinite vortex of particles in matter. Of the unitary ideals, founded in previous eras beyond the changes and contradictions of things, we recognize their dependence on historical conditions and the adaptation to their changes”⁷. Design can contribute to achieving a balance between society and territory, facilitating a new phenomenon of change; city spaces are transformed to give immediate and concrete answers to improve the quality of life of new multi-ethnic societies to increase functional, perceptive and aesthetic comfort.

4. Installations, People’s Space

In recent years, many urban areas have been interested in hosting installations which are linked to the user and they are not only sculptural forms, volumes to be observed, but urban products to be used, products that express functions, a use, new open-air places dedicated to be together, where everyone can meet and get to know each other.

The term installation refers to more or less large structures, located in squares and open spaces, in spaces that have the possibility to welcome works for short periods, yet an increasingly growing trend shows that designers imagine structures that will “inhabit” the public space for often undetermined times, locations that will remain for long periods until the function of the work ceases to satisfy potential users, moreover the structures are designed and articulated to have a direct and “bodily” participation, creating a tactile physical relationship with people.

For Giulio Lughi, professor of Media Digital,

⁶ Lazzarini, A. 2012. “Dare forma allo spazio del convivere.” www.ocula.it/agosto2012.

⁷ Simmel, G. 2010. *Denaro e vita, senso e forme dell’esistere*. Milano: Feltrinelli, p. 75.

contact and closeness is the transformation of things that can also be given with the contribution of technology, through enlarged reality that allows, via smartphone or similar devices, and with dedicated software, to see a landscape that transforms under our eyes with the superposition of virtual objects in the real landscape. Virtually the physicality created is integrated with real places, giving life to a complex experience between reality and fantasy, between documentation and fiction. Material and immaterial balances are made up together to give life to new locations that transform and change to rethink another identity construction, a temporary vision of the spaces of the city, urban frames that can represent a different and other way of use of artistic and cultural spaces and products.

To be usable and perform a social function, the urban space must be: “a place that offers a cultural identity and memory”⁸, the physical references, lighthouses located in the urban fabric (Lynch, 2006): the facade of a church, a monument, a well-articulated square, seats arranged along a road or gathered in a measured space give the inhabitant of the centers, places to meet, mix, get to know each other, removing loneliness, feeling part of daily life.

The empty spaces between the buildings play a fundamental role in creating a balance between the cultural stratification and the identity of a community and it is important to preserve it in order to communicate the experience of a particular place.

“The identification of these ‘singular points’ can be due to a given event that occurred at that point or it can depend on other infinite causes: however, an intermediate value is also recognized and sanctioned here, the possibility of a single, even if exceptional, notion of space.

Moving from this subject to the domain of urban facts, it seems that it cannot go beyond the value of images, as if their surroundings were not analysable in

any positive way; and perhaps nothing remains but the pure and simple affirmation of the value of the ‘locus’, for this notion of place and time seems rationally inexpressible even if it includes a series of values that ‘are’ outside or beyond the feelings we feel in catching them”⁹.

The Finnish architect Marco Casagrande poses the same measure when expressing his idea: “city planning is conceived as a becoming of episodes and processes that put together making it the evolution and wealth”¹⁰.

“Disseminated” interventions on the entire urban fabric, a virus can be transmitted to neighboring spaces, a place to bring people together and reactivate the economy and the vitality of the spaces that have faded over time.

A very significant example of the past few years is Parklets, urban products, temporary installations that help encourage the meeting and improvement of the city landscape, a social and ecological response, an intelligent strategy, a resting area surrounded by vegetation and often used to exhibit art, to create pleasant and comfortable spaces in portions of cities previously anonymous and without identity.

The survey carried out through interviews from the Planning and Urban Research Association Department, San Francisco, revealed that the inhabitants support the construction of Parklets, to be active and involved in the design, construction and maintenance phase for the desire to share a place because this way they feel close and communities are created. Many of the interviewees said that before the creation of Parklets the people of the neighborhood did not frequent and did not know each other because of the lack of public spaces and the absence of places designated for the meeting.

“Parklets are a sort of big room open to the sky, urban lounges, where you can talk, have a drink, read

⁹ Rossi, A. 1978. *Architettura della città*. Milano: Clup, p. 136.

¹⁰ Casagrande, M. 2018. *Needle e l'agopuntura urbana*. Needle Admin, Milano. Accessed Apr. 06, 2018. <http://needlecrowd.com/blog-agopuntura-urbana>.

⁸ Tomlinson, J. 1999. *Sentirsi a casa nel mondo*. Milano: Feltrinelli, p. 132.

or take care of vegetable gardens and fruit trees, enjoying the presence of wildlife”¹¹; each neighborhood has created its own meeting corner and each corner has got its own identity.

It is essential that a social balance is created within the territory between the empty and the “grafts” of the buildings; installations will take place between the complex architectural “scaffolding” of the city, interventions can be both material and immaterial, it is important for the new organization of open spaces, where social activities are able to shape the territory through intertwining and overlapping of signs and functions to form new balances and new patterns of habitability.

Reference

- [1] Armato, F. 2018. *Pocket Park, una stanza a cielo aperto*, Palermo: Navarra Editore.
- [2] Armato, F. 2019. *In/Out Interior Design*. Firenze: DIDAPress Unifi.
- [3] Bauman, Z. 2006. *Amore liquid*. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza.
- [4] Bauman, Z. 2011. *Modernità liquida*, Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza.
- [5] Branzi, A. 2007. *Capire il design*. Firenze: Giunti.
- [6] De Biase, C., Petrella, B., and Tufano, C. 2007. *Il Progetto Urbanistico: spazi e funzioni multiculturali, Architettura*. Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica.
- [7] Lanzani, A. 2003. *I paesaggi italiani*. Roma: Meltemi.
- [8] Maffei, S., and Villari, B. 2005. “Risorse locali e comunità di progetto.” In *SDI Design Review 02: ME. Design. Il contributo del design allo sviluppo locale*, edited by Castelli, A., Vignati, A., and Villari, B. Milano: Polidesign.
- [9] Magnaghi, A. 2000. *Il progetto locale*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- [10] Manzini, E. 2018. *Politiche del quotidiano*. Roma: Edizione di comunità.
- [11] Valtolina, G. G. 2003. *Fuori dai margini, esclusione sociale e disagio psichico*. Milano: Franco Angeli
- [12] Mays, K., and Gilad, M. 2018. “Parklets Experiments in Urban Public Space.” Texas University.
- [13] Rossi, A. 1981. *L'architettura della città*. Milano: Clup.
- [14] Simmel, G. 2010. *Denaro e vita, senso e forme dell'esistere*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- [15] Tomlinson, J. 1999. *Sentirsi a casa nel mondo*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

¹¹. Armato, F. 2017. *100 Pocket Parks per Londra*. Il giornale dell'architettura.com, Torino. Accessed Mar. 28, 2017. <http://ilgiornaledellarchitettura.com/web/2017/02/28/100-pocket-parks-per-londra/>.