Temporary Active

Temporary Active - Actions as Urban re-appropriation strategies
Eleonora Lupo, Politecnico di Milano, Italy
Gennaro Postiglione, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

Abstract: Erasure from collective memory of the image, presence and vitality of an urban space is a painful act. Reasons for such dissolutions are multiple: ideology, alteration, progress and change in general. Architects and designers have a mission to properly question this erasure and they can develop the capacity to use it as a powerful source of creativity.

This paper focuses on forgotten urban spaces (mainly those that have been neglected or written off), and explores ways of revitalising them using methods of identification, analysis and temporary architectural projects. These urban spaces may each be quite different: consisting of a mixture of squares, streets, unoccupied buildings and/or abandoned plots, small and large sites or industrial compounds and so on. Observation and analysis allow focus on the catalogue of problems and consequently, proposals for recovery often emerge along with possible means of intervention. These processes reveal a diversity of cases and approaches that bear witness to the cultural richness embedded in the hidden realms of collective memory. In this century, overwhelmed as it is by image, information and dynamism, it is particularly important for architects and designers to take on the special role of managing the creative recovery of forgotten spaces.

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“A minor geography”: enabling practices for city social construction

The urban and metropolitan landscape is no longer defined as a "secure and stable place of contemplation, but presents itself as a mobile device that is continually altered" (Gravano, 2008). Looking at our cities, it is possible to see weak but constant upheavals that tend to make forms of resistance explicit and visible, including a range of urban activities. Of such practices it is historically possible to identify a number of cultural models. The appropriation of public spaces by the Parisian flaneur with his walks through labyrinthine passages, (converting the streets into intérieur), is one such model. Similarly, the Situationist International ‘drifts’, using maps and topography of transitional spaces, not just to "fix" territory, but to change it too. In the process, they planned to radically transform the essential structures, of architecture and city planning, through subjective perceptual experience (Debord, 1958).

In the contemporary world, active ‘practice’ of metropolitan space has become more structural and more involved and widespread, with a view that is necessarily welcoming and inclusive. The city is increasingly seen as an experiential field (Scotini, 2003) and the processes of reading, interpreting and implementing opportunities offered by the urban context have become more mature, more culturally aware, and sensitive. Meta-design actions, are aimed at a recognition of the value and potential of public spaces, through a descriptive approach (Dematteis, 1995) of reading, decoding and “context providing”. More proper planning actions may then be aimed at activating these spaces. In this way, dismissed or forgotten spaces,
abandoned places and unused areas, change from being "swamp-like places" outside of official maps, to become paradigmatic examples of urban spaces, filled with meaning, value, shape, and opportunities for creative re-signification and appropriation by the city.

These actions of occupation, appropriation and activation often tend to draw a “minor geography” in the urban fabric, capable of giving visibility and response to the needs and forgotten desires of an “insurgent” city looking for structures. This should not be understood in an exclusively subversive or protesting sense, but as a collective intentionality, careful to offer multiple points of view and to give voice to communities that would otherwise be invisible. In this way, people, culture and places are connected in a common “discourse” about the social construction of the city, its identity and memory, through the rehabilitation of lost or deleted tracks and abandoned places. According to Richard Sennett, communities “make uses of disorder” to trigger their personal identity in city life (Sennett, 1970).

For this very reason, however, it is important to understand that these processes are far from being voluntarily negotiated. Left adrift, they are often layered onto the existing city in a pervasive but isolated way, creating differences, fractures and urban “solitude” (an autonomy that could lead to tension), rather than plural identities. Conversely, if regimented in processes that tend towards standards or control, they progressively lose their charge of vitality and experimentation. It is therefore necessary to map the best experiences currently ongoing and to enable these processes through the planning of design strategies. On the one hand, we must develop a paradigm of coexistence between the new and the existing, establishing relationships in the urban fabric, and on the other hand we must turn to participatory design tools and active listening (Sclavi 2003, 2007) which stimulate but especially empower community participation in the practices of city use, while respecting diversity.

The processes of city social construction and re-signification can take on a positive aspect, in terms of their negotiations and sustainability, if they are leveraged onto individual and collective practice. They may create a dimension of urban participation, promote ownership and use of places and public spaces and foster collective design, relationships and the conscious expression of plural identities, all in a constant process of self-recognition and self-experimentation.

They consist therefore, of a series of "relational-aesthetic acts" that involve people in the design of their cities through practices of art, design, architecture and city planning (Bourriaud, 1998). A set of practices, frequently of a temporary nature, that enable the formation of communities, places and identities. These are often empirical acts - precarious, situational or playful, but they are also capable of performing in and conforming to the space. All these experiences are indeed united by being planned actions in which the more or less temporary nature of intervention (from extemporaneous to semi-permanent), or performance, takes on a positive value capable of producing a lasting effect over time. Being designed interventions, even if temporary, they need some form of bond and commitment, (such as a spatial or economical gauge) that takes them closer to voluntary and conscious actions rather than to extemporaneous ones. Some of the most significant and distinctive qualities of these urban re-appropriation strategies in fact are:

1. The ability to work (and therefore to produce significant impacts, in real time), through self-organization in “territorial laboratories” of networking involving a variety of social actors. Although the actions involved here mainly consist of temporary conversion,
recovery and reuse, they are capable of generating consequences that are not ephemeral but are permanent and consistent. Investing not so much in the physical and material realms but in the intangible aspects of community building (identity and sense of belonging) (refer to no. 8 – OUT and no 11 - PUBLIC DESIGN in image. 01).

2. The ability to trigger innovative processes from social creativity, in other words by the collective involvement of people. These practices describe new subjective geographies in which the emphasis on the individual is associated with the potential of collective actions. They expand the concept of authorship to one of participation, in a worthy mixture of the private and the public dimensions (refer to no.11 –PARKingDAY or no. 16- PERMANENT BREAKFAST in image. 01).

3. The emblematic nature and sustainability (especially relevant and distinctive for the focus of this paper) of a methodological process that is careful to pick out the weaker signals present in the environment. Particularly those that focus on the re-use of residual places, transit spaces and areas that are still only potentially significant within the dynamics of the city and the availability of urban resources. These are ‘void spaces’ that, in an extended meaning of the term, are the dismissed, derelict and abandoned spaces, not only in the sense of physical use and function, but even more importantly, in a metaphorical sense. They can become the main subject of the representation of possible and practicable development and exploitation of scenarios. In this sense, they are also applicable to the recovery of small towns that are subject to abandonment and depopulation. (refer to no.14 –OSSERVATORIO NOMADE and no.19 –CAIRO REPAIRING CITY in image. 01).

4. The various processes of the recovery of “empty spaces”, and their activation involve a variety of goals and scales of action, which range from acts of pure challenge to advocacy and empowerment activities using a sort of “repairing process” of infrastructural facilities. (Navarra, 2008). These interventions are divided into (not necessarily consequential) actions of design, safety and maintenance (i. e. through decoration); the implementation and appreciation of aesthetic experiences related to the expressive qualities and communicative vocation of a place (refer to no.15 –ADD ON and no. 6- GRAFFITI LAB in image. 01), and ultimately to the improvement of the use value and functionalization of a place. (refer to no.13 –CABIN EXCHANGE and no.18- PARTY PLATFORM in image. 01).

5. The multiple approaches and techniques of intervention that are introduced through a fusion of art, design and architecture using concepts of performance, urban happening, event or site-specific service to create, substantially bottom-up, “spaces of democracy”. On the one hand there is an approach that is in the arena of art, which includes conversational and public art references for the promotion of dialogue between aesthetic experience and collective poetic imagination. This approach encourages the innovative use of languages, technologies and behaviors (Zanfi, 2003, Birrozzi, Pugliese, 2007, Altarelli, 2006, Ottaviani, 2007, Galal, 2009) (refer to no. 2 –CITTÀZIONI in image. 01). On the other hand there is guidance that makes social innovation practices, the design of collaborative services and public design the foundation of its action. This guidance operates in a context where cities and creative communities are platforms for the design of new collective social and cultural scenarios (Manzini, Jegou, 2008, Meroni, 2007, Carta, 2007, Landry, 2000) (refer to no.7 –GOING PUBLIC in image. 01).

6. The potentiality of networking in a physical system of connections and relations including the use of technology and digital devices, ranging from virtual relief mapping of these dense places in the city (refer to no.9 –URBAN TAPESTRIES in image. 01), to their systematization into a diffused and connected structure of collaboration and cooperation.
We would particularly emphasize here that, rather than an artistic component per se, it is the aesthetic and relational value, which gives force to these interventions and underlines their political vocation. This is because they are potentially perceived as “soft” actions that do not impose deliberate transformations, but simply make them possible. They provide structures and contexts that allow the hybridization of institutional projects to become self-produced and more spontaneous activities. They manage to be disruptive and effective in generating positive changes, ranging from the re-functionalization of places to a better integration and social cohesion.

There are many contemporary examples of public design and public art that have an enabling and participatory approach in collective areas. In these actions, the public space becomes a new means of exchange and recognition through the metaphor of the (not) common place, understood as a space full of memories and meanings determined by individual and social relations. These places are also understood as shared places where different cultural instances, also find a field of comparison and encounter while at the same time respecting differences.
In these experiences the creative appropriation and occupation of space becomes a social engine of the community. It is a logic that moves the action from a simple location in the community, to an asset for the community and with the community, which in itself creates community (Toscano, 2004). Interventions use a perspective of social empowerment, with emphasis on self-determination and the recovery of individual and collective capacity. This is “in opposition to a system that requires inspection and approval” (Pietromarchi, 2005). The city becomes an “interacting system of multicultural communities, capable of expressing different forms of urban life” and permitting the coexistence of the material city along side the intangible city of flows and relationships.

The concept of temporary is conceived as a positive idea of improvisation and approximation in which the values and characteristics of lightness, transience, mobility and instability reflect a condition of freedom for experimentation and cultural cohabitation. A city centered on humans and set up at a human scale. The notion of exhibition and setting up has become a metaphor for the reversibility and convertibility of a contemporary “light city” (Altarelli, 2006), potentially democratic activities and facilities are set in place to encourage opportunities for reuse. These facilities are collected together in a list of “dot-actions” from which national governments and private citizens can freely draw inspiration. In this sense, processes of appropriation are real incubators for a “creative city” (Landry, 2000), whose success will be determined by the ability to recreate a sense of citizenship (the genius loci, the continuity of traditions, security and the ability to imagine the future) and simultaneously maximizing some specific opportunities to create real networks of local identities (Carta, 2004, 2007).

Berlin: a Case Study

Berlin is emblematic for the observation of contemporary strategies of urban appropriation. It can be seen, from an unconventional point of view, as a pathway of bubbles emerging from a lively and creative fabric of the metropolis’ forgotten spaces. A view from the inside out, as if from behind the curtains of the city. Such spaces are already a fertile ground for the apparently chaotic generation of temporary activities that actually stem from active involvement of the dwellers recapturing their own city. Berlin is nowadays a reference for proposing and arranging an exemplary new colonization of these spaces.

Strolling along the streets of Berlin today it is impossible to ignore the presence of empty spaces. They just catch the eye by their apparent ‘non-existence’, caused by destruction or non-construction. Such spatial particles are spread out in a capillary manner, and each of the different scattered spaces has a lot in common. They lack functionality, being made up of raw material that can be identified in their simple structure or skeleton and they have an immediate visual impact and therefore a potentially direct accessibility. They serve no purpose, as non-built grounds, abandoned places, dismissed spaces or simply temporary pauses between building phases. Their origin usually lies in the bombing of World War II, and later they were only partially filled during the following a reconstruction based on previously existing schemes. They are raw material, being marked off by surrounding objects only, by the blind walls of neighbouring buildings that unmistakably define their presence. Such elements constitute an external skeleton, an almost supporting structure for new proposals.

The basic material is neglected ground, where nature slowly re-conquers its position. These spaces do have an immediate visual impact, as open wounds very easily spotted among existing buildings, as brutal interruptions of the construction continuum and as gaps or holes that allow a peek into what is happening inside the block. They invite us to follow our glance
and enter.

Some of these empty spaces host structures that temporarily occupy them. Architectures conceived not for filling up empty rooms, but rather for repossessing them and giving them back life and function as public spaces or meeting spaces. The common rationale consists in injecting new meanings into these spaces, while waiting for a permanent occupation. This rationale follows the stream of the spontaneous phenomenon of temporary activity – stimulating action, furnishing the spaces and making them newly available.

Being aware of this, a field research workshop has been organized to study the repossession of urban space by means of different techniques. Interviews, videos, pictures, canonical architectural representations, and any other form useful for narrating all the slight transformations that characterize several abandoned spaces in Berlin. So, a short journey within this network of well-rooted activities has been planned and developed, in order to comprehend the very sociality of the functions that manifest themselves each time which have proved to be vital to generate interaction among people.

As a result, a catalogue of examples has been produced from the survey. The interventions are varied; they can be movable or rooted, reversible, modifiable or adjustable to different uses, according to the success of the activities or to their destination on the ground. The city of Berlin has made available innumerable and well-established temporary and spontaneous initiatives, that have been generating real and tangible do-it-yourself cultures through the last decades. The identification and mapping of these strategies for gradually giving back life to the spaces, carried out by the users, shows a particular and promising cultural substrate of enabling that does not have to go through the channels defined by “classic” planning, which on the contrary is aimed at an immediate achievement of a finished product. We believe that telling a story about the life of these places, exploring, investigating and mapping them with the eyes of those who lived them, even for a few moments, has been really inspiring and helpful for other processes of appropriation.

Our mapping presents cases of urban empty spaces, that would otherwise remain unexploited, which are now used to give room for initiatives by citizens. These are in a context where owners and potential users are accustomed to the idea of using spaces in a non-permanent way with mutual benefits. In addition, since temporary use contracts exist and are stipulated in Berlin, citizens have a chance of realizing their ideas in a simple and legal manner. We present here only three paradigmatic examples, quoting their processes of start-up and realization and their results and impact on the local territory as exemplary of the overall catalogue.

1. *Ein platz fur Marie*

*Process & goals:* In the place of a demolished fire station in the area of Prenzlauer Berg, some citizens, formed an association and, supported by local residents, proposed to re-functionalize the area by establishing in 1998, a *children’s playground and park*. They negotiated a temporary use contract with the landowner, lasting ten years, with the approval of the institutional local district body. One architecture studio has been involved to assist the residents in designing the activities for a 0-12 year old kids playground, and post school activities including sports and creativity laboratories.

*Approach & Results:* The intervention focused on providing a public service and with the help of private backers, supplied the infrastructure to make the playground available. Having been a really successful initiative, after ten years, the temporary contract was renewed in
2008 for the following ten years., The area was extended and the park was further implemented for the addition of children up to 16 years of age.

**Impact:** In the surrounding neighbourhoods, different initiatives and various other playgrounds have been realized based on the experience of Marie’s park and a district association called Netzwerk has been founded with the mission of qualifying public spaces for the use of people, generating an impact both on both physical and intangible aspects of intervention, especially in the creation of a potential network of children’s parks.

**Image. 02- Ein Platz fur Marie, Berlin**

2. **Rosa Rose Garten**

**Process & goals:** a **neighbourhood garden** was conceived by the local community and district in an area close to Friedrichshain, previously occupied by social housing (demolished) and squatted apartments. This project was initiated when the municipality decided to entitle the use of the occupied houses and to clean up the area. The community garden was completely designed and realized by local people and equipped with different structures such as gazebos, a public oven and a well, in order to allow for a range of activities, which included parties and playgrounds along with gardening.

**Approach & Results:** The area is now divided in two parts that are mainly conceived to provide simple social platforms, more than services. Thanks to the minimal infrastructures at their disposal, people can use the area freely to organize collective dining, barbeques, children’s parties and so on. They use the internet to share initiatives with each other and to invite friends.

**Impact:** The laying of a simple fence has provided both protection and an incentive for the use of the area that is now lively and very well frequented, especially in summer. So this can also be an example of the need for identifying a first space appropriation element (temporary and movable) as a “declarative” starting point for the process.
3. Wagendorf Lohmuhle

Process & goals: In the place of an abandoned area resulting from the demolition of the Berlin wall and previously occupied by illegal camp structures, the initial occupants negotiated the possibility of providing collective aggregation activities for the surrounding residents with the municipality, in exchange for getting the use of the area for ten years. They were also authorized to establish an alternative social housing village to enlarge the community and reinforce the dialogue with the district residents.

Approach & Results: This activation process experimented both with the use of artistic and cultural interventions and the creation of social services. The use of self-constructed and low budget temporary structures supported the definition and provision of a very articulated program of cultural and artistic activities, called “Experimentcity” and divided into permanent (cinema, concerts), temporary (theatre, artistic events) and extemporaneous ones (special events). They used abandoned railway coaches still available in the area from the time of the pre-existing train station, as part of a low cost strategy to equip the area with temporary residences.

Impact: The experimentation aroused the interest and participation of the surrounding residents, demonstrating the possibility of a democratic and pacific co-existence driven by a realm of social creativity and innovation by collective involvement. As a result of this initiative, a cultural association called Kultur has been founded.
Conclusion
Evaluating these examples and case studies, we observe that a substantial length of time is needed to embed those processes in the existing context in an integrated and non-hostile way and to settle them as successful participative strategies. Because social and cultural changes often require processes of negotiation and a longer time frame than is generally acceptable to a community, it is necessary to make them synchronic for people’s understanding.

Involving the City Council as a mediator between owners and users can be a winning strategy. In order to be a valid proposal from the point of view of the city administration, the result of a temporary exploitation process must be of a high quality, hence the idea of an architectural tender for the available spaces. Once tested and verified, according to the citizens’ needs and requirements, the temporary reuse process initiated by a local community and supported by a municipality could be standardized so that it may be executed in different places. The following seven steps should always be included: Identification, Information, Consultation, Decision making, Summoning, Executing, Substituting.

These seven steps may evolve as verification of the process to be set in place for a possible temporary use. They also emphasise diversification, which in turn will lead to a combinatory opportunity for spatial and environmental situations. An ample array of exploitation options is configured by coordinating equipment systems and available surfaces.

In such a process, designers and architects may play a significant role as building agents of a shared identity. They have the opportunity to use their training and skills to foster ethical awareness, reflection, commitment and responsibility in processes that lead to the, unveiling of issues and real problems, for the collective consciousness.
Endnotes

1 This section was compiled by Eleonora Lupo.
2 By context providing we mean a creative process able to produce a context; it is a device producing opportunities solutions and contents.
3 For reference to the examples in the map see the web Reference at the end of the paper.
4 In Italian facilities or equipment can be translated with the word "dotazione", that has an assonance with the word "azione", meaning action. There is a play on words that sounds like "facility for action" or better "dowry for action", that gets lost in translation. We propose the term dot-actions in this sense of tools for/points of action.
5 This section was compiled by Gennaro Postiglione, as a result of an urban exploration workshop organized in November 2007. Students at the Faculty of Architecture and Society of the Politecnico di Milano also participated: Marta Balestrieri, Alessio Casiraghi, Maria Soo-Ran Accorsi, Francesca Guarascio, Alberto Clerici, Paola Di Salvo, Sirene Papadimistru, Maria Elena Soriero, Benedetta Sartori, Giulia Urciuoli, Andrea Pezzoli, Claudia Moranti, Marta Vitali, Roberta Filippini, Alessandro Colli, Maria Luisa Daglia, Matteo Perin, Silvia Fanoni, Federico Cabrini. Senior students Gabriele Corbetta and Benedetta Cremaschi cooperated in organizing the workshop, while Agostino Petrillo, Urban Sociology professor, contributed to the development of explorations by the students.
6 This section has been compiled by Eleonora Lupo and Gennaro Postiglione.

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