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From tramway-line to park – mapping the process of an urban transformation

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Book of Proceedings

the time^{of} streets

INCISIONS
OVERLAPS
AND
RHYTHMS

TITLE

City Street⁵

The time of streets:

incisions, overlaps and rhythms

Book of Proceedings

EDITION

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Book of Proceedings

the time^{of} streets

INCISIONS
OVERLAPS
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From tramway-line to park – mapping the process of an urban transformation

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Abstract

Aim of the research is to analyse the different dynamics which put into effect the transformation process of an abandoned green linear space into an urban park in the city of Turin, Italy. The Precollinear Park has been developed by a non-profit organisation in a portion of a former tramway line area exactly positioned in the in-between belt dividing two different administrative districts. Therefore, a normative and physical vacancy opened the possibility for the organisation to temporarily take the management of the area, making the project being recognised through the institution of a public-private partnership. The project has been carried out by a private intervention, initiated by a non-profit actor, which has been using the operational and financial support of the local community, both public and private.

On the review of this specific process, the paper examines the continuous aggregations, variations and deviations which made the project happen by presenting the different human and non-human actors which took part in it, highlighting the combination among different elements and their effects.

What this case study shows can be considered as twofold: from one hand, it depicts the diagrammatic course of the different actions which made the project possible, and investigates its peculiar process; from the other, it questions the role of non-institutionalised neither professional actors, which without any official elective nor technical-administrative mandate, manage to intervene in urban spaces and transform the city. Ethnographic methods applied to the study of architectural projects help fostering the conversation about the externalisation of public services to private actors in cities urban developments and the role a topic like city branding may have in this.

Keywords

Temporal urban transformations, public-private intervention, city branding.

Introduction

The “Precollinear Park” is a project started in June 2020 as a temporary reuse of a dismissed tramway area in Turin and is potentially considered to become even permanent. It has been designed and managed by the not-for-profit cultural organisation Torinostratosferica and consist in a 700-meter-long former abandoned tramway currently converted to a linear Park. This green and pedestrian boulevard hosts several cultural and social activities in a designed area furnished with benches and tables, a small urban garden and an exhibition space. Having just an architect in a staff of roughly eight people, comprised mainly of graphic designers and communication managers, the association generally deals with the organisation of cultural events focused on urban themes, open to a broader and made-by-non-experts audience. Before receiving the permit to manage the park, their curriculum presented no previous experiences of any physical intervention neither in the public nor in private spaces. Thus, previous to 2020, the analysed association would have not been considered as an *ordinary* actor in the urban development of cities in general nor in Turin in specific. Nevertheless, it has managed to sneak into what can be considered an administrative and physical vacancy of the area by exploiting peculiar contingencies which will later be presented in the paper. By unpacking the unfolding phases of the process that brought to the realisation of this temporal intervention, the research shows specific dynamics that can help framing general considerations about urban transformations and adaptations to temporal needs in the use of city streets.

Therefore, the study presented can be considered as a site-specific focus on a peculiar case, which, explained through its unfolding process of place making, shows how public-private partnerships can succeed for the development and the maintenance of dismissed public areas in Italian cities. It can be considered as a specific zoom that highlights development mechanisms of allowance and refusal in the ordinary management of public spaces and streets in particular.

The pragmatic observation used to analyse the diachronic realisation of the project finds its methodological references in specific ethnographical studies applied to the observation of architectural practices and has applied direct observation, qualitative interviews and an

in-depth study of the organisation's archive in order to study the project; it mainly takes the works of Californian architectural theorist Dana Cuff and sociologist Albena Yaneva as references¹²³. Thus, it takes the study of a selected particular case study as a “specific form of the generic”⁴ in order to unfold how specific urban practices and their *modi operandi* could possibly be integrated in urban processes. Such a working method positions itself with an ethnographic interest in the knowledge of practices, acquired in their direct observation, asking indeed how objects are *handled in practice*⁵.

Starting from a pragmatical position, the paper will briefly introduce the theoretical issues the research aims to tackle; then, an introduction of the specific research methods applied will be given, followed by an in-depth explanation of the results of the ethnographical observations. A conclusive reflection closes the paper aiming at opening up the conversation to some generalizable issues concerning public spaces and city streets.

Urban transformation of cities and public private partnerships

As British geographer Erik Swyngedouw clearly unfolds in the first chapter of his book “Promises of the Political”, over the past few decades, a generalisable tendency of emergence of formal and informal “post democratic” institutional arrangements and figures of governance has influenced the political in general. According to the author, this has brought to a growing involvement of both private economic actors and civil society in governing and managing what was previously provided by the national or local state⁶. Once looking at the urban development management of western European cities, such a radical

-
- 1 Dana Cuff. *Architecture: the story of practice*. Mit Press, 1992.
 - 2 Albena Yaneva. *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: An ethnography of design*. 010 Publishers, 2009.
 - 3 Albena Yaneva. *Mapping controversies in architecture*. Routledge, 2016.
 - 4 Dana Cuff. *Nature of the Research Practice and Methodology*. In “Architectural design and its agency: Research”, 2021 Retrieved from <https://researchingthearchitecturalproject.wordpress.com>.
 - 5 Annemarie Mol. *The body multiple*. Duke University Press, 2003.
 - 6 Erik Swyngedouw. *Promises of the political: Insurgent cities in a post-political environment*. MIT Press, 2018.

shift becomes particularly evident. This neoliberal transformation has resulted in an overturning of distributional policies towards more market-oriented solutions and services, where cities and their municipal administrations, traditionally main promoters of urban development projects, have drastically lost their traditional leading roles⁷. Therefore, new forms of governance have emerged, consequently enlarging the spectrum of formal and informal actors involved in urban developments and externalising public services. Once looking at the development and management of city streets and the general maintenance of public spaces, this is particularly crucial to consider as a background field of action. The presented case can be considered as a good exploration to deepen considerations about city branding and city marketing. A recent publication of a study about city branding Italian urban geographer Alberto Vanolo highlights an interesting paradox in the consideration of such a growing phenomenon, which can be considered as generally neglected by critical urban scholars but still has a larger than expected attention and follow-up in municipal administration offices. Indeed, he pinpoints, that even though the topic of city branding has generally been considered as “the practice of selling cities” in critical urban theory it has seen a greater debate in academic departments mainly relating to business and marketing studies. Nevertheless, these distinct academic communities poorly engage in conversations with each other’s. Moreover, in the Italian context, policy makers are still “greatly attracted by those terms and ideas” and therefore meaningful reflections across the fields are much needed⁸.

By looking at the unfolding process of transformation of the “Precol-linear Park” both the shifting roles of actors become more evident, as the importance of city branding and city marketing narratives in public administration offices.

According to Italian urban scholar Gabriele Pasqui, cities are characterised by the forces that cross them and create *dynamics balances* which

7 Bas Waterhout, Frank Othengrafen, Oliver Sykes. Neo-liberalization processes and spatial planning in France, Germany, and the Netherlands: An exploration. *Planning Practice & Research*, 28(1), 2013, 141-159.

8 Alberto Vanolo. Cities are not products. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 2020, 111.1: 10-17.

constitute their inner *radical pluralism of practices*⁹. The presented work will indeed map and present these sometimes-contrasting forces, how they got in relation one another, their effects in the given case of the Turinese green boulevard.

As it has been stated in the introduction, the research will adopt a pragmatic position and will look straightforwardly at the diachronic process that made the realisation of the placemaking project happen.

The Precollinear Park: a genesis

Torinostratosferica is a not-for-profit organisation active in the city of Turin since 2016. This cultural association has been born as spin-off project that emerged from a collaboration of 2011 between the communication and graphic design agency Bellissimo, in charge of fostering the branding of Turin, and the city municipality. By actively contributing to the editing and the design of the third strategic plan one the city of Turin¹⁰, the design studio and its staff rapidly got convinced about the urgency of bringing communication and marketing *modi operandi* into the city strategies. Fostered by the popular reading of Richard Florida about the important and emergent role of the creative class characterized by its “Talent, Tolerance and Technology” in cities developments¹¹, these thoughts and experiences made rapidly grow the idea of founding an organisation particularly dealing with urban issues in a non institutionalised way in the founder and creative director Luca Ballarini and his collaborators. Thus, the brand led to the foundation of the not-for-profit organisation in 2016. This, started to deal at first with the “participative dimension to the construction of the city image in an alternative way” by proposing an alternative to institutionalised decisions-making-processes and its bureaucratic mechanisms and claiming to be in charge of sharing urban knowledge to a non-specialised public. In the first four years of activity, Torinostratosferica had started to structure its works and build its network mainly dealing with an *unusual and non-conventional* approach to common paradigm used in

9 Gabriele Pasqui. *La città, i saperi, le pratiche*. Donzelli editore, 2018.

10 Torino Strategica. *Metropolitan Turin 2025*. 2015, Retrieved from http://www.torinostrategica.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Metropolitan_Turin_2025_Summary_web.pdf.

11 Richard Florida. *The rise of the creative class*. Hachette UK, 2014.

participatory design and applied to city branding and city marketing¹². Until 2020, as a cultural association, it had organised an annual international festival “Utopian Hours”, thought as an event to talk about *city making* with a non-specialised neither sectorial public and several gatherings moments of *collective territorial branding*, so called “visioning sessions”, where it was asked to participants to imagine a Turin at its best.

How is it possible that a non-ordinary actor, apparently not directly involved nor interested in the physical development of the city, neither in the city’s urban policy discourses, has managed to become what could be defined as a place-making agency? Is there any kind of relationship that can be deduced between city branding and city marketing and so called “place-making” construction narratives? Looking at six years later, during the summer of 2020 when the Precollinear Park has been realized, are some patterns of this peculiar entanglement between city municipalities and strategies of branding and marketing¹³ still visible? Moreover, can these be considered as a trigger from where the public and civic engagement of Torinostratosferica agency has started?

Ethnographic methods to study architectural projects

In order to unravel the diachronic process that made the project of the Precollinear Park possible, it has been chosen to carry out qualitative research applying direct and indirect observation of the work of Torinostratosferica and the different actors that they have encountered. In the period between November 2020 and November 2021 fourteen interviews in order to reach the different actors involved. Following the classification of the dutch social scientist Gerben Moerman¹⁴, it has been chosen to systematise these interviews as open conversations in order to give everyone the possibility to tell, from his/her specific per-

12 Luca Ballarini, Edoardo Bergamin, Dario Consoli. *Torinostratosferica: un progetto di city imaging*. In Monica Gilli e Segio Bernardino Scamuzzi, *Pianificare il Turismo. Innovazione, sostenibilità e buone pratiche*, 2020.

13 Alberto Vanolo. Cities are not products. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 2020, 111.1: 10-17.

14 Gerben Moerman. *Typologies of interviews* [Video file], 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oM1acdBAkao>.

spective, issues and aims related to the specific case study. Simultaneously, an attentive study of the association's archive and the different documentations produced during the process have been analysed and, together with the interviews transcripts, consist of the following research and paper the main sources of references. The application of ethnographic methods, which have been crucial to structure the ethnographic report of the paper, which consist in its core, have as references general ethnographic studies as Clifford Geertz "Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight"¹⁵ and the study of Annemarie Mol "the body multiple"¹⁶.

Albena Yaneva's ethnographic study of OMA design practice has been pivotal to the recents raising interest in ethnographic methods to the study of design studios trajectories. Indeed, her work, by taking methods and approaches from design theory, political philosophy and cognitive anthropology, opens "buildings to the experience, to the course of events that make and consume architecture"¹⁷.

Prior reference but still crucial, similarly applying an ethnographic pragmatism to the study of architecture with the aim of researching which are the professional activities of architects and how they are performed is Dana Cuff "Architecture: the story of practice"¹⁸. Such a method allows to trace the inner logic of the design project and on what architects actually do, by looking at everyday routines, individual gestures and collective interactions. Thus, it prioritize the actions and not the discourses and narratives and enters into a conversation with the design practice¹⁹²⁰.

Unfolding the process

15 Clifford Geertz. *Deep play. Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*. Ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1991, 239–277.

16 Annemarie Mol. *The body multiple*. Duke University Press, 2003.

17 Albena Yaneva. *Mapping controversies in architecture*. Routledge, 2016.

18 Dana Cuff. *Architecture: the story of practice*. Mit Press, 1992.

19 Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva. *Give Me A Gun And I Will Make All Buildings Move: An Ant's View Of Architecture*. Architectural Theories of the Environment: Posthuman Territory, London: Routledge, 2012, 107–14.

20 Albena Yaneva. *Five ways to make architecture political: An introduction to the politics of design practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

In June 2020, the cultural association decided to make one of the “boutades” of the visioning sessions come true by starting a process of trial and error in trying to realise the so-called “Precollinear Park”. The project found its available contingencies in part of the abandoned tramway path of tram number 3, serving the north-east area of the city from 1989 until 2013. Figure 01 shows its terminal, Piazza Hermada (1) and the roadway of Corso Gabetti (2) further down to the river Po (3) towards Regina Margherita Bridge (4). Notwithstanding the almost permanent abandonment over the last decennium, still different municipal projects of letting the tram run again are made as political promises²¹. Moreover, the yellow line on the figure highlights the demarcation border between two different administrative districts of the city, the seventh and the eighth²².

From this given information, we can pinpoint three different levels of vacancies and delimitate some previous conditions of action:

1. a physical vacancy is given by the abandonment of the tramway. Since 2013 indeed, the tram had been active again only for a few months between 2015 and 2017, leaving for the remaining time urban wilderness space and the time to slowly take appropriation of the dismissed area;
2. an administrative vacancy due to being on the border between two different administrative districts, resulting in none taking jurisdictional responsibility on the area itself.
3. a planning vacancy. As several promises of infrastructure investments show, within the city of Turin there is still a certain planning idea of tram making line 3 work again (metti reference regolamento 389). Such an uncertain future, made any structured design for the area hardly possible.

Different interviews with several employees working at Torinostratosferica show how the space appropriation process came from peculiar

21 Many articles can be found in Italian. For further information look at <https://www.torinoggi.it/2020/07/22/leggi-notizia/argomenti/attualita-8/articolo/corso-gabetti-parco-lineare-ma-solo-per-poco-il-comune-promette-il-ritorno-del-tram.html> or <http://www.comune.torino.it/cittagora/altre-notizie/la-rambla-di-corso-gabetti-prima-che-arrivi-il-tram.html>

22 For an in depth overview of Turinese administrative boundaries look at <http://www.comune.torino.it/decentr/>



Fig.1 – Area of the intervention. Source: Gribling, 2022

contingencies combined with the shrewdness and the ability to sneak into the spaces left by the presented vacancies. “We took the project by conquer,” “the main idea was: let’s obtain a part of the city and let’s start to take care of it;” “a project of learning by doing;” “the iter had been totally improvised” “the administrative issues were like a jungle...therefore, we have had the need to make our way through them using a machete” “we always informed the municipality of what we were doing but we have never asked for official permission” are some of the collected sentences which characterise the summary of the experience according to whom had taken part in it, after some months. Indeed, the idea “existed already” since it came as a result of one of the proposal of the visioning sessions²³ and how to let unfold the different phases came *consequently thereafter*. A crossover reconstruction of what the design and realisation process has been shows how the first step of the informal request for the development of the project took place on may the 28th 2020. On the 20th of June, twenty days after but before having received any kind of official concession, the cultural organisation decided to organise an unofficial event to announce the “next opening of the first Precollinear Park of Turin”; on the 7th of August 2021 the city of Turin had publicly approved the “temporal and free concession” of the area to the cultural association Torinostratosferica for the realisation of the Precollinear Park Project in the area between Piazza Hermana and Corso Gabetti.

The several vacancies of the area had favourable conditions that made the project feasible for a non-experienced collective and realisable in a short period of time. Besides, the specific design and management *iter* can be considered as going opposite to a tender procedure opened by public administrations for the delegation of some public services. Indeed, there has never been a call of applications, or a competition for the development of the specific linear and green boulevard. Torinostratosferica started at first to claim that it would have taken over the abandoned space, making public declarations that they would transform the space during two open and informal events. Thus, a spe-

23 Luca Ballarini, Edoardo Bergamin, Dario Consoli. *Torinostratosferica: un progetto di city imaging*. In Monica Gilli e Segio Bernardino Scamuzzi, *Pianificare il Turismo. Innovazione, sostenibilità e buone pratiche*, 2020.

cific declaration of intention came at first. Thereafter, some administrative employees of the municipality of Turin, sympathisers of the project idea, privately suggested how to apply for receiving the temporary concession of the space. Among more than 400 regulations of the city of Turin, the n°389 resulted perfectly suitable for the needs of the project. As it has been previously explained the area was vacant, and the project idea was considered to be successful in different circles of people working for the municipality of Turin. Moreover, as several interviews have shown, the idea found a general positive reaction among a broad spectrum of both citizens and civic servant's due to its position in an easily manageable neighbourhood, its feasibility and temporariness. *"The area was abandoned and therefore was downgraded in its physical terms [...] tall grass and garbage around [...] thus from the commission for the public green to the one in charge of the infrastructure everyone would have been in favour of the project"*.

The regulation n° 389 approved by the city of Turin in 21st of October 2019 is an incentive to private parties to participate to *"contrast urban degradation and to foster urban safety"* by proposing any kind of physical intervention in public space that would not exceed sponsorships major of € 40.000 euro and takes over to the association full responsibility of the management and the maintenance of the area. It is defined as a strengthening of distributed public-private partnerships and it basically works as a delegation of the maintenance of public spaces to private parties. As several interviews have shown, the project has been developed in three different phases between June and October 2020 aiming at both building the physical interventions and the general reputation and agreement among the neighbourhoods. The branding strategy of the whole area went along with its material development in an incremental and step by step process of claiming space. Figures 02 and 03 show how the former tram platforms had been cleaned up, crosswalks had been painted new, benches and tables had been installed together with the designation of an exhibition space and a small urban garden, and with a dog area; moreover, on the bridge itself a yellow container had been placed to physically branding the place itself. A team of five people of the staff were constantly involved supported by a growing team of volunteers.



Fig.2 – Benches in Corso Gabetti.
Source: Federico Masini. *Pictures of
Precollinear Park*, gently provided to the
author by Torinostratosferica, 2021



Fig.3 Regenerated Tram stop in Piazza Hermada. Source: Federico Masini. *Pictures of Precollinear Park*, gently provided to the author by Torinostratosferica, 2021

From one hand, this spatialisation of city branding has given to Torinostratosferica the possibility to enter a conversation with city's main actors and stakeholders, from the other the state of abandonment of the area and the inability of public authorities to take care of it made the involvement into urban development management of this particular actor possible.

From a public space management perspective, is particularly interesting to highlight how the space, after its regeneration, drastically saw an increase in its use. Indeed from being abandoned and dismissed the cleaning and making over of the area made it accessible again. *"Suddenly students felt comfortable to meet after school in the area, and dog owners felt safe to let their pets walk [...] public space was accessible again".*

Public services and supplies, as street illumination of the whole area and the provision of free water, interrupted since the tram had stopped to run, started to be provided again. In particular, SMAT group, the private enterprise in charge of providing and managing the 45% water goods in the metropolitan area of Turin, offered to Torinostratosferica to plug in drinkable water for free; while the joint stock company Iren, providing electricity to the city, helped the association to illuminate the park again²⁴. This *exempla* of public private interventions, can be considered as non-ordinary for their process of intervention and realization. Indeed both companies offered to provide the services after having seen the "successful management and strategies of the Park". The interventions can thus be considered as effects of the specific position acquired through the realization of the place-making project.

Even in these considerations, the pragmatism standpoint of the research looks at how the objects are handled and then, from the proposed observation reflects.

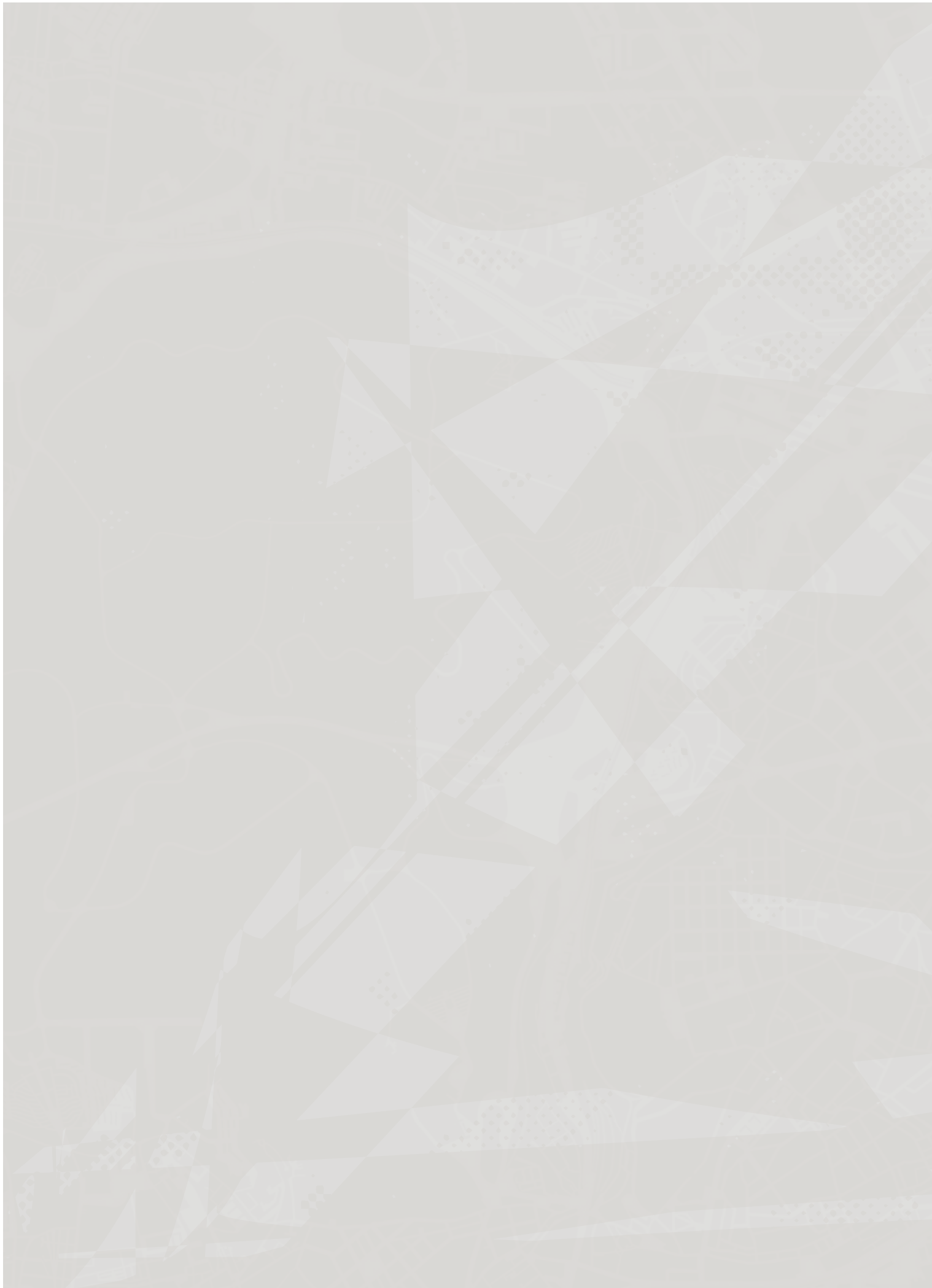
By highlighting some crucial nodes emerged from the ethnographical enquiry, the next session will try to delineate some general reflections and criticalities that could make possible to relate such a specific case to the broader context of management of public urban spaces in general and streets in particular.

²⁴ Information have been taken from an interview with Luca Ballarini and Eugenio Dragoni held in June 2022.

Conclusions

As the research questions have presented, the paper aimed at fostering the conversation about city streets and public spaces in general by highlighting issues of externalisation of public services and city branding in administrative offices by looking at them through an ethnographical exploration. Indeed, the presented case were a practical observation of the phenomena has been applied, seem to confirm the given hypothesis. The Precollinear Park can be considered as an exemplar of how much rhetoric of city branding can be appealing to city policy makers which, has it has been shown, partly approved the project also to the reputation Torinostratosferica had as a branding and communication association. The institution the public-private partnership has been made possible by the ability of the association to sneak in to ordinary development process taking advantage of specific circumstances given by the presented vacancies. Having presented the specific dynamics, more generalizable reflections about the process of externalisation of public services work in practice can follow. Both considerations can be applied to the particular case study but to also trigger the conversation about the commodification of public services and infrastructure and seem urgent in the general debate about city streets and their unfolding processes of development and management.

Particularly interesting to notice for further considerations about the management of this kind of positive processes is the combination of the spontaneity of abruptly interventions of the association and the positive and the welcoming reactions of the administrative institution. What can be defined as a continuous process of negotiation between the two, shows how this kind of positive processes could suggest some general reflections about possible strategies. A broader research about these processes could end up in proposing a tool kit of possible moves in order to foster the welcoming of non-ordinary actors in urban development processes.



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