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Urban Voids After the Pandemic. A New Chance for Greenway

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Abstract

Our proposal deals with the meaning of urban voids in the post-COVID-19 period to suggest new understandings of how urban green corridors can positively affect design for healthier and more sustainable cities. According to Secchi (1986), planning through the void involves a profound revision of the way we think about the city, reversing the points of interest, proposing as polarities the spaces that do not usually emerge. The void thus becomes an opportunity, a chance to improve the structure of our urban landscape (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020). A city is a powerful place, always in motion and transformation. It has an artificial spirit full of surprises and vague limits. It is the scene of remarkable transformations that in their wildness are partially ungovernable by the designers themselves. The desire to control them leaves a series of abandoned and unfinished spaces, “holes” that live from their discontinuity with the surroundings (Labriola, 2021).

During a period of crisis, like the one that we are still living with COVID-19 (Fabris et al, 2020), it is common to re-think our cities to create better places for the community. After the long period of forced distance that we lived, an evolution of public space is recommended.

During the pandemic, the emptiness of our cities permitted Nature to re-appropriate its spaces. Following this trend and thinking about a new kind of public space where Nature and its inside processes are the protagonists, it is possible to intervene in our cities. The porosity of the urban fabric in towns without humans, blocked at home by the never-ending lockdowns, became a new green corridor that revealed the presence of wildlife (both fauna and flora) as part of a forgotten urban layer that turned visible again. The preservation of this new asset should be possible. The spaces to allow this change can be the abandoned and empty areas present in the contemporary city’s sick body that we can finally heal. The so-called wastelands, voids, or terrain vague, have a significant value independent from the environment in which they are inserted, showing a relationship with the contemporary city extraneous to its rhythms. For this reason, they are the perfect place for experimentation in terms of greenways, a possible starting point to re-think how green can be part of the urban texture and how to conceive public and open spaces after the nowadays crisis. The paper considers the Metropolitan City of Milan as a remarkable case study to understand the pivotal role played by urban voids in the formation of greenways and their capacity of reshaping the environmental, aesthetic and healthy dimensions of urban landscapes.

Introduction

A reflection on the meaning of urban voids in the post-COVID-19 period can help to suggest new understandings of how urban green corridors can positively affect the design of healthier and more sustainable cities. According to Secchi (1986), planning through the void involves a profound revision of the way we think about the city, reversing the points of interest, and proposing the spaces that do not usually emerge as polarities. The void thus becomes an opportunity, a chance to improve the structure of our urban landscape (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020) as cities are powerful places,

always in motion and transformation. In addition to the soil consumption and other negative trends, cities are the scenes of remarkable transformations that, in their wildness, are partially ungovernable by the designers themselves. The desire to control them leaves a series of abandoned and unfinished spaces, “holes” that live from their discontinuity with the surroundings (Labriola, 2021).

During the pandemic, the emptiness of our cities permitted Nature to re-appropriate its spaces. Following this trend and thinking about a new kind of public space where Nature and its inside processes are the protagonists, it is possible to intervene in our cities (Barchetta, 2021; Gandy, 2022). The spaces to allow this change can be consequently the abandoned and empty areas located in the contemporary city’s sick body that we can finally heal. The so-called ‘wastelands’, ‘voids’, or ‘*terrain vague*’ have a significant value independent from the environment in which they are inserted, showing a relationship with the contemporary city extraneous to its rhythms. For this reason, they are the perfect place for experimentation in terms of greenways, a possible starting point to re-think how green can be part of the urban texture and how to conceive public and open spaces after the nowadays crisis.

The Role of the Public Space after the COVID-19 Crisis

Covid-19-induced lockdowns made us understand how our homes were often inadequate for prolonged inside-living, and then, with the reopening, even the public spaces did not seem up to expectations. It appeared clear then how the design of public spaces in the last decades was poor and inadequate.

It is unequivocal how the effect of the COVID-19 crisis does not affect only our private everyday life but also the way we live in the public space. However, it is possible to consider the positive impact of re-thinking the contemporary city meaning through its community places. The answer of the public administrations was usually accelerating some public actions. The Metropolitan City of Milan promoted, for example, a considerable intervention both in public space use and slow mobility.



Figure 1. “Piazza Aperta” in Piazzale Bacone, Milan, ph. Valentina Labriola (2022)

The capillary implementation of spaces and services in several parts of the city started years before the pandemic, but it became even more essential after the lockdown. Milan's General Master Plan, the so-called *Piano di Governo del Territorio* (PGT) of 2012, included the identification of the NIL (*Nuclei di Identità Locale* – Local Identity Cores), promoting a depth mapping beyond the administrative division to support the different local identities. In 2018, the “public areas’ quantity and quality” act was also approved, then developed through the “*Piazze Aperte*” (Open Squares) project. Using Tactical Urbanism’s tools, the aim was to promote light, fast, and cheap urban interventions that could quickly improve the city’s quality of community spaces (Fabris et al., 2020). This operation improved the general health of the citizens but is considered just the scratching surface of the extended crisis that we are experiencing. Global Climate Change, the uncontrolled soil consumption in our cities, the lack of biodiversity, and so on are factors in a prolonged crisis that we are still living, and a new vision of cities after COVID-19 should consider every piece of this puzzle to promote capillary action. As architect Rem Koolhaas argues, it will be needed to design the cities through their voids (Koolhaas, 2021). So, considering the urban voids as a catalyst for the following interventions is a good chance to plan a new kind of urban space.

The Voids

The presence of residual areas relies on the cities' transformation processes, which permitted a new point of view about these spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. Typically identified as urban voids, they are a network of heterogeneous fragments of various sizes inside the urban fabrics, a fair number of areas where it is possible to re-think the open spaces in our cities (Labriola, 2021). The existence and quantity of the voids are not enumerated, but they represent more than the actual planned open spaces in the cities, underlining a lack in traditional urban planning. Unplanned voids break the saturation of the metropolis, creating an unjustified pause between the constructed buildings and the planned open spaces. They are meant as unhealthy elements and abandoned because they are considered a waste. However, their isolation allows increasing internal transformations that make voids unique spaces with high design potential. As Sergio Lopez-Pineiro argues in “*A Glossary of Urban Voids*”, the “lack of value is what makes these vacant spaces appear as marginal, and this marginality gives the urban voids the possibilities that other urban spaces do not have” (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020).

The waste areas of the city are witnesses of the latent urban transformations that quietly change the relationships between people and territory (Sennett, 1999). Positively looking at these places is a rare opportunity to rediscover and re-found the ethical implications of living, a way to promote a democratic design of our cities. Since they are mostly easy to reach and open to all, they are places where normal activities such as skating, jogging, graffiti painting, or parching are welcome, but, at the same time, their being outside the city planning and management allows the proliferation of a dynamic space almost without the human intervention. Tom Nielsen defines them as ‘*superfluous landscapes*’ (Nielsen, 2002) and argues that voids could be alternative public spaces out of the rules of contemporary cities. Voids are an excellent example of sustainability and adaptability to change the city and its dynamism, establishing a new sequence of processes and metamorphosis that allow their persistence during the time.

In 1995 Ignasi de Solà-Morales published his famous work ‘*terrain vague*’, where he started to define the so-called wasteland as an “empty, abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place” where “the relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy” is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of these places

(de Solà-Morales Rubiò, 1995). The discontinuity with surroundings imposes a negative connotation for the community, but he argues their aptitude to become a new potential public space despite it. Moreover, de Solà-Morales' research is also explicit about the difficulty of defining these spaces. Since they do not have a specific scale or peculiar activities, making an abacus that could help the analysis and the consequence planning of these spaces is almost impossible. One of the only ways to list them is by the cause of the abandonment. The result is several terms that make it even more challenging to compare these empty spaces. Thankfully, cataloguing is not a necessary condition for designing because the unlimited power of the voids goes beyond the definition. As vague spaces, these places open various opportunities for the planner action, a wide range of possible implications, from the violence of an extreme and radical intervention to the preservation of the memory of the void treated as a reliquary. However, the choice of seeing the design of these places as a unicum, inserting them into a plan, would limit the freedom of action that these places bring with them. Despite the scale and the origin, they are all resulting from processes of urban abandonment, and naming them is counterproductive and contradictory because trying to fix something that has in the *vague* its true potential.

The residual spaces are one of the most critical vital resources for the contemporary city as they represent an excellent opportunity for the development of the city itself. Their planning should be a catalyst for the city's sustainable development, considering the abnormal movements that determined their creation. They are tools for creating flexible spaces that, in antithesis to the immense growth of the contemporary city, speak through the void. This radical choice must guide architects to take responsibility for decisions involving the city through a reform that can include the whole, starting from the landscape.

New projects, learning from the informal uses done during the pandemics by the citizens, should be developed starting from the contradictions that have created these residual spaces. They can become the basis for impenetrable interferences, mixed realities that best express the importance of the transformations of the places in which they are inserted (Labriola, 2021).

Land Consumption and Unfinished

In their complex, permanent and fragmentary evolution, the contemporary cities created numerous discards and products. The referred so-called residual spaces include, among others, a specific kind of waste Unfinished.

From the beginning of the 20th century, the pressure on the city has become progressively stronger: population growth and the preference for a specific kind of production model have led to a necessary expansion of the city in the shortest possible time. The development of what would later become the suburbs brought many contradictions from both an environmental and a social point of view. The growth of cities has not been, and in part still is, regulated, fueling the phenomenon of land consumption at the expense of green areas, particularly the agricultural countryside.

The image of a low-density city is often misleading, suggesting a better standard of living for citizens who often find themselves stuck in dormitory neighbourhoods that lack essential services. Therefore, the consequence of building speculation is the uncontrolled consumption of land, which, despite zoning plans, increases because of the phenomenon of urbanization.



Figure 2. Green spaces and locations of abandoned areas in Milan. Data from *Geoportale Comune di Milano*, re-elaborated by Valentina Labriola (2022)

Also, other instruments, such as the Milan Territorial General Plan (PGT, 2012), promote the idea of densifying the existing city. The aim is to remove the functional zoning, assuming a single index for all the soils introducing a general equalization. Theoretically, this prevents the consumption of more land but, at the end, where a void was present, rapidly covered with residential buildings according to a purely speculative real-estate logic. The result was that an interesting urban situation, distinctive of some neighbourhoods, dissolved, favouring a vast typological homogeneity.

Land consumption is a significant problem. In this context, the promotion made by institutions of the redevelopment of Unfinished buildings, although noble, tries to stem a phenomenon from a very narrow perspective. These policies promote the requalification of the Unfinished through the construction, leading cities to further, and inevitable, real estate surplus, shifting the problem from the Unfinished to the unused.

“Urban residual spaces [...] provide opportunities for new, transitional reappropriations assumed by civil or ‘informal’ actors coming from outside the official, institutionalized domain of urban planning and urban politics. These spontaneous, organic evolutions epitomize a different notion of ‘urbanity’ from which is evident in planned developments owing to their dissociation from modernist utilitarian approaches and the logics of planning” (Groth & Corjn, 2005, 506).

Looking at the phenomenon from a broader perspective promotes a redesign of spaces to create environments that can stem, at least in part, from the phenomenon of land consumption. The redesign could give breath to the cities by creating new open spaces that do not necessarily impose the demolition of the Unfinished, which would become a perfect landmark and no longer an urban scar.

The Role of Nature

It is already clear how the loss of natural permeable surfaces and the soil consumption in our cities compromises hardly the adaptation to the ongoing climate change, but it is also true how cities are the best testing ground for new experimentation. The Metropolitan City of Milan Territorial General Plan includes, for example, the establishment of 1.7 million square meters of no more extended buildable areas. This action is not enough, but the involvement of the Public Administration is a good step that will allow the limit the soil and energy consumption, reducing our ecological burden on the environment.

Concerning wasteland, the intention is to restore or demolish more abandoned areas as possible in the case of buildings. This action shows the usual tendency of the architecture in the design of the vacant space. The propensity is planning these spaces, trying to include them in the city through a violent transformation that denies the unique qualities of the wasteland instead. Urban voids can trigger the imagination of new alternative public spaces while simultaneously positively influencing the ever-present re-urbanization and re-naturalization process (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020). These places' ecological and socio-cultural power allows the design of a new kind of open space that considers the presence of an unseen nature. As Gilles Clément argues, “Abandoned areas constitute the principal refuge for the pioneers of exhausted, bare, ‘turned over’, or littered soil” (Clément, 2002, p.111). Indeed, it is visible how nature affects the voids in different aspects, firstly, in the aesthetic.



Figure 3. Istituto Marchiondi from Vittoriano Viganò, Baggio (MI), ph. Valentina Labriola (2022)

Speaking about the unfinished buildings, Marc Augè was impressed by “the beauty of that which could have been, the beauty of a moment when everything was still possible, the beauty of the original gesture and the primary impulse that had been brusquely interrupted. Nature had seized these anticipated ruins, so to speak, to dissolve them into the beauty of the surrounding landscape by modestly carpeting them here and there with vegetative veil” (Alterazioni Video, Fosbury Architecture, 2018, p.27). It is clear how nature gives an incredible aesthetic value to these spaces and structures, which leave for a moment the negative value they represent for significance closer to the ancient ruins.

From an ecological point of view, the abandonment allowed the unexpected growth of an unusual nature. The so-called wasteland “hosts a substantial proportion of floristic diversity of cities and certainly plays a key role in favouring exchanges among urban habitats” (Muratet et al., 2007, p.661). The planning design action should preserve the incredible transformations of these spaces by creating open spaces that hold to the identity of the contexts. The necessity of the functions and the tendency to “fill the voids” do not allow the growth of a new and unseen nature radically different from the usual planning of the cities’ green. On the contrary, the network of the voids provides a new greenway system, more sustainable and efficient.

Conclusion

The voids are residual spaces, neither ephemeral objects nor just space. They are subjects of a possible future, a counter-perspective for a new city that must be able to change course, thus dealing with the loss of soil and biodiversity.

To overcome the traditional dichotomy between city and nature is necessary to understand the possibility of the two realities coexisting in the definition of hybrid spaces, a new kind of public space where the wild is no longer content with marginal places but inhabits the centre of the city (Metta & Olivetti, 2019). The voids answer these possible transformations as flexible places in time and space, and we have seen their importance as buffering zones during the recent COVID-19 pandemics. The challenge for the contemporary city is to take this flexibility and make it a catalyst for future development.

The growing pressure of ecological awareness can prove that the challenge is not necessary to fill all urban voids but recognise the different situations that need to be assessed and clarified. The architects should rethink the landscape of our cities, starting from the void, from residual spaces. The challenge is precisely to rethink cities in reverse. Urbanity must be defined through its voids, which will no longer be urban scars but central to sustainable development (Koolhaas, 2021).

The future of cities depends on considering multiple variables that must be analysed appropriately to define urban strategies that see emptiness as an opportunity and not a problem to be solved. Following this philosophy, managing residual spaces is one of the most significant challenges for today’s planners. Instead of referring to them as a problem, we need to evaluate the opportunities offered by these places to improve the structure of our urban landscape.

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