

Can culture be social?

This paper is about an unusual event, organized twice a year in a Northern Italian city, Bologna. The event takes place in a condominium and lasts all night long. It involves all the apartments in the condominium and takes form as a huge, collective, but secret party.

Every condominium, in the Italian legal system, is based on shared rules and agreements, re-discussed and possibly renewed during every periodic condominium apartment owners' meeting, also with some powerful argument. In those meetings people talk about social and economic issues of the building(s); a condominium is a small cell nucleus, a micro-cosmic model of the city. In our case, an additional parallel and secret series of meetings are held, meetings to which only the owners participate, and the formal condominium chairman is not invited.

These events take place in a city that's already rich of cultural activities and initiatives. So, what's the reason driving the apartment owners? Who are they? They are young ladies and gentlemen, owners of cozy two-room apartments looking onto a small courtyard. They are students and young professionals working in the cultural field, and their age is ranging from 20 to 35. They need something different and new, they expect something more stimulating than what they normally do in their spare time. They craft a more distinctive event than the mainstream ones the city can offer.

A few numbers:

- Apartment owners: 7;
- Official party organizers: 15;
- Hosts: 30 per apartment (1/2 + 1 female, of that 1/2 + 1 not in a relation. 1/2 men not in a relation as well);
- 'Senatori a vita': former party organizers who used to live in the building;
- 'Complici': external collaborators, i.e. technicians, musicians, artists, singers, dancers, radio speakers, photographers;
- One internet domain and some personal blogs.

A few compulsory rules:

- Invitation cards are personal with the host's name on the top;
- There's a door selector at the building's door (friendly called 'uomo alla porta');
- The party is offered by the flat owners to everybody and entry and drinks are free.

Changing choices:

- A theme, live acoustic concerts, games and awards are selected time by time.

Only one shared goal:

- 'farsi la festa', have quality time to spare with friends, meet interesting people, listen to niche music.

Main effects:

- The main effect is the creation of a model of event, or of freedom and life-style, ethically shared by the persons;
- Public entertainment with its rules has been substituted by a private approach with new rules.

How it works

The “Emergency Condo Party” starts at least 1 month and half before, with an increasingly chatting about it. Meetings and brainstorming are day by day activities. What kind of CP will be this next one? Shall we host a Podcast Radio on air?

Will we enjoy little concerts at different moments in different apartments? Or will we choose a movie we love, and create awards for the best personification of its characters?

Each person is in charge of a task, the closest to her/his own the more it works. In a functional system there will be someone in charge of communication, someone else in charge of the costumes and so on.

From the economic point of view, every apartment owner takes care of drinks and food to be given to her/his own friends. In this way every subgroup of people have to pay only for people they have invited. Moreover every apartment choose what to buy and offer, in total freedom.

While the event takes place all the flats are open at the same time. Everyone, owners included, can step in and out of the apartments. Meanwhile, the building embodies the big picture of the party (let's say the apartments are the *privées*).

We should talk about the presence of an emerging strategy inside the Condo Party. Strategy and economic impact are so deeply connected with the single event's architecture, that they vary from time to time. From the economic viewpoint the party is paid for only by the organizers, and no fees are asked to the hosts.

Moreover, in order for the parties to prove more intensive and effective, the condominium as a community bought a microchip which, implanted in a PC, could broadcasts in FM wave. The radio broadcasts up to a 100 meters radius, in order to cover all the apartments, but it cannot trespass its borders. It airs music during the party, without noise for the neighborhood, people just need an iPod or a vintage radio system with headphones (“Il tempo delle mele” teaches).

As already said, there's a web domain and a link to the personal blogs, where people chat and see the pictures taken the night before.

The party gave the birth to its own Saint Protector, San Ciccio, who takes care of the owners and of their friends when they travel back home. A Backgammon contest took place, as well as a series of acoustic sessions with the presence of an on air Podcast Radio. And so on.

We could try to explain the word ‘culture’, but it could go too far from the goal of the paper, which is a simple storytelling. By the way, we should explain how some features of culture, such as identity and taste formation, work here quite intensively. We will focus upon the information transmission element later, in order to understand what drives the subjects of this story. Why in a big city like this a few people decide to spend money and create a private party for at least 250 people? We will be back soon on such an intriguing dilemma.

Nowadays well-educated people build increasingly complex taste formation process and cultural identity status, because they experience an exponential amount of events and studies. The ability to appreciate a concert, or a theatrical event, or the visual arts and so on, increased as well, also through a sort of

specialization. Beyond the mainstream offer, our people appear to prefer experiences and music that others don't like, performances which could never be enjoyed in a typical public place based on a ROI system.

We are approaching the Bermuda Triangle of subcultures. In fact, the Condo Party is a kaleidoscopic picture of subculture: the Independent Subculture, usually labeled 'Indie'.

We adopt the term subculture as it has been defined in 1950 by the sociologist David Reisman, who emphasized the difference between the 'majority', which passively accepted commercially provided styles and meanings, and a 'subculture' which actively sought a minority style ... and interpreted it in accordance with subversive values

There are a lot of differences between a public event and a private indie event like this, last but not least a lovely atmosphere created by the cozy apartments, where people do share impressions and an élite experience, which embody feelings such as friendship and trust. But, moreover:

1. You can attend to beautiful concert of niche music and think they simply know your tastes;
2. A tailored experience is crafted by the flat owners also for themselves, so that they effectively become 'prosumers'.

Regarding the third cultural component, the information transmission chain able to transfer cultural values to users' perceptive and cognitive sphere, the Condo Party uses a blog and a bundle of tools as the buzz feedback, collaborators, and most of all shares values. A manager of the CP's online account sends alerts and emails before the Party, giving date and instructions, therefore creating a strong and diffused expectation from the visitors' point of view. Good keywords for this example of private initiative in cultural field are collaboration and values sharing.

Going back to the crucial question: Why in a big city like this some people decide to spend money and create a private party for at list 250 people?, we can suggest the answer: Because they have the infrastructure (the condominium) and the capabilities to use it (a dynamic cultural approach). Together, they create a precision tool inside the field of cultural activity production, keeping everything independent from economic returns and from the judgment of art critics. The only official report of the CP is just a little newspaper's article, written by a style art guru. After that, dozens of blogs boost the event as a bright star in the nighttime of a city depressed by a cloudy public administration with its wicked cultural policy.



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