Making places: the plan as a process in the Green University project

Descrizione

To be is to inhabit, to inhabit is to be. (M. Heidegger)

1. Environment and art

A few months ago the new Campus of LUISS University in Roma was the object of an artistic action aimed at emphasizing the wasteful behaviour of its users (students as well as teachers) during their everyday activities. The artist Ettore Favini inoculated its creative language into the serious and traditional architectural setting of the campus, inviting users to acquire awareness about their behaviour. The project was mediated by Verena Lenna and Rossana Miele, and realised in synergy with the Associazione LUISS Sostenibile.

Should we consider this an isolated experience, due to the enlightened intuition of the few, or does it indicate a path for co-operation between art and environmental responsibility? Probably new in the University the model of participatory art has been experienced in urban districts and residential units, and in working spaces. The academic option emphasizes the opportunity for disseminating the concept of responsibility through the arts among a wide and multi-cultural audience, multiplicating its potential. It seems to happen in the right moment.

In fact, the present economic and social conjuncture is characterised by a high potential of growth, because of the urgency to structurally reconsider false balances, and because of the completely new range of tools available for individuals to develop any kind of action, tactical and capillary, of feminine resistance to the systems of power blocked by their monolithic nature. The self-help logic is no more only a resource for personal growth, but also the factor networking small communities, as Castells theorized and as the diffusion of new spontaneous economic paradigms

demonstrates.

The strengthening of new organisational patterns highlights the importance of the everyday dynamics and their immaterial elements originating identities in continuous evolution, which appear fluid, ubiquitous, and a-tectonic even if still territorial. To sustain the current inhabiting processes a project has to consider the above summarized trends: in order to satisfy moving actors and cross-sectional approaches, it should offer new specific opportunities, designing margins to enable creativity, as a necessary condition for identity processes, both collective and individual.

In the next paragraphs I will try to describe some features that should represent the basic equipment for a process meant to improve inhabiting conditions and to activate sustainable processes, especially when dealing with ecological issues.

2. Space vs place.

It has been largely proved that designing a space is not sufficient to create a place or to enhance a given inhabited situation. Today this is more and more confirmed by the sprawl of hybrid territories, virtual and liquid layers superposing over solid architectures, altering their meaning and perception, changing their original functions crystallised in concrete shelters. The inhabitants – the term being used with reference to Heidegger – engender these processes in everyday life, informing and reacting to their environment with relational paths. Along a timeline they produce culture, memory, meaning. In the spacial dimension they project images and shape places.

Planning should deal with this kind of strengths: rigidity being not suitable and better replaced by an infrastructural logic, enabling creative organizations, both for individuals and for communities. To plan should mean to focus upon identities, values, and images as real actors able to engender behaviours and, thus, to shape places. In such a respect, a plan would better work if conceived as a process, whereby the inhabitant could recognize its identity, and identify the necessary factors for a path of

growth also corresponding to an evolution of meaning.

3. Discovering identity and values.

Places are complex systems. Because of their nature, they are shaped by relationships and can grow only through a continuous exchange of energy and matter with their environment. The evolution of a place can be considered as a step towards a superior organizational level and, according to Varela and Thompson this happens through shifts of self-consciousness, corresponding not only to an enlargement but, most of all, to a qualitative jump concerning the organisational pattern. Back to the inhabiting subject, for example, the transformation from the village to the city is made possible by tools and perspectives not corresponding to a simple dimensional adaptation.

The first aim of a plan considered as a development path should be to engender consciousness in the inhabited system, making a blurred identity readable. A urban community, a city, any other kind of organisation first of all has to recognize its own identity – felt, lived and perceived – in order to choose and sustain its specific evolution. This can be possible as the result of a constructive dialogue with the actors charged of planning, due to which a community could describe itself and its environment, identifying the appropriate domain of intervention.

3. Recognizing the strengths

The second aim is the identification of the strengths at stake: these can be considered as those factors that have actually determined choices and shaped environments. These are values and behaviours, not always one mirroring the other. Values project towards an identity project, of which it is better to verify the proximity to the real and to the potential status. Behaviours are the result of an indefinite number of elements, and for this reason they are quite unpredictable. They are the tactical and creative reaction of the inhabitants, acting in everyday life independently from their community and in this way confirming and empowering their right to identity.

In such a perspective, to intervene implies the adoption of a posture of respect and valorisation of the above described domain of uncertainty: first of all a listening attitude is needed, in order to extract some predominant features; secondly any regulatory approach should be abandoned in favour of an infrastructural logic, in order to support the endogenous development of meaning. It’s not by chance that places start to form where predefined programs cease to work.

4. Enabling the process

The third aim is the activation of the process. A planning intervention should not simply correspond to the realisation of an artefact: it has to be able to activate the field of strengths needed to support the evolution of the system in the chosen direction. The process will be site specifically featured and its effectiveness will strictly depend on the quality of the interaction found with the involved inhabitants. Structuring the relational exchange since the very beginning will assure a deeper motivation and, thus, a higher level of sustainability.

5. Participatory art as a catalyst

Participatory art is a catalyst, really suitable to the previously described planning approach, combining interaction and impressiveness. In fact its effectiveness is evident at least at two levels, both relevant to involve the inhabitants, engendering sustainability for the coming shift: the relational level and the retinal level.

Relational level
Because of its dynamics, from the very beginning participatory art produces the development of a relational layer, as a structural condition for a sustainable planning process. This artistic procedure involves the inhabitants through the whole process, starting with an analysing phase, developed with a few representatives, and continuing with a dialogue addressed to the entire community involved. In this way

the process is built on the basis of shared values and perspectives of commitment, engendering motivation. Moreover, the emotional factor accompanying the shaping of the relational text imprints the sense of involvement even with higher effectiveness.

Retinal level

The pattern described in the previous paragraphs can be developed with more effectiveness when intersected with images, experiences and artefacts finally converging to a retinal synthesis, this being a privileged means for human learning. The process of participatory art gives the possibility to exploit an infinite repertoire of expressive possibilities, every time declined according to specific needs. In this way contents and values have a direct access to individual and collective imaginaries, deeply altering the perception of reality and finally changing behaviours.

Lastly participatory art not only engenders motivation, but also and most importantly suggests margins for creativity, so necessary for the evolution and the definition of identity processes. In any kind of intervention related with the inhabiting process, it's immediate to guess the need for any kind of user interface, better working when the user's involvement is required in terms of creativity, as a meaningful and emotional contribution. Focusing the attention and contaminating imaginaries, art gives the possibility for individuals and communities to react in creative ways, producing new gestures, working on identity.

6. The plan as a process: towards sustainability.

The possibility to reach the mental maps of the inhabitants with higher effectiveness, altering their behaviours, becomes crucial if the aim is the introduction of new ecological attitudes: in such a case the degree of involvement and the communication of the contents become relevant, both socially and ethically.

This is certainly the case of Green University, a public art project conceived and developed through the 'Nuovi Committenti' model promoted in Italy by the Fondazione

Adriano Olivetti. Nuovi Committenti (New Patrons) gives small groups of teachers, students or citizens' associations the opportunity to put their desires into action, taking part in the conception and realisation of art works in all its phases. The intense synergy between the patrons (Associazione LUISS Sostenibile – Sustainable LUISS Association), the mediators (Verena Lenna, Rossana Miele) and the artist (Ettore Favini) places the emphasis on the social and political, as well as esthetic, dimensions of the artistic operation.

"Associazione LUISS Sostenibile" was founded in 2007 by about thirty students from the Università LUISS Guido Carli in Rome. Today, LUISS Sostenibile is a cultural association with the aim of encouraging ecologically-sustainable everyday behaviors in the university setting. Meetings with various Association representatives and the distribution of questionnaires provided opportunities for the students to make their needs heard. What emerged in particular was the need to lend greater visibility to the group's initiatives, sensitising the university audience first and foremost, and setting virtuous processes in motion for long-term ecological sustainability based on education about everyday actions.

Listening to and actively involving the 'recipients' of the art work are fundamental elements of the New Commissioners process. Initial rough evaluations had to do with wasteful energy use and the utilisation of resources and materials with negative repercussions in terms of environmental impact as well as the University's budget. Meetings, musings and blogs that arose around the theme led to the Green University project, which consists of an altered/alternative path through the LUISS campus in Viale Romania in Roma. The work involves students' everyday activities, with environmental interventions to draw attention to the problem of ecological sustainability. Along the path, students encounter a description of the waste of materials and energy produced every month at LUISS. The path describes the possible and hoped-for reversal of the current situation, switching the resource-management balance from negative to positive in ecologically-advantageous terms.

Green University is intended as an ironic reference to the contents of the installation, which represent wastefulness and a lack of environmental awareness. At the same

time, it is also an indication of Associazione LUISS Sostenibile's main aspiration, the objective it aims to achieve. At the end of the path, the artist has set up a temporary reading room where visitors can consult a large selection of books on the theme of waste, recycling, sustainability and utopia. In the same room preparatory sketches for everyday objects will be on display — canteens, water dispensers and notebooks, which will be produced using recycled paper, plastic and aluminum during 2010, with a view towards economic savings and reduction of environmental impact. (more details can be found following the links at the end of this essay).

The project has strengthened some beliefs whose theoretical consistency is evident, but which needed an empirical verification: the diffusion of top-down approaches in planning rarely offers the possibility of a direct confrontation with the complexities of reality. These beliefs are nourished, among the others, by Kevin Lynch theories about the city's images and their role in influencing the use of space; the infrastructural logic of Cedric Price and Yona Friedman's mobile architectures. The common element is the central role played by the inhabitant, an 'author' using space to write and produce identity, testing relationships in everyday experience. Fortunately, planning experiences intersected with relational approaches – the pretext being art, design, culture – are multiplying, opening the perspective for more and more hybrid planning methods, dissolving the limits of the different disciplines involved. Finally, the process is the most important aim to reach.

The challenge of the present conjuncture can be faced only in a perspective of sustainability, conscious of the acting strengths, respecting identities and their places. In this direction, the relational level is the crucial focus for an intervention really conceived according to an inhabiting perspective. Maybe, characterizing planning as a path will not lead to any formal result, for those who need this kind of certitude. But no doubt that the conditions for the practice of creativity are granted, in order to define identities and to produce meaning, as natural expressions of the inhabiting process.

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