

Paola Scala, Grazia Pota
Elastic places and intermediate design

Abstract

Most of the architectural and urban considerations conceived during and after the Covid-19 pandemic seem to allude to the invention of new development paradigms, alternative to the idea of global city and metropolis. Is this answer really possible or, once again, a gap between architecture and reality that is difficult to bridge is being generated? In the following article, we try to tackle the theme of the post-Covid-19 city starting from the existing one. In particular, starting from the suburbs; neighbourhoods built on the idea of standards that arises from the architecture-health relationship. The design of both housing and public spaces in these areas has often generated abstract places that make social networks difficult to being realized.

Keywords

Periphery — Resilience — Publicness

«Noi abbiamo bisogno di abitazioni a buon mercato e igieniche, che rendano possibile agli abitanti il risparmio di forze fisiche e psicologiche. Tali abitazioni non implicano soltanto una salute migliore della popolazione ma anche un vantaggio per il patrimonio nazionale perché risulterebbero ridotte le spese per ospedali, sanatori, etc.». Alexander Klein (1930).

The modern city is built on the relationship between architecture and public health. Research on the minimum dwelling, capable of ensuring a minimum “modus vivendi” rather than a “modus non moriendi” (Gropius 1930), rapidly effected not only the dimension of the building but also that one of the neighbourhood, public space and the modern city. This is not the place for retracing a well-known story, started with the CIAM, continued with the pre and post-war experiments, passing through the great Utopias of the sixties and seventies, and sadly ended with the banality of many of our suburbs. However, the COVID emergency has framed the issue of these areas on the city edges in a new perspective, highlighting the real reasons of modern urbanism. The suburb question was one of the hot topics in the Italian research in architecture before the pandemic. The suburban plan, strongly supported by Renzo Piano, started several urban regeneration processes in the Italian cities peripheral areas, despite the freezing of funds realized in 2019 by amendment 13.2 to legislative decree no. 717. Some of that was based on studies conducted within universities¹. The pandemic has turned off, at least for the moment, the spotlight on this issue by moving them to other horizons; other ideas of cities and territorial development such as the recovery of inland areas through the construction of small villages with ecological corridors that allow wild animals to coexist with men.

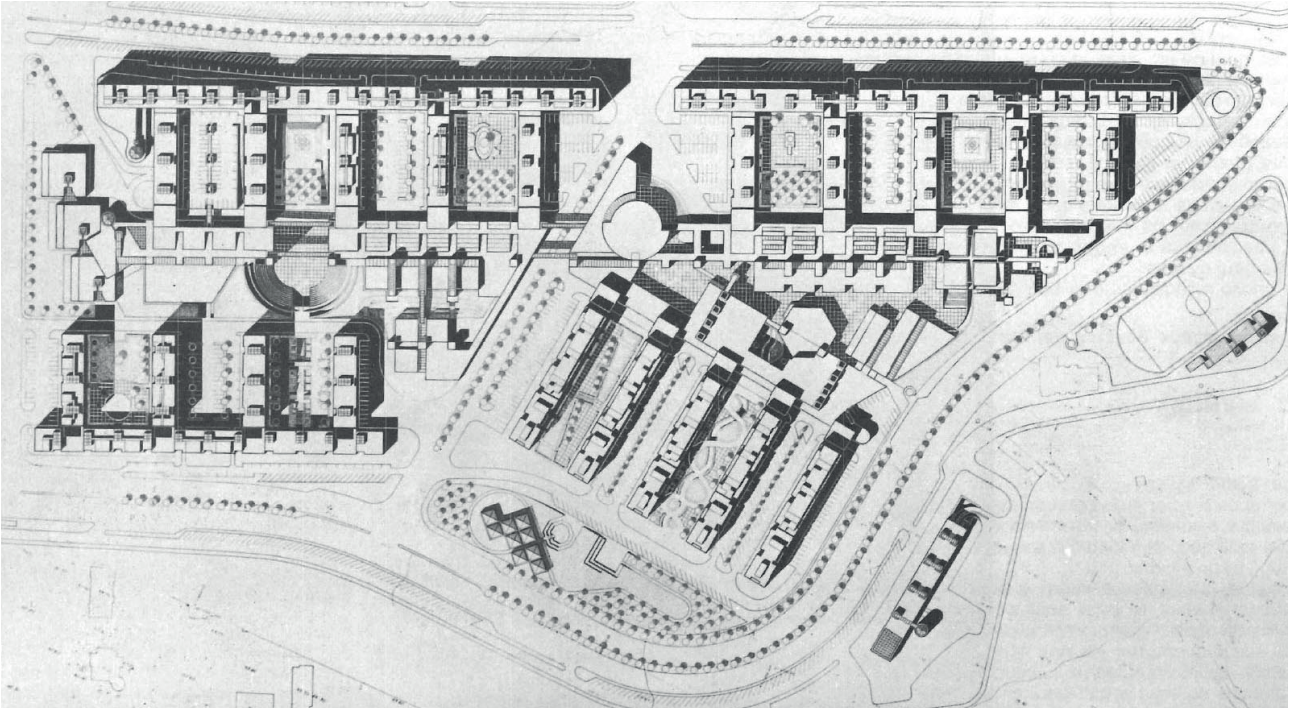


Fig. 1
Ponticelli (Naples), Lotto O, Masterplan. Source: Urbanistica Informazioni, Quaderni 1/82.

The reality is that, at least at the moment, most of us will continue living in our cities and suburbs. Before the pandemic, a Neapolitan research group coordinated by Prof. Laura Lieto had begun to work on the eastern periphery of Naples within the Hera European Project, entitled PUSH, *Public Space in European Social Housing*². In particular, the object of the research conducted in the University of Naples Federico II is the “Lotto O”³, a set of buildings built as part of the PSER, extraordinary residential building program, at the end of the 1980s. The research aims to investigate the places of the *publicness* within the neighbourhood. Downstream of the pandemic, the question that echoed in our heads was: does it still make sense to talk about *publicness* in the post-COVID era and, above all, what is *publicness* now?

The “Lotto O” is heir to the idea of “modern” living based on the concept of standard as a guarantor of quality (Le Corbusier 1924) which quickly became a quantity principle. It has some features that makes it interesting in a post-COVID city project point of view. First of all, the geographical position. It is located on the eastern outskirts of Naples, on the slopes of Vesuvius in an area that is still highly agricultural. Secondly, the design system, that is characterized by buildings and open spaces relationships set on correct dimensional criteria. Finally, the flats distribution, in which each stair serves two flats per floor. This structure allows more controlled access to the stairs which is particularly important during the pandemic.

As a consequence of what we said, it might seem that theoretically, suburbs are better suited to face emergency than the historic city. The following considerations are still purely speculative since it is probably still premature to draw conclusions about what has happened. However, from the first inspections carried out and from the news collected during the emergency through social media, the historic city would seem to have proved much more “resilient” than the modern one because in the narrow alleys, made deserted by the pandemic, social and economic practices were activated to support the weakest sections of the population. Therefore, reality has shown us that what really held up during the lock-down were social networks, those of the neighbourhood unit and communities that seem to be



Fig. 2
Napoli, Ponticelli, Lotto O.
Photo by Grazia Pota.

much more typical of the “alley” than of the modern neighbourhood. This answer, which manifests itself in times of emergency, in “times of peace” is built through the creation of a *publicness* made up of “common spaces” in which communities can meet and recognize each other. In the “Lotto O”, as in most of the peripheries of the world, it is difficult to find the places of the *publicness* while the places of the public space are clearly visible. They often correspond with big facilities, almost always not built. The two concepts of *publicness* and public space are not overlapping; referring to the *Commons* concept by Elinor Ostrom, it is possible to argue that the idea of public space is linked to the state ownership while that of *publicness* is linked to “adoption” and the management of space by a group of people held together by bonds of knowledge and unwritten laws. This idea is not new in architecture, it recalls that of “realisable utopias” theorized by Yona Friedman, according to which society is a utopia realised by a group of people who daily manifest their own behaviour joining a common project (Friedman 1947). In order to make it possible, a high communication level between people is necessary, capable of making the project shared. With a certain pre-visionary capacity, before Otterlo’s CIAM, Friedman hypothesized the failure of “global” development models caused by the fact that they are based on communication not built within a community. On the contrary, it moves to a higher level being imposed and managed by groups and authorities outside the community itself.

On an architectural point of view, public space can be designed, *publicness* cannot. We can only create some spatial conditions to make it possible. First of all, the definition of spaces with a human dimension where people can recognize each other and build a structure of relationships. These spaces are usually in antithesis to those provided by the “standards”. The



Fig. 3
Napoli, Historic centre, the “panaro solidale” (supportive basket) during the quarantine.

places of *publicness* need to be colonized by different types of users. It means they need a certain level of programmatic indeterminacy (Mau and Koolhaas 1995), capable of making them work as “open works” (Eco 1962) with respect to the possibilities of use. Many of the main theoretical contributions in this sense can be found in the 1950s and 1960s. The appropriation of space by Alison and Peter Smithson, experimented in the project for the Golden Lane Estate Building, with the “streets in the air” and the concatenation of different sharing degree spaces (Smithson 2001). The studies on “in-between” spaces by Aldo Van Eyck, for their capacity of being neutral and easily colonisable (Venturi 1966; De Silva 2018). The contribution of the critique on the “Mass Housing” by John Habraken who highlights the impropriety of this system compared with practical and creative needs of men who needs to build his own space (Habraken 1961). How is it possible to combine these issues with pandemic restrictions and social distancing? A possible answer is in the definition of “elastic places”. On the one hand, they are designed to facilitate the construction of social networks. On the other hand, they are capable of reacting to emergency equipping themselves for managing people flows and applying safety protocols. Therefore, the design of these spaces concerns a project that we can define as “intermediate” because it crosses all scales, from the urban one to design, and also because it tries to keep two approaches together. On the one hand, it is an open process which begins from a deep observation of all those spaces which are “suspended” between public and private, able to accommodate flexible and unexpected uses and easily colonisable by different types of users. On the other hand, it requires a more scientific approach capable of translating security protocols into spatial structures. A possible approach to the problem should start from identifying some categories of spaces capable of producing *publicness*, due to their characteristics of neutral and intermediate places. A critical redrawing of those spaces should abstract general criteria and parameters which consider, on the one hand, immaterial data able to qualify the space and, on the other hand, quantitative data that reconcile the distancing protocols with the minimum dimensions necessary to increase indeterminacy in terms of use. The redraw could be carried out using the parametric design tools in order to obtain a repertoire of possible strategies which, instead of being crystallized in predetermined forms, are transferable through parameters and criteria capable of proposing a repertoire of possible spatial configurations. Such a research restarts, in content, from “post-modern” contributions of

Team 10. At the same time, it recovers, in the methodology, the systematic approach that characterized the Modern Movement. It is useful to mention the Chermayeff and Alexander work in which the relationship between public and private space is investigated through a systematic approach. The result of their study is a set of criteria and diagrams that act in opposition to the predisposition of forms, typologies and stereotypes in architecture (Chermayeff and Alexander 1963).

It is still early for knowing if and how the pandemic risk will impact on our lifestyle and on our urban paradigms. However, this crisis could represent an opportunity to overcome some long-standing dichotomies in architecture, such as the contrast between modern and “post-modern” thought. Facing the post-COVID city challenge maintaining this double register probably means re-reading disciplinary tradition in order to rethink design ways, methods and tools. These variations should move through an adaptive logic that allows spaces to be experienced as “places” and, at the same time, to react to external forces and, above all, to emergencies.

Notes

¹ Cfr. ECOWEB TOWN n. 19, june 2018. *Dossier: Progetti urbani per le periferie* edited by Maria Pone.

² The European research Push (Public Space in European Social Housing) is part of the HERA research program “Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe 2019-2022”. It is conducted by four European partner universities: The University of Copenhagen in Denmark, The Norwegian University of Life Sciences in Norway, the ETH of Zurich in Switzerland and the “Federico II” University of Naples in Italy.

³ The “Lotto O” covers a total area of 143,000 square meters. It is organized into four sub-areas. Three of them house comb-shaped buildings, while the fourth is occupied by five long buildings. The neighbourhood is designed to house around 3800 people distributed in 1084 apartments of five different sizes, with living space ranging from 45 to 115 square meters. The comb-shaped buildings are organized around C-shaped courtyards, equipped alternately with public squares and parking. The apartments living areas are oriented, as far as possible, towards the squares. The same criteria are used in long buildings. Furthermore, the original project provides a central zone of public facilities.

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Sitography

www.pushhousing.eu (luglio 2020)

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