
Collective and Common spaces

Making City

EURAU'12

ABSTRACT. In the contemporary city, beyond private spaces and public spaces, there is a third kind of spaces that we can define like Urban Commons. This are spaces where community can be involved in building and caring: for examples community garden and social allotments, but also some occupations, and other open (or closed) places where people can meet and work together and in this way they can build friendly ties, and express themselves. In spite this Community Gardens are really open, they can have very specific destination, or involve specific category of citizen. While they are self-built by the people, they are the right answer to the community needs and also they can be the result of a long collective thinking, as the SLURP spaces.

KEYWORDS: urban commons, self building and self expression, citizen participation, care

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1. A third kind of space

For contemporary planning spaces of the city are private or public, intending "private" as somebody's property, and "public" as State's property.

If we pay attention for the use and not only for the property, we can find that there are some public spaces that are used like private (people cannot access and use it) or some private spaces used like public (people can go inside and meet, for example some mall). Beside public and private spaces there is a third kind of space that we can call common. These are places not properly public nor properly private, because they are managed by people that work together to create and take care of the spaces in a collective way, and these spaces are open to other people.

It appears as not sufficient divide spaces in only two categories: we can say that spaces are public or private from different point of view (ownership, openness, who takes decisions, ...).

Because these places are self built and garnished by people, they have most of the characteristics required to answer to the needs of citizens and inhabitants. Notwithstanding common spaces are very important for people's wellbeing, some of them is illegal: sometimes the start of these experiences is an occupation without the permissions of the owner or the municipality: Cellamare notes that people can do positive things for the neighbourhood without the help and sometimes in spite of the municipality (Cellamare, 2012).

2. Community gardens in contemporary cities

Gardens and allotments have always been part of the city: in Middle Ages some Communal Statute compelled citizens to grow allotments, even if they were merchant (Poli, 2000); in the cities there were some empty spaces to be used as gardens, due to the shrinkage as a consequence of a big pestilence plague that infested Europe (Grohman, 2003), and also some spaces were used a grasslands (Rao, 2008).

Empty spaces for gardening existed in the cities still in Modern Ages: in the Nolli map of Rome (1784), you can find many villas gardens and allotments, even inside the city walls. One of this spaces is named *Prati del popolo di Roma* (Roman People Gardens), that was used by people to celebrate fest, to stay open air, to pick wild edible and aromatics herbs, and as grassland. We know that this space existed since Middle Ages, and you can still find it in every map of the city until the first general city plan (1873) that decided an industrial development in this area (Insolera, 1981). Now a part of the *Prati* are occupied by buildings and other part host the non-Catholics cemetery.

In Industrial Ages allotments were given by municipalities or charity association to industrial worker and to the poorest part of the population, as help to ensure good food for all the inhabitants and employ everyone (as the work was considered a way to ensure civic education). (Pasquali, 2008).

Urban allotments were also growth in the ages of the two World War (in USA they were called Victory Gardens) (ivi).

In contemporary ages normally municipalities give allotments to retired people for a few years, for growing plants. In some cities (London, New York, Paris)

municipalities give some urban gardens to associations of citizens who want care for these spaces. In some cases, as happened in Detroit or Youngstown, urban gardens represented a solution for a very big crisis (Coppola, 2012). In some cases these gardens occupy wastelands or abandoned places and let people know the strategic value of empty spaces (Lynch, 1990).

3. Community Gardens in Roma

The city of Rome had a very rapid and disorderly growth especially after the Second World War, thus there are a lot of wasteland or places without use, as they are hidden, or vacant. These places are often dangerous because they become dumping, or meeting points for robbers or places for other criminal activities. People don't like those spaces because of the dangerousness or the dirtiness.

A lot of active citizens in Rome decided to work together for growing and taking care of such spaces and for creating community gardens. Around hundred different experiences of groups that manage and take care of vacant lots now exist in Rome, and the number is increasing.

Here are presented four cases in the city of Roma, that are very different because they were made with different objectives: the first one were conquered and garnished by a group of neighbours to have a place where meet each other; the second one is a collective allotment that is grown by a group of unemployed people to fight against the joblessness and the isolation; the third one is an allotment made to defend a green area from property speculation; the fourth ones are spaces created by groups of activists at the same time to give a new sense to playgrounds and to reconquest a part of the right to the city.

3.1 A space made for meeting: the *Terreno* of Mandrione and Casilina Vecchia Committee

This little garden is located in the south east of Roma and is managed by the people of the Casilina Vecchia – Mandrione Committee. It was created to have a place where neighbours can meet and stay together.

Mandrione Street and Casilina Vecchia Street are two little streets between the railway to Napoli and the Felice aqueduct (built in Ancient Roman time). Going for a walk here around give the feeling of walking in a corridor because there are only three crossroads (and the streets are 4,5 km long) and because there are no place where you can stop and stay: in the side there are only cars parked without a footpath, so walking is quite difficult, even if the aqueduct is a very pleasant view.

In this situation one of the first need for the neighbours was to have a place to stay together. So, after a long bureaucratic battle, they conquered the permission to stay and manage this garden, called *Terreno* by them.

The space is daily cleaned by the people of Committee, that grow plants and trees to sit in the shade and they have garnished the *Terreno* with some tables, seats, a great barbecue and a little swing for children. Some ashtrays are available and should be utilized. To leave the place clean is the only request to access. Everyone can come here and use everything is inside the garden, also pick the fruits of the trees (the ones you can eat inside the garden without bringing them home). This is a place that people define "Se magna se non piove" (rain is the only thing that can keep you away from here).



In the last year there were some conflicts about the uses of the *Terreno* because here came some young people to have parties. At the begin there was no problems and here people celebrated birthday, university degrees, and so on. Problems began when some of these young people destroyed some tables using them for burning in the barbecue, leaved the space dirty with empty bottles and other waste, and made too many noise. For these reasons, now it is not allowed to stay here freely in the night, but some groups of people stayed here after an agreement with the committee.

The members of the committee are very proud of the *Terreno*. They know that this is a very pleasant place because people come here from other part of the city. Curiously, even if it is in the centre of the neighbourhood, this is the place where the inhabitants meet people from other parts of Roma. (Giangrande, Goni Mazzitelli, 2011).

3.2 A space made for fight against joblessness: EutOrto

EutOrto is an allotment sited in the area of the Agricultural Institute of Roma, in the south of the city. The space is managed by a group of 20 unemployed people, which worked in an information technology company, named Eutelia.

Naturally it was very hard for these people to learn how to grow plants and change their information job to a manual one; but also it is very valuable for them to have a place where they can stay together and continue to work. They are also experimenting a different way of life, based on self-organization and self-production.



The first choice of the group was to grow together the ground, to let everybody do every job (cultivate, go to market to sale vegetables, write the blog and work for public relation), but it was too difficult. So now they decide to divide the ground in individual parts.

They work with organic cultivation and they have a little production so, even if they were contacted by Solidarity Purchasing Groups (groups of organised consumers with solidarity purposes), they can sale their products only in little market or to people that directly goes to the ground and directly pick vegetables (like french "*cueillette*").

People of EutOrto networks with other groups of people growing gardens in Roma and in Italia. In that way they don't suffer for the isolation connected with the joblessness. The space is very well known all over town and people are involved in many events (for example in june here came Vandana Shiva, when she came in Roma).

3.3 A space against property speculation: the Orti di Garbatella

Garbatella Garden are located in a lot of 4.500 squared meters near the building of Lazio Regional offices. The area has been empty for many years. As designed in City Plan this area is a public park, but nothing was done accordingly in the last 15 years.

The lot is in the side of a very big road with a lot of traffic and noise and could be a green barrier among the houses of Garbatella and the pollution of the road.

In these 15 years of battle to defend the green area from property speculation and waiting for the park, the associations and the inhabitants have seen in the area a circus, a car dealer open air, a dump of rubble, and so on. All these activities damaged the ground and left a soil of broken asphalt where it's impossible to grow anything.



The need of a green area was so strong that some associations decided to put there some allotments. They choose this destination because of the continuous presence of the gardeners and because of the wishes of some inhabitants that knew experiences in other European capitals. It was also because in the neighbourhood live many aged people over sixty years old that frequently have the wish to grow a garden: in Italy most of retired people cultivate an allotment, or are waiting for one. Moreover for younger people and families the garden could be a little income, which is important as there are some unoccupied persons. Naturally, because of the management of local associations and neighbours, rules for the assignation and the maintenance of the garden are less bureaucratic than the ones of the municipality.

Because of the gravel and the asphalt initially there was no chance to grow in the area, so the association "Orti di Garbatella" had to dig some "pool" of 40 squared meters and fill them with fertile soil. Initial pools were 15 and were assigned to individuals and little groups and families according to their being retired, unoccupied, or of their contribution in the project. Gardeners are very different among each other: they are young anarchist, family, squatters and old people.

The gardens are enclosed only to avoid the dog entrance, but the door is always open and you can have a walk whenever you want. The gardens exist from three years and nobody took away tools or fruit without asking. In growing together people share some tools and some fruit: the main rule is "everyone grow, everyone eat" as the main objectives are to defend the green in this area and to create a meeting point for people to socialize.

A part of the area is dedicated to establishing relationships: there is a table with chairs for meeting and common dinners, a place where children can stay together and play, and they made an handmade a scarecrow.

In another part they created a Japanese – style garden, which is the second biggest in Rome (the first one is in the Japanese embassy). Every week an expert teaches to everybody who wants to attend how to create and care a real zen garden.

For the success of the initiative "Orti della Garbatella" decided to increase the number of the allotments and now they are digging 10 other ground pool. One of them will be a didactic garden.

3.4 A different kind of playground: the SLURP spaces

These spaces are made by groups of activists to react to the extreme standardisation of urban playgrounds. Actually in Italian city it is not permitted to play everywhere: one example is the city of Firenze where a few years ago the municipality forbade to play football or other games, or to play guitar, or sit in the ground or on the steps of the churches, especially in the city centre, or in other touristic parts of the city. Most of the places where is allowed to play in Italian cities are little, fenced and designed and garnished only for security, so there are only few games that children can play there. So they cannot use the some of the most important parts of playing activities: handling natural elements (water, ground), self-building, having adventures, risks, and this way to discover and to learn many things. Also the places reserved for the games of adults are very trivialized.

In May some groups of urban activists from different cities met each other in Firenze to reflect together about playgrounds and to propose some solutions to make people able to reconquest the Right to Play as part of the Right to the City (Lefebvre, 1968). In this meeting activists decided that the 6th of every month they will create a SLURP. The acronym means Urban Playground with Shared Responsibility (in Italian Spazi Ludici Urbani a Responsabilità Partecipata): places furnished for let everyone free to play.

The June 6th happened the first coordinated action of the Slurptruppen and in seven Italian cities were created nine SLURPs. Some examples: in Firenze there were organized three different kind of games (Very Wet Games, Very Dirty Games and Cartonville), in Naples some Crosswords (with the pen) appeared at the bus stops, in Bari some rebus were stuck in the city centre, and so on (for other examples see BELINGARDI, PECORIELLO, 2012). In Roma were created two SLURPs, one of them is a collective artistic installation in a community garden made with recycled materials, the other one is a little football ground that the association CantieriComuni realized in a pedestrians street in the city centre. (Fig 4). This ground was made by night, because they didn't ask a permission, but it was to keep their promise: a few years ago they did a participation project about Rione Monti (the neighbourhood where the SLURP is in) with children and kids living there. Children said that there were not enough playgrounds there around and no place to do it free (it's a very touristic place, with narrow streets and many caffè). Finally they asked to the Municipality for a little football pitch in via Frangipane, but nothing was done. Thanks to this "Slurptruppen attack" now the football ground is done.



4. Characteristics of self-built common spaces. Relevance of self-built spaces for a liveable city.

Self-built spaces can have many different aims: in this paper there are presented four different kind of space (a community garden, two allotments and a playground), with four different objectives (having a place for meeting, fighting against joblessness and isolation, reconquering a part of the right to the city). Only in the city of Roma there are around hundred of these places and we can individuate also other aims for building, like to have space to with dogs, or playground specific for children under the age of eight, or to promote organic cultivations, to care autistic people, or alzheimer, and so on.

Generally common spaces are characterized by an high level of social responsibility, because they are open, shared and they promote the Right to the City, intended like the possibility to handle not only private spaces that people owns, but also public ones.

The rules for using and managing common spaces are constantly discussed and modified. This way people can exercise their political skills, like decision making, listening, conflict solving.

We can call these places common places or "public spaces from the bottom", comparing them with the "public policies from the bottom" as they were theorized and described by Giancarlo Paba in the book *Corpi urbani* (Paba, 2010): these are cooperative and horizontals actions that people do to help themselves or other people. Some common aspects between policy and spaces are:

- both are made with the aim of solving very important problems (for people or for the city);
- both include the addressees into the practice (people are involved in building or take care of a place);
- both are made in the right way to solve specific problems, adhering to the people, to the body, to the contexts, and so on;
- both give relevance to the interactive part of the processes, producing relationships by relationships;
- both improve the knowledges of people involved in, building and modifying informations by the way;
- both reach different goals, which are linked together, or link one another different goals;
- both are sensitive to the differences, based on the differences between urban populations;
- both are based on circularity and freeness of actions;
- both are defined case by case: are single, appropriate for a specific situation;
- both are spread by dissemination, imitation, adaptation;
- both are characterized by attention on how do, exceeding the opposition between the substantive and procedural.

We can say that always existed in the city spaces of freedom, that people can use as they want and where they can express themselves. Making city as inhabitants wish is an important part of the Right to the City, so common or empty spaces are necessary for a good and liveable city.

5. legends

Fig. 1: the Terreno in via Casilina Vecchia (Roma)

Fig. 2: EutOrto (Roma)

Fig. 3: Orti Garbatella (Roma)

Fig. 4: the SLURP in via Frangipane (Roma)

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12. Biography

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Her PhD research is about Urban Commons. Her main research interests are: active citizenship, citizen participation, right to the city, active urbanism.