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The Relational Space: Designing New Urban Hinges in Suspended Edge Places

Abstract

The research on tentative strategies for designing spaces which reveal themselves as relational, choral, shared, participated, gains new meanings and renovated urgencies under the changing conditions of contemporary architectures, landscapes and cities. Object of inquiry is the complex whole of transitional spaces, intermediate places, suspended fragments hovering among different morphological, historical, social contexts, expressing unexplored potentialities as new urban hinges. These mediated joint-spaces – acting as relational devices – provide the opportunity to reflect on the overcoming of the traditional theme of public urban space. Therefore the sustained hypothesis resides in the turning of the idea of "relation" from a conceptual device – for the interpretation of space quality – into a strategic tool with multiple methodological values, whose implications may be investigated through the concrete experience of the project.

Keywords: Relational Space; Architecture of Connections; Superimposition of Levels; Urban Hinges; Edge-Places; Strategic Devices.

Relationality as a Strategic Device for the Design of Public Spaces

“For the future to be open, space must be open too” (Massey, 2005, p.12).

In the contemporary city, we are now increasingly witnessing the emergence of a new urban and architectural condition, in which the concept of “relational space” can describe the overlapping of a multiplicity of material and immaterial spatial regimes, defining the existing tissues. The main assumption of the study thus lies in the possibility to turn the concept of “relation” from a theoretical principle for the re-reading of current situations into a concrete strategic direction of intervention for the contemporary project into the existing city, act at transforming the static view of public space into a more dynamic device, by taking into account a broad whole of networking, interweaving, connectivity issues.

According to this relational perspective, the “unstable” balance between modification and permanence – deriving from a complex set of political, economical and social changes belonging to the present age of crisis and metamorphosis – seems to require a new lexicon, together with a new series of spatial strategies and devices. Thus, the interweaving between the need for a new epistemological attitude – combined with new tactical directions for architectural and urban interventions – provides the opportunity to configure a new methodological approach, able to deal with the contemporary needs for different cultural and spatial implications. Several years ago, Bernardo Secchi – foreseeing this condition – claimed: “Nowadays, the issue is to give meaning and future to the city, the territory, the existing materials through continuous modifications, which implies a modification of our design method” (Secchi, 1984, p.12). The failure of the old “prevailing orders” and previous formal models allowed thus constitute the basis for seeking a reinterpretation of the space itself as a more intricate element than what it was meant before. Traditional objects and spatial forms seem not suitable anymore for being understood as autonomous, requiring the overcoming of the mere idea of compositional arrangement, by virtue of a closer and deeper attention to the interrelations among things in space. These entwines involve a multiplicity of disciplinary fields in the definition of public space, dealing both with the physical and concrete organization of the matter of places and the effects that the multiple spatial settings may trigger, under several aspects.

Yet, the concept of “relationality” – applied to architectures and urban places – does not mean the loss of concrete spatial structures to the advantage of global media-architectures for cyber-spaces. Conversely, in the age of digitization, which is increasingly involving also the dimension of public space – for example, through the

proliferation of telematic squares, aimed at multiplying the level of connections by crossing geographical barriers – an inquiry about the relational character of places can constitute a process leading to the revaluation of the concrete and tangible dimension of space. According to this interpretation, particular value is gained by the representative spaces of the city as a fundamental part of the collective imaginary in which users identify and recognize themselves by virtue of their belonging to a specific place with its own specific history, architectural characters and urban relations. In this perspective, an integrated design methodology – oriented at interpreting the project's process as an occasion for the experimentation of tentative assumptions – may configure a further level of relationality, meant as the potential connection between design and research, the construction of spaces and the theoretical apparatus supporting them or deriving from them.

In the proposed approach, the reading of the fundamental aspects of a site, the understanding of the complexity of superimpositions and interweavings among the multiple forms and uses of public spaces, the survey carried out through any residual traces, the ratio between the original plant and the changes it has undergone over time, provide some supporting strategic objectives. The interpretation of “design as knowledge” entrusts the project itself with the role of a device for the recognition of physical changes experienced by a particular place or structure, with the peculiar aim of discerning between the transformations resulted in the loss of identity of collective locations, and the modifications that are useful to understand the reasons for a need to update and revise public urban spaces, according to the needs which change over time.

The concept of “relation” can be thus construed according to several interpretative levels: as a physical interaction within the strata of the city, meant as layers superimposed or placed below the existing tissues; as a hybrid dimension among the different functions – sometimes even in conflict – which encounter and collide in a common space; as the delicate dialectical balance between the overall framework – defined by the project – and its capacity to be effectively “projective”, by forecasting wide margins of flexibility in order to adapt itself to the dynamic – and often unstable – necessities and wills of its various users, during the whole life-cycle of the designed space. The “ambiguous” condition of public space may thus find in the idea of relationality the intermediate dimension of the complex spatial dichotomy – typical of the contemporaneity – between physical space and media, so as “relational space, names the ambivalent spatial configuration which emerges as the taken-for-granted nature of social space, is withdrawn in favor of the active constitution of heterogeneous spatial connections linking the intimate and the global” (McQuire,

2008, p.IX).

Hence the proposal of inquiring the design of a strategic contemporary "square" in a medieval city centre in Southern Italy (Fig.1), as an emblematic and paradigmatic case in the elaboration of a tentative, experimental, design-based research.

Through a description of a competition proposal for the "Redevelopment of San Francesco Square in Cava de' Tirreni", the study aims at investigating the "processes of inquiry" in the architectural practice. According to this purpose, the peculiar design work selected may structure an occasion to build a new experimental methodology in the definition of innovative forms of public spaces, through the concept of "research by design".



FIG.1 Project for the International Competition for the Redevelopment of San Francesco Square in Cava de' Tirreni, awarded with the third prize. Original designs and drawings by the author and the design team: Pasquale Miano (team leader), Eugenio Certosino, Giorgia Aquilar, Laura Chirichella.

The International Competition for the rehabilitation of San Francesco Square – announced in 2013 by the City Council of Cava de' Tirreni, in the province of Salerno – provides an interesting occasion to reason on the themes of relationality in architecture, in design terms.

The medieval square is identified as a potential relational space for a complex whole of characters and features, firstly due to its strategic position. In fact, the space of the square – dominated by the presence of the ancient sanctuary of San Francesco – appears both marginal and central at the same time. The relevance of the historical architectures which define the borders of the wide open space, and the importance of the urban relation which characterize it, configure the square as one of the most significant and emblematic places in Cava de' Tirreni. At the same time, the peculiar

urban conditions make of this unusual kind of the traditional type of Italian "piazza" a paradigmatic case of the multiplicity of potentialities hidden in a public open space placed on the edge of an historic city, where the apparently marginal position may give it a strategic role in relation to the diversified urban portions which lap its borders. The "piazza" may thus be reinterpreted as a potential "hinge" of connection between the historic city core - characterized by the ancient tissue of Borgo Scacciaventi in the east and the Hospital of St. Mary the Crowned of the Elm in the west - and the peripheral area around it, where rural settlements and recent urban expansions spread in a wider territory.

In the present conditions, the value of the square as a place for interrelations and connections - from the perspective of uses and usability - appears totally denied, but the broad esplanade, surrounded by representative architectures of religious and civil value, offers itself as a malleable space, despite of the unavoidable necessity to preserve and enhance its traditional role of huge churchyard in relation to the ancient Sanctuary of San Francesco dominating the overall setting. The role of the historic church thus represents a strong constraint but at the same time the main source of architectural, social and traditional identity in its ability to activate a profound sense of belonging in the community which inhabits those spaces.

These "relational" aspects - inherent in the traditional events which use to have place in the square in forms of folkloristic parades and historic performances - result to be in conflict with the current organization of the space, which seems to be split in two malfunctioning parts, as the whole space is mainly occupied by an abandoned and faulty maintained garden in the west, and a messy and chaotic parking lot in the east. The existing arrangement of the square - which therefore appears as a wide expanse of open air parking - contradicts its own originating identity, clashing in the daily management of the area between the requirements relating to traffic and the coexistence of the temporary events which undoubtedly need of adequate space, able to be flexible to the alternation of different uses but at the same time to provide a stable basic structure.

The project proposal has therefore been set taking into account a variety of aspects dealing with historical features, territorial position, relations to the urban fringe, connections with a broader system of open spaces, perspective views at different scales, morphological articulations of the site. The starting point of the design is the choice of working to build a relational urban project, recognizable and stand-alone although limited and focused on a specific area, able to modify the existing urban relations, to affect on the global organization of Cava de' Tirreni, by recalibrating the involved urban "weights" and defining a new balance between the historic and new

parts. In order to fulfill a methodological reasoning, the emblematic value of the project proposal for San Francesco Square (Fig.2) is also linked to the opportunity to face one of the most difficult and important issues of the European architectural culture in an updated manner: the relation between tradition and innovation, conservation of the existing structures and recognition of the new contemporary parts.

The consolidated elements of identity of the space of the square – the surrounding gardens, the urban fronts which follow the historic trace of Borgo Scacciaventi, the Sanctuary of San Francesco, the complex of St. Mary of the Elm - have formed over a long period of time. These elements have remained unchanged in their role and essential characters, but the configuration of the open space has never been stable: historical photographs and maps – together with some design drawings – testify those different stages of the square setting.



FIG.2 Project for San Francesco Square. Planimetric configuration and elevation toward the Sanctuary.

Exactly from those historical features of identity and recognizability many indications

for the project have been drawn, as firstly the simplicity of the square meant as a "plane" in front of the Sanctuary of San Francesco, considered as a "massive churchyard". Further basic design choices relate directly to the aim of providing adequate answers and solutions to the requirements of the brief – in terms of innovation – in order to constitute a real contribution of research and experimentation through the project itself.

In reference to the call for projects, the announcement clearly reveals the main objective of the proposed intervention, identifying the square as a theatrical scene for public events and exhibitions. According to that purpose, the tender mainly required to work on a basement car parking, to be placed below the square, apt at ensuring a reorganization of the road system, allowing the prosecution of liturgical and social activities on the freed space above. The announcement text also identifies additional issues of deepening, mainly relating to the enhancement of the green areas, the accessibility to the square by all kinds of users, the use of natural and environmentally friendly materials, and the search for solutions for the traffic surrounding the area of intervention. Taking into account these dispositions, a design strategy has been developed with the aim of overcoming the single provisions relating to the individual issues to be addressed, by interpreting the many themes in terms of relationality.

In regard to the main double objective of "parking underneath and square above", together with the four further points highlighted by the announcement, the main strategic actions structuring the project can be briefly described.

Starting from the square itself, the vocation of that space to fulfill the role of aggregation node – tied to the religious functions of the Sanctuary as well as the cultural events of different nature – can be confirmed through an investigation in the historical iconography and cartography, depicting the "piazza" during the performance of traditional manifestations with folkloristic and choreographic character, which currently continue to unfold in the square. Entrusting San Francesco Square with the pivotal role of hinge-space – both from relational and spatial perspectives – the parts that interact in the overall arrangement have been identified as a concentric organization, which takes the space of the square as the center of a system that branches towards the old town, also becoming more easily accessible thanks to a required reorganization of the traffic.

The "square-plane" is thus meant as an open air theatre, where the civil and religious urban fronts – surrounding the square – hold the role of a "scene", and the horizontal surface of the plan gains the meaning of a "stage" for ordinary shared life and extraordinary performances, as the multiple and diversified events belonging to the

ancient tradition of Cava de' Tirreni. Overall, the square is meant as a plane central space, with a structured and controlled system of angled spaces which develop around it, characterized by changes in the direction of arrangement and able to establish new urban relations with the different elements positioned on the edge of the project area. At the urban scale, the square is also seen as part of a new system of connections, a space which aims at being static and dynamic at the same time, able to relate with the main architectural elements of the site, with the landscape and its landmarks, firstly the Sanctuary of San Francesco with its raised level, but also the Castle, the "Cross" of Cava, the hills and valleys that surround the historic city.

In relation to the design of the parking, the project aims at overturning the relation between the square and underground level in an innovative way, by breaking the rigid separation in some measure. The objective of creating an underground parking (Fig.3) – perfectly to norm of law, with a higher number of places-car than the current one, easily accessible – is therefore combined with the introduction of a set of in-between spaces, exactly configured as a relational filter – made by closed, open and intermediate spaces – but also as an essential service to the community, through the introduction of a multi-purpose hall, a museum on the history of the site, a flexible venue for young, a place for the reception and some workshops.

As for the valorization of the "green", the presence of the gardens is reinterpreted as a chance to work on a further kind of intermediate space, a natural filter between the rural area which extends to the west and the "stone plaza", also aiming at reconnecting the northern and southern portions of the outer park. In the specific area of the square, the integration of the existing trees into a new overall design – that "accommodates" also the historic fountain currently placed at the center of the square – defines a new system of green spaces organized as a kind of "park" through eight distinct gardens, symbolically referred to the eight "contradas" (namely the historic districts), constituting the identity of Cava de' Tirreni.

About the "widened accessibility", the overall design of the space has been elaborated by entrusting the connecting elements between the various heights in elevation of the interconnected square units – walkways, ramps, inclined planes – with the role of buffering zone between the lower level of the street that links the square to the historic city and the raised level of the small high ground on which the church and the plane of the square stand. The main goal of this design action is thus to draw a system of ramps which may be easily crossed by every user, at the same time able to determine new sorts of continuities, defining an articulated path which runs along the raised edge of the square and spread into the alleys of the park, as an open

system act at being further widened in the future.



FIG.3 Project for San Francisco Square. Plan of the underground level, sections along the in-between spaces (above) and the parking (below).

In relation to the choices of the materials, experimental solutions for the integration between traditional historic patterns and contemporary elements have been tested, in order to clearly express the belonging of the new parts to a different age, while seeking strong relation and respect with the preexistences. A careful design study of the pavings, seatings, multiple elements of installation and detailed systems of lighting – also referred to the local constructive tradition – has been carried out to facilitate the unitary character of the spaces.

Finally, on the issues of traffic and the relations with broader urban surroundings, the project sought to answer with a reorganization of the road system, also through a new mechanism of entrance to the site, which may allow the pedestrianization of the street that comes from the ancient core – lapping the lower edge of the square – so as to assign to the space of the apparently marginal square as much value as the oldest historical parts, turning the vehicular circulation outside the site also through the completion of some interrupted road sections.

A complex urban project thus has been drawn – held on this overall track described above – founding the basis for the expected methodological turn, in the assumption of working with the relational interaction among physical and conceptual “strata”, understood in a broad sense. The schematization of the intricate articulation of

involved aspects through two triads of “levels” – despite the unavoidable limits of an abstract action – means at clarifying the interweaving between the “conceived” dimension of relationality as a “projectable” datum and its “experienced” – or perceived – character, affecting multiple interpretative levels.

Three Levels of Conceived Relationality: Superimposition of Strata, Hybridization of Uses, Dynamization of Structures

“I think we are still stuck with this idea of the street and the plaza as a public domain. I don’t want to respond in clichés, but with television and the media and a whole series of other investigations, you could say that the public domain is lost. But you could also say that it’s now so pervasive it does not need physical articulation any more. I think the truth is somewhere in between” (Koolhaas, 1996, p.45).

The conceived aspects of relationality – inherent within the “projective” dimension of the design process – directly deal with the spatiality of places, the physical matter of spaces and architectures, both in the reading of what already exists and in its manipulation through the introduction of the “new”. In the dynamics of “conception” of a project – which aims at acting as a relational device – the interweaving between the different involved levels means to work “with the thickness” of the city, “inside the depth” of its tissues. This aspect leads to emphasize the section as the main tool for both the conception and representation of the “depth” as a design quality, the most suitable instrument to draw up and explain the simultaneity and coexistence of the events which occur within the stacked levels of a building, or among the layers of an archaeological ground, or again over and underneath the public space of a square, as in the case-study of San Francesco Square.

The first issue deals with the idea of “superimposition of strata”, meant as a sort of “archaeological” reading applied to the contemporary stratified city in design terms. That analogy leads to the interpretation of the present building tissues and urban structures like the result of stacking and layering processes (Maas, 2003) among the physical tiers, thus the “new” can be construed as the “top” stratum. This potential ultimate level of the city can establish a strong set of relations with the “older” layers which lie underneath itself. In the example of Cava de’ Tirreni, that last level – intended in temporally terms – does not coincide with the portion that is located at the higher position in elevation, allowing to trigger further mechanisms of architectural addition which act as grafts, infills, underground extensions, so that the space results to be relational also because of its “topological” character.

In the peculiar case of San Francesco Square, this concept appears clearly defined. The starting point of the competition's call provides the basis for thinking through superimposed strata, as the tender explicitly requires the manipulation of the artificial "hill" on which the square itself stands (Fig.4), in order to move the existing parking lot – which is currently arranged in open air at the foot of the Sanctuary – underneath. This transformation, made possible by the complex system of levels in elevation which characterize this portion of the city, becomes the main vehicle to trigger a new dynamics among the low level of the ancient Hospital in the west – which marks the new entrance to the gardens of the square – the high level of the plane on which the Sanctuary lies in the center, and the intermediate level of the access road to the historic city core in the east.



FIG.4 Project for San Francesco Square. West section along the overlapped levels of the public space.

The project proposal has thus been conceived as a unique wide esplanade – mainly flat, in order to enhance the development of public performances – whose margins seem to break into light slopes which concretely act as theatre glaciers. This spatial choice follows a double aim. On the one hand, the slopes facilitate the view towards the façade of the Sanctuary, which becomes the real perspective backdrop by exploiting the upper level in elevation of the church parvis as a stage platform. On the other hand, through the progressive changes in height – reached thanks to the different inclinations of the slopes themselves – it is possible to introduce a set of new functions underneath the raised segments of the “square-plan”. The result is a depth-space – meant as an overlapping of strata – able to shed light on the spatial potentiality of ground ripples, foldings, slippings, altitude changes (Viganò, 1999). Meant as an overlapping of changing stratifications, the relational space reveals its inherent character as a palimpsest able to highlight the hidden, lost or battered traces of history, “preserved, deleted and re-written, keeping track of what was there and revealing new signs, in a completely different light” (Bocchi, 2011, p.54). According to this schematization – which may be useful for the purposes of a concise reasoning on complex issues – a second concept to be mentioned is the “hybridization

of uses". This specific aspect of the general matter requires a further explanation, in order to clarify the sense of talking of "conceived" relationality while talking about users.

This case relates to the "projective" character of the design work – and thus defined as "conceived" in its "manslaughter" features – since the project should be able to manage the coexistence of users and functions, but at the same time it must leave some fundamental "degrees of freedom" for future needs. As a consequence of the superimposition of strata and functions – overlapped into a unique space – an innovative type of mixed uses and users may thus become a fundamental character for the rereading of the concept of public space as a place for real and deep relation and connection, meant "as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity (...), always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (Massey, 2005, p.9).

For that purpose, the spatial and geometrical choices described for San Francesco Square have led to the overcoming of the rigid distinction of uses provided by the competition's call, in order to introduce a more dynamic functional program, able to weave – within the space of the square – the protection of the historical value with a contemporary updating attitude. The space underneath the historic Sanctuary has thus been designed as the urban incubator of fluxes and uses – not only cultural and religious – revealing its potential as a "container" for multiple activities: a museum dedicated to the history of the square and the Sanctuary, a series of small workshops which recall the traditional vocation to retail trade which characterizes the ancient streets of the city core, and additional recreational areas with facilities and services that become available to the city users in different times of the day and with flexible uses. In this intervention, a fundamental importance is gained by the intermediate level of the in-between spaces which act as the junction between the high level of the square and the low level of the underground parking (Fig.5): hybrid spaces, open patios, covered small secondary plazas, and a complex system of ramps and stairs constitute a multiple device of tiers act at mediating in the perceptive and physical connection from the street level toward the "raised" square. In fact, in the front elevation towards the Sanctuary, this articulated system of new volumes seems almost completely hidden, since it never overcomes the level of insertion of the church parvis, acting as a large architectural pedestal for the religious complex. As a result, in the proposal for Cava de' Tirreni, the multiplicity of users – simultaneously directed to the manifold coexisting functions – configures a clear exemplification of the possible overcoming, reinterpretation, and sometimes subversion of the boundaries between several traditionally antithetical pairs of adjectives: the designed

intermediate spaces aim at being private and public, closed and open, inner and outer, religious and civil at the same time.

That observation leads to the third raised issue: the “dynamization of structures”: the idea of a fixed project – which rigidly defines the spatial setting – reveals its absolute failure. It thus becomes clear that the project should introduce an overall structure – mainly acting on some design invariants such as the tiers, the system of vertical connections, the introduction of slope surfaces – unavoidably leaving some “degrees of freedom” to the eventual changes, urgencies and directions of the future uses and meanings of the place. The general architectural structure is interpreted according to John Habraken’s theory of “Supports” (Habraken, 1961), since it is meant as a system of relations by virtue of the interaction between the main framework defined by the project – namely the overall “support” – and the internal variable elements, the so-called “infills” which become the instruments to “adjust” some aspects of the design setting for the necessities of the collectivity through almost spontaneous processes of changing, so as constituting the relational “maneuvering spaces”.

In this conception, in the project for Cava de’ Tirreni it is possible to identify some fixed spatial aspects and some “malleable” parts, in which the design process has the role of forecasting tool for future developments.



FIG.5 Project for San Francesco Square. East section along the overlapped levels of the public space.

On the one hand, among the main ineluctable features of a project for a contemporary square it should be surely mentioned the complete and absolute ability to remove each kind of architectural barrier. In many cases, this fundamental objective results hard to achieve, particularly in historical sites and above all in complex morphological situations such as San Francesco Square. This goal has thus become the main guideline to start the setting of the “fixed” part of the project. Like a winding spine which climbs upon the small promontory of the Sanctuary, the ramp has been intended not just as a walkway for people with disabilities, but as the real backbone of the composition. In the development of this path – which continuously

changes its dimensions and character, varying in height, width, internal articulation, configuration of margins – an articulated set of additional spaces can be identified: small aprons as well as wide unexpected gardens, integrate systems for the seating and lighting, and also some ceramic inserts in the ramp paving, introduced to assign each of the eight proposed gardens to the corresponding eight historic land divisions of Cava de' Tirreni, through the representation of the symbolic shields with their divers colors, so as to recall the ancient memory and identity of the medieval city highlighted in a contemporary arrangement.

Three Levels of Experienced Relationality: Choral, Shared, Participated Places

"The protagonist of an urban project is public space, the place where the collective reality of the city is produced. The city is essentially its public space, provided that it is a readable space" (Bohigas, 2002, p.73).

The spatial issues – described as the "conceived" dimension of relationality – can be linked to some peculiar aspects which deal with the perception and experience of a place, meant as the "effects" of design processes aimed at strengthening the connective and even central character of marginal places and border architectures in the contemporary city.

In a tentative assumption, the architecture of marginal places has the capability to make them central, in certain respects. That apparent oxymoronic condition is extremely determinant in the contemporary city, where the condition of isolation, exclusion and sometimes also abandonment often affects places due to their ambiguous position.

The case of San Francesco Square in Cava de' Tirreni represents a clear example of a "suspended" edge-place on the border between the historic centre and recent expansions (Miano, Aquilar and Certosino, 2012), where "the presence of the architectural infrastructure enables the safeguard of the preservation of public space, by imposing a path that embanks blank areas for the socialization which otherwise can be attacked by uncontrolled models of spreading" (Marini, 2010, p.108).

According to this interpretation, the user gains a renewed value, allowing to widen the mere idea of "function", which can be replaced by a broader and more articulated concept of multiplicity of uses and aims of a place. In the construction and reconstruction of public spaces, the concept of multiplicity thus becomes able to overcome the spatial dimension and to involve also the category of the "fourth"

dimension of time and movement: the value of the “experienced relationality” thus stands in its reference to process and kinetics as additional aspects which are able to “shape” the physical matter of architectures and places.

In the case of Cava de’ Tirreni, the designing of passages, junctions and crossings follows the objective to revert the static perception of the denied and motionless public space into a more dynamic interweaving of levels and connections (Fig.6). At the same time, public space is not meant just as a “passage-type” space: those relational devices introduced by the project are combined with the persistence and strengthening of the historically recognized wide and open central “cradle” of the square-plane, an urban incubator which becomes a space of “situated multiplicity”.

As the product of interrelations, space can be perceived and experienced “as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny” (Massey, 2005, p.9). That consideration entrusts the project with additional responsibilities and duties related to the “intelligibility” of a spatial configuration, which should be predicted by the conception, so as to be pursued in the whole life-cycle of a public structure or open space.

Instead of looking at consolidated spaces and architectures, the research turns its main attention to the sites of identity crisis, urban conflict and typological ambiguity, in order to experiment new strategies for the formation of public space. A first inquiry may be related to the following question: is space formed once and for all, or is it the changeable product of changeable patterns of use?

In the aim of focusing the attention also on the experienced aspects of a spatial design settled upon the described approach, some ancestor ideas of the concept of relationality may be found in the adjectives “choral”, “shared”, “participated”, and the influence they have had – and continue to exert – in the architectural discourse.



FIG.6 Project for San Francisco Square. Section along the park as overlapping of public spaces.

The first selected adjective is “choral”, which can help to subvert the traditional interpretation of public space, by pursuing a complex theoretical reasoning. Several

years ago, the idea of chorality – in the adjective form – has been the object of an interesting assumption by Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman (1997), which may be useful in the purposes of this study. In the book “Chora (L) Works” (Derrida and Eisenman, 1997), result of the collaboration between the American architect and the French philosopher, the “L” letter in brackets connects the concept of chorality with the Greek term “chôra”. This passage results to be interesting for the purposes of the present study, since it may constitute a possible junction between the social dimension of the uses of places and the concrete dimension of space. Replacing the Greek term of “tôpos” – commonly used to describe physical space – with the idea of an amorphous and indeterminate space, inherent in the Platonic notion of “chôra”, and then relating this idea to the adjective of “choral”, it is thus possible to involve the narrative character of places into the design process, and to reinterpret their cultural identity devoid of any stable and determinable essence, as the analogical spaces of the happening of phenomena, the geometric form shaped by events.

The second aspect concerns the adjective “shared”. Among the multiple meanings of the increasingly widespread idea of “common ground” in the architectural discourse, the “sharing” dimension can be construed as the concept which allows to understand the idea of “public” as “collective”. In a shared perspective, the concept of “spaces of interaction” leads also to the idea of shared responsibility. Returning to Habraken’s considerations, a “common responsibility” in the production of architectures deals with the complex networks of interaction between space and social life, taking place in the idea of “open building” – or “open square”, paraphrasing his words – which follows the slogan “to inhabit is to design”, in search for experimental forms of balance between freedom and control, chaos and order.

According to the third identified adjective, public space revised is also unavoidably “participated”. In the contemporary conditions, the idea of participatory architecture seems to have lost its utopian connotation so as triggering a complex debate about the active role of the “user” in space. Several years ago, Jane Jacobs foresaw this attitude, describing the conditions of cities made of multiple authors, which “have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody” (Jacobs, 1961, p.238). The presence and active role of the observer-user clearly appears as essential: the participation of people – which “comments” the space – alters the city as an “open work” orchestrated by projects, so as becoming itself a sort of “infrastructure” of projects. The concept of participation – masterfully embodied by the discussions of Giancarlo De Carlo during the Seventies – becomes today the expression of the unavoidable waiver to any totalizing rational control (De Carlo, 1973), introducing a “spontaneous” dimension, a sort of

programmed indeterminacy act at transforming the city through a focus on relational dynamics rather than pre-established rules, in the awareness that the construction of the city – and its public spaces – follows irregular forms of different orders, sometimes even in conflict, whose unpredictability becomes a prospective character of the city itself (Fig.7).

The project of public space – eternally, declaredly and intentionally "unfinished" – is finally configured as a unitary "device", although able to develop itself also "by parts" within a more general implant, revealing its potentialities as a relational system where the "elemental" (Aravena and Iacobelli, 2013) relation between a framework defined by the project and the freedom given to users assumes a concrete form (Harvey, 1973, p.13).



FIG.7 Project for San Francesco Square. Views of relational in-between spaces beneath the square.

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