

“Serpentone Reload” an experience of citizens involvement in regeneration of peripheral urban spaces

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Abstract. Suburbs are often very contradictory places. Despite great part of urban population live there, these parts of cities are mostly considered as degradation places. The topic of suburbs regeneration is relevant today. Nevertheless, often expensive interventions implemented by local authorities fail to regenerate their public spaces. This paper presents the experience of “Serpentone reload”, a workshop based on participatory reactivation of abandoned or underused spaces and buildings in “Cocuzzo/Serpentone” neighbourhood in Potenza (Basilicata, Italy). The workshop particularly focused on the reuse of the “Ship”, an underground building, completed in 2010, never used, because it has been perceived as an extraneous element, the result of an imposition and not the outcome of shared choices. The experience is particularly significant, because it shows how low cost interventions, realized with citizens involvement, could contribute to the regeneration of peripheral urban areas more than expensive and complex imposed interventions.

Keywords: public space, co-creation, public housing neighbourhood, temporary design

1 New planning paradigms “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper”

Small actions to achieve great changes: at glance it can seems a pun, but it contains the key of a new approach to the city. Traditional approaches to planning define rules, parameters and indices, produce choices and great transformations, pursuing the am-

bitious research of permanent and definitive solutions, that most often do not take into account the changing nature and the extreme dynamism of the urban organism.

The scenarios imagined by urban plans in several cases are out-dated before being implemented, mainly because of the rapid changes of the initial conditions and the unpredictable and often innovative uses introduced in the meantime by the inhabitants. Consequently urban landscapes often are full of unfinished or abandoned "relics", unnecessary infrastructure, empty or underused, public spaces without meaning for the community, rural fragments trapped within the urban fabric only by chance, saved by buildings. Massive urban transformations are almost always characterized by significant public investments in interventions, spreading over several years, high soil consumption, scarce involvement of local communities, production of unused urban spaces at the margins of great interventions (the so-called "urbanscrap"), devastation of fragile suburban and rural landscapes. In many cases these "heavy" interventions do not provide significant and lasting improvements to inhabitants life quality.

An alternative way to these interventions, taking into account the poor produced results, is emerging, with increasing success and efficiency; a new approach to urban design based on the following three terms "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" [1] [11] [12] [13] [14].

This approach, based on the need to do less and better, using the few available economic resources in a more effective way, rethinks city starting from its built part.

The movement Everyday Urbanism [3] considers fragility and potential of built city, often hidden, as a strength, in order to give space to "fragments of happy cities that continually take shape and vanish, hidden in the unhappy cities" [2]. Possible and current strategies are then based on reactivation and reuse of fragile and marginal places and abandoned or underutilized buildings, refusing to find permanent solutions. This logic is based on micro-temporary interventions, a sort of "urban acupuncture", or tactical urbanism [5], producing sustainable benefits on the whole urban organism revitalizing parts of forgotten city, encouraging their re-appropriation by inhabitants.

Examples of successful experiences consist of temporary projects characterized by strong innovation and social creativity, related to the world of culture, associations, start-up projects of temporary strong innovation and social creativity, related to the world of culture and associations, start-up of small enterprises and handicrafts, etc.

The temporary reuse has the great advantage of maintaining the process open, ensuring adaptability of the project to urban dynamics changes and different needs and demands that might occur over time. Another important aspect that characterizes new scenarios of contemporary city is an active inhabitants involvement in transforming and managing the urban landscape.

There are a lot of examples of unstructured groups of citizens who undertake voluntary actions in taking care of portions of the city.

The success of such experiences is the evidence of efforts of local communities in improving the current city and in shaping the city of tomorrow.

From a planning point of view, errors made prove that the city must be thought by people who live in it and interventions must be the result of participatory processes,

containing bottom-up instances, avoiding decisions imposed by few people. Shared decisions inevitably have greater strength and a better chance of success.

From the citizen point of view the achievement of participation spaces requires a great effort of responsibility and civic sense towards what is shared.

The road is imagining and building together, a city of space reuse, involvement and sharing, a community as a place for everyone as the result of a common effort.

2 Urban gaps of Potenza Municipality

Considering the issues discussed in the previous section, the city of Potenza could be a laboratory where it is possible experimenting "urban acupuncture" interventions. The most urgent need of this city is to adopt a strategy based on patching urban mosaic, on regenerating urban space and on re-appropriation of urban places.

Thinking about urban mosaic or spaces to be regenerated by adopting a different approach to the city, looking especially to social relations, with the aim of re-imagining the city itself. The choice of the type of city is, therefore, strictly related to the social dimension, the so-called city of individuals, where people biographies, with their social relationships intertwined with the urban space, are relevant and can guide policy making and administration. The imperative that now arises is to design cities having people as a reference, to deal with wishes as well as with needs. In practice, beyond the city itself it is important to consider also "looking and feeling", in other words image and sentiment of a city. When approaching government of a city, it is fundamental to capture its new complementary dimensions, direct expression of the wishes of its inhabitants: actual city, city living, imagined city and dreamed city. The demand of cities, today, increasingly appears not only as the demand for new services or adequate functions or spreading of urban quality, but the demand of everything that can help making the city a unique and irreproducible good [19].

There is the need to produce urban projects based on the growing demand of beauty and attractiveness, able to reflect expectations of inhabitants. The action will be focuses on urban public spaces, real life scene, meeting and social interaction.

The physical dimension of a city is important, but it is equally important its density of social relationships. This aspect has to be understood as the place where processes of cohesion and social exclusion occur, the place of cultural norms regulating behaviour, of identity that is expressed in urban public space. If the city is a field of complex relationships it is also a place of policy and practice of change and transformation construction, based on visible (buildings, spaces and places) institutional and social aspects. The urban political process should be seen as a social construction result of social interactions. Facing and designing urban policy means, therefore, taking into account social problem solving issues, in an effort to find rational and useful solutions to the correlation among inhabitants, city users and spaces. Reinterpreting urban policy in this dimension means to contribute to the reduction of inequalities, to the management of expressed or latent social conflicts, to the building of a sense of community where it is missing or greatly weakened. The urban design for Potenza municipality has to be centred on these reflections, through a massive cognitive and

participatory mobilization [7] [8], able to meet a new right to the city [6], based on the demand of beauty, variety, usability, security, sustainability, etc. The need of an individual and collective welfare is the new paradigm, more complex to satisfy, based more on immaterial aspects than on physical changes of the city. On the other hand, the same right to the city is not confined to individual liberty to access urban resources, but has the right to change us by changing the city. It is a collective right, rather than individual, which inevitably requires the exercise of a common power.

3 The experience of Serpentone Reload

3.1 A ship in a mountain town

"Serpentone Reload" experience, started with a workshop held in September 2014, having the aim to study "Cocuzzo" neighbourhood in Potenza (Basilicata, Italy), is based on previously described principles. In 1998 the Italian Ministry of Public Works published a call, with the aim of low quality suburbs regeneration. The main aim was to improve the quality of neighbourhoods with lack of environmental quality and services, paying particular attention to the recovery of buildings constructed in modern periods and energy efficiency improvements [9].

The Ministry selected and funded forty-six projects. The project submitted by Potenza Municipality, concerning the regeneration of two neighbourhoods, "Poggio Tre Galli" and "Cocuzzo", has been included within this funding [10].

The first neighbourhoods the typical example of a dormitory suburb. The second one is characterized by high complexity in terms of housing with strong social conflicts [17]. In this neighbourhood, despite considerable accessibility problems and an enormous lack of public spaces [15], the hugest housing of the city is located [18]. This building, entirely devoted to social housing, is five hundred meters long and forty meters tall and has a sinuous shape which generated the name "Serpentone", literally big snake. This huge building based on "Unit d'habitation" principles became a symbol of urban decay in a suburban area of the city.

The regeneration project, funded by the ministry in 1998, was based on the following elements:

- lowering of two floors of the building, realizing a multifunctional roof with a heating system;
- accessibility improvement;
- realization of underground parking;
- creation of a huge square.

In the adjacent area of Poggio Tre Galli neighbourhood the construction of new social housing, a parking area and a neighbourhood square was planned.

The whole project was funded for more than 10 million euro by the Ministry, 2 million euro by the local organization of Social Housing management (Azienda Territoriale per l'Edilizia Residenziale, ATER), 625,000 euro by Potenza Municipality and 4,8 million euro by private investors.

However once obtained funding, the project was radically changed.

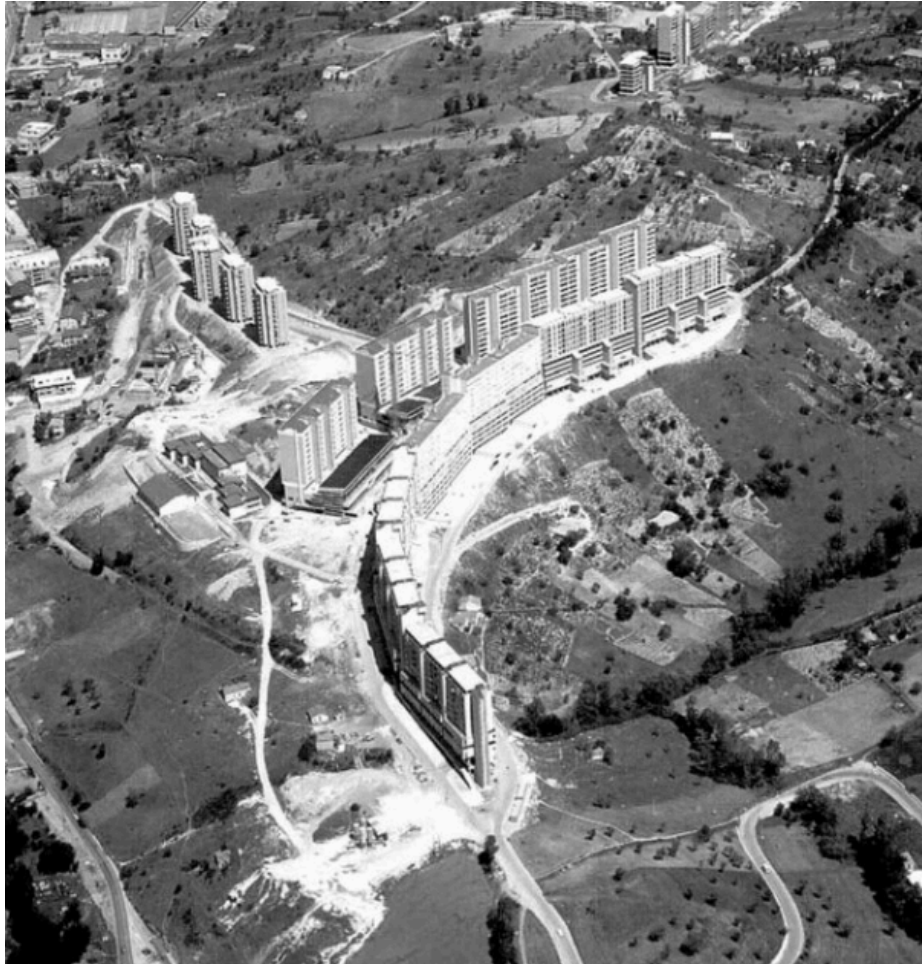


Fig. 1. The "Serpentine" shortly after its completion, when it was disconnected from the central part of Potenza; the subsequent urban development has included the neighbourhood in the urban part of the city.

Enric Miralles was commissioned to work on the design of a large public space in Cocuzzo neighbourhood. Unfortunately after few months a cancer was diagnosed to the architect, which caused his fast death. The project was then assigned to the architect Marco Casamonti. His idea of improving the urban space of Cocuzzo neighbourhood was based on the transformation of Via Tirreno, the only road of the neighbourhood, in a large park. The proposed project considered the strengthening of a road surrounding Serpentine and Serpentino, a building similar to the first with a smaller size and distant few meters from it. In this way the road that separates the two huge buildings could be destined to park [16].

The main idea was to transform Via Tirreno in a green corridor "animated by the presence of rocks" in the lower part of the neighbourhood and a "ship" with huge concrete sails ten meters tall in the upper part.

To date, the ship is the only part of the regeneration project realized. This impressive concrete object, since its creation, is at the centre of a strong controversy. Today the ship, made with significant public investments is basically not used.



Fig. 2. A view of the "ship" from the arcades of "Serpentine"; the ship inhibits correct lighting to the first floors of "Serpentino".

The roof garden is totally abandoned, forgotten both by residents and municipality, which stopped all kind of maintenance. The huge "cargo", the space under the roof garden, was never completed.

The ship, therefore, caused a decline in quality of life for residents, who, as a protest against the municipality administration, unable to collect needs and requirements, have continued their daily life in perfect indifference as if it never existed. It is not uncommon to meet inhabitants declaring proudly that they had never stepped on the roof garden of the Ship.

In this context the workshop "Serpentine Reload" has developed, on September 14-21 2014, with four main objectives: project and participation, strategies, communication, implementation.

Project and participation means designing, through the active involvement of citizens, interventions able to define and characterize areas of aggregation, socialization and interaction within Cocuzzo neighbourhood.

These interventions have always been realized through the actual technical skills of participants, taking into account availability of resources and time.

Strategy means working on identifying initiatives and events designed to encourage sharing of workshop space.

Communication refers to the identification and definition of the best strategies of networking intervention and initiatives related to it.

Realization finally implies how project interventions have to be realized in self-construction by citizens. In this way the sense of belonging to a community becomes stronger. All citizens feel involved in a small and voluntary urban transformation, transmitting enthusiasm and pleasure of taking care of a small and collective garden.

The interior space looks like a construction site, making difficult to image specific uses for it.

The Municipality, despite the important amounts of resources invested in the construction of this huge space, uses it as a deposit. The impact of the ship on the quality of the urban space is bad.

The idea of the park, the metaphor of the ship and the rocks appear distant and elusive. This ship stranded between two large buildings, "Serpentone" and "Serpentino", caused the occurrence of significant problems. Partially obstructing the only way crossing the neighbourhood, compromising accessibility because the interventions of the road annular network have been realized only partially. Furthermore, the impressive body of the concrete ship inhibits correct lighting to the first floors of "Serpentino"

3.2 Story of a method of a territorial re-animation

Serpentone Reload was imagined as a workshop in which participants were at the same time actors of a path specifically created for them and interpreters of the reality submitted to them. It was not a traditional top down participatory process due to the lack of institutions, nor a result of a re-appropriation bottom-up process.

Serpentone Reload was an educational experience with the aim, more than working on space configuration, to suggest several new uses of abandoned or underutilized spaces. The awareness of places potentiality has been promoted, organizing meetings between citizens on one hand and practitioners, students and artists and the other hand.

"Territory is the use made of it" [4]; starting from this definition Cocuzzo neighbourhood could not be analysed or reinterpreted starting from spaces as architectural places, but from the use or non-use that the local community makes of it. Paying attention to everyday practices, the first part of the workshop attempted to define various neighbourhood identities, investigating recognizable practices in the neighbourhood and around it.

A first introduction of the place occurred through a series of urban ethnography tools, identified and tested by coordinators and then proposed to participants, in order to activate knowledge between participants and neighbourhood and to build tools for the analysis of the place and the possible needs expressed by citizens.

Cognitive walks in the neighbourhood have been conceived to explore a portion of everyday neighbourhood activities through clichés and citizens telling. Attention of

participants and their objectives were aimed at identifying actions that consider existing daily practices.

Interviews with experts selected by coordinators on key issues concerning the neighbourhood, tried to investigate not only their personal visions, but have deepened the individual discourses as a synthesis of collective paths.

This sort of anthropological exercise, based on neighbourhood walks, informal meetings, experts interviews, observation forms of place life, has been the starting point of the working week.

Some key elements have been identified and submitted to participants attention: identity, clichés, conflicts, relationship with the ship.

Identity of Cocuzzo neighbourhood is characterized by a negative stigmatization diffuse in the whole city of Potenza, which inevitably is reflected in a negative self-perception by the neighbourhood.

The cliché related to this social representation describes Cocuzzo neighbourhood as a dangerous, degraded, peripheral and inhospitable place. The improvement of neighbourhood connection with the central part of the town changed completely the whole geography of the city.

But what are the "common places" of the neighbourhood in the true sense? Do they exist? Are they used as such or are they abandoned and empty? The ship is one of them, but not used, nor valorised; on the contrary, in the collective imagination of the whole city, is one of the best expressions of neighbourhood degradation. Another key element of the neighbourhood is conflict: social mixing realized in the neighbourhood (Serpentone and Serpentino, social housing, are clearly separate from the other buildings) produced a clear socioeconomic and spatial distinction. All the inhabitants are joined against the ship, which can reconstruct a social fracture catalysing a sort of hate against the intervention.

The negative assessment shared by everyone is not based on its use, but it is the result of a sort of political imposition of an expensive and not understood intervention.

This reaction of strong rejection made the ship invisible, and therefore unusable, for local residents. A form of passive resistance to decision-making approach imposed from the top that, obviously, did not take into account citizenship needs. This passive reaction accentuates the expropriation (or its perception) of public space, already occurred with the ship construction.

These are questions and issues resulting from analyses and surveys before the workshop.

Walking, observing, meet crossing the place were useful in creating a specific knowledge of the place, where each participant was able to compare their own knowledge of the place with the representation provided by neighbourhood inhabitants.

After a walk in the neighbourhood it was asked to each participant to immediately provide a question to motivate his activities within the workshop, immediately establishing what were priorities and interests of each participant. During the workshop they were asked to update this question according to the newly received information.

The methodology of this workshop was based on an analysis of needs defined with the objects of the research and on several measures of territorial re-animation based on local specific skills.

Outputs of the performed analyses were the basis of a common reflection developed in the second part of the workshop, mainly based on project and self-construction activities.

In the case of Serpentone, also temporary interventions, in the construction of small artefacts, that often characterize tactical urbanism approach, appeared to be incongruous and "out of scale". Geometric and symbolic-perceptive aspects have been considered. The first one compare small artefacts to the size of the ship and residential buildings, the second ones analyse in which context these interventions can be useful. In this case small artefacts are suitable only at proximity dimension, without having any impact on relations between the neighbourhood and other parts of the city.

It was therefore considered more useful to address workshop contribution towards forms of activation of ideas and proposals. A path of project-action-event has been activated, more incisive on awareness level than on space configuration and intentionally quite ephemeral.

Due to workshop shortness it would not be possible to build relationships with the residents, able to define a clear and comprehensive idea of shared expectations and projects.

The risk was to catapult in the neighbourhood one more unrequested "object" or "collection of objects", with a great probability to create the same rejection mechanisms that characterized the initial situation. Hence, the desire to work on "almost nothing" in physical terms and instead having a huge production in terms of imagination, open to new places interpretations which would generate persistent transformations in a slowest time. Two actions have been pursued: a concrete and immediate possibility of use the ship and its roof-garden, to build a new shared imagination. In the first case, a game mechanism has been adopted: the game of "It can". Engaging students attending neighbourhood schools, an attempt to reverse the prevailing attitude of complaint and dissatisfaction with the ship has been tried, in order to highlight all possible enjoyable things that it was possible to realize.

The result was a surprising, large and inventive list of opportunities, emerged at first with suspicion, gradually with a lively succession of proposals. Several opportunities have been immediately concretised, animating the park with games and meetings, which have demonstrated with simple and instantaneous concreteness, the possibility to live the ship and its garden, only apparently unfriendly.



Fig. 3. Workshop participants guide students from school to the "ship".



Fig. 4. The Solarium, "space created during the workshop, attracts children and local residents.

Others have produced micro-places, made by workshop participants with the inhabitants, realizing basic gardening activities (selective cuttings of tall grass, pruning

of existing trees and removal of dead ones, planting a precious *Liriodendrum tulipifera*, arranging seasonal flowering plants) and setting up spaces for games (a sandy track for bowls, a mini football, volleyball and basketball fields). The strength of these operations, although so minute, was to evoke a spontaneous mark of names: the Solarium, the Playground, the Ascent, the Well, the Mirador, indicated by signposts on original drawing, immediately become meeting places.



Fig. 5. Few games built by workshop participants were enough to bring the neighbourhood children on the ship.

The second action has been working in the direction of a gradual removal of the suffering neighbourhood stigma. The ship was the emblem of "internal" stigmatization, generated by the same inhabitants. It was necessary then to try to exorcise the negative connotation, using game and irony. The ship appeared stranded. It was necessary to put it into a harbour, able to speak about effervescence, flurry of activity, relationships, coming and going, voices, departures and returns, loves, adventures, explorations. The port was supposed to be the whole neighbourhood, which consequently was imagined such as a swarm of ships and boats, arriving and departing from somewhere. Hence the idea of using a simple object came: the paper boat, too familiar and almost universal. Miniaturizing the ship was a way to tame it, have it friend, make it harmless, through a game. Thus, the cargo became a laborious and joyful place for paper boats production. Around the tables of work, a heterogeneous community of workers has alternated: workshop participants, neighbourhood children and their families, representatives of associations and local authorities.



Fig. 6. In the cargo of the "ship" workshop participants, neighbourhood residents and members of municipality administration building paper boats.



Fig. 7. The small boats invade the roof garden of the "ship", defining paths that lead to the various activities undertaken.

The construction of the small paper boats became a ritual of the community: sitting around the tables, while their hands, more and more skilled, bent the paper, people talked about their stories, showing not only worries and discomforts, but also desires, concrete proposals, expertise to make available. During the workshop days, the cargo has hosted a permanent laboratory of small boats, stimulating, in the "distracted" repetitiveness actions, talks, secrets, stories and variegated forms of hospitality.

If you know how to make a paper boat it takes no more than a minute: with the workforce of participants, inhabitants, students, it has been possible to produce in a week ten thousand small boats with a really collective work.

Thousands of small boats have animated Serpentine "harbor": in rows, more or less ordered, or in groups (as grouped in the race) invaded the garden, braving the strong winds of a September Sunday.

The small boats covered parked cars; simulated flower gardens; marked paths, indicating interesting trajectories to follow in the meadow; sailed in the fountain, where finally the water returned.

A further issue has been added: the ship cargo, a generous space for quantities of certain beauty never used except as improper deposit. At the port inauguration, the ship opened its cargo space and showed its shipment: an instant-exhibition of videos reporting the neighbourhood, realized by workshop participants, and wonderful images by the photographer Salvatore Laurenzana.

The exhibition marked the opening of the art centre N.A.v.E. - New Expressive Adventures (coordinated graphic image within the same workshop has been defined).

4 Results

4.1 "Shape is emptiness and precisely the emptiness is shape"

The challenge of "Serpentine Reload" was to involve neighbourhood residents and to reverse the negative sentiment expressed in general by the city against the ship, which had, not without reason, a national importance for the inconsistency of the project. Hence the idea of the project to build a multidisciplinary path starting a participation process to build active citizenship for continuing the garden maintenance and the spaces below. Between September and November residents have organized a school of gardening for garden maintenance, with weekly appointments of shared work. An annual calendar, on the model of an horticultural calendar, has been produced and distributed among inhabitants, where every month is accompanied by useful recommendations on the activities to be carried out in the garden.

Workshop activities also allowed to focus the attention of the whole town on Cocuzzo neighbourhood. At the same time, inhabitants realize all the potential that a structure such as the ship would have, as a sort of point of interest for the neighbourhood and for the city.

Here, Sariputra, form is emptiness and emptiness is precisely form (Heart Sutra). This Buddhist quote is a good metaphor for the image of the implementation idea. For Buddhism vacuum means the absence of itself, not only from a spatial point of view,

but also from a time point of view: this implies that each element and phenomenon of the internal or external reality, is not only interconnected with the other, but it is also provisional and interconnected with the provisional nature of the other elements and phenomena. It determines a structure that is relative, relational and, at the same time, transitory, impermanent.

In that "empty" context the idea of a space that should not have to tend to a fixity structure, but maintains its performative fluidity was experimented.

Continuing the Buddhist metaphor, the empty "quarry", was intended as figures background that show their contours only through the reciprocal action between them, interaction guaranteed and made possible by the same background. The potential of that "empty" space has been used not only during the workshop, but also as a result, some activities of the City Festival of Hundred Stairs, which deals with dance and performative arts, were made in N.Av.E..



Fig. 8. The ship cargo has become the stage for performances of "City Festival of Hundred Stairs".

The real meaning of this activity was to show some of the potential of N.Av.E and what could be the future: a performative place able to take many forms in relation to the dynamics of participation achieved. Several meetings and seminars have been held to compare this experience to important similar experiences in Italy and Europe. In order to continue the place narration, it was thought the creation of short-time workshops about cinematographic writing to collect the experience of stories made by inhabitants of Serpentine and transpose them into a movies script. A public discussion has been opened and several social or cultural associations, theatrical or musical

groups, requested to help to navigate N.Av.E as a privileged place of their activities serving the neighbourhood and the city.

5 Conclusions

Serpentone Reload laboratory was an innovative experience made available to different involved actors:

- to decision-makers, because it offered the opportunity to experiment inclusive policy processes and has demonstrated the power of regeneration of minute actions, in short times with few resources;
- to participants, young designers that have directly verified the possibilities to build a project that actually has not built any artefact, nothing tangible, measurable and quantifiable, understanding that this way is not a waiver of the project, but on the contrary it is an intentional amplification;
- to inhabitants, who accepted to question their refusing positions and to trust in themselves and their landscapes.

Many projects of public space share the tension to affirm opportunities and destinies in a very wide repertoire of co-creation.

In the same way Serpentone Reload, calls the project to reflect on their responsibilities and their own instruments with a reflection, factual and active, on public participation, often devalued.

Participation is devalued when it is confused with the consensus. When decision makers and designers abdicate their duty of projection of the future assuming roles of mediators that collect and nourish the wish list of their voters or customers. Experiences such as Serpentone Reload show that participating means sharing skills and points of view, finding solutions that are not accomplished but that continually become, taking place through time, modelling itself on the living body of the city.

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