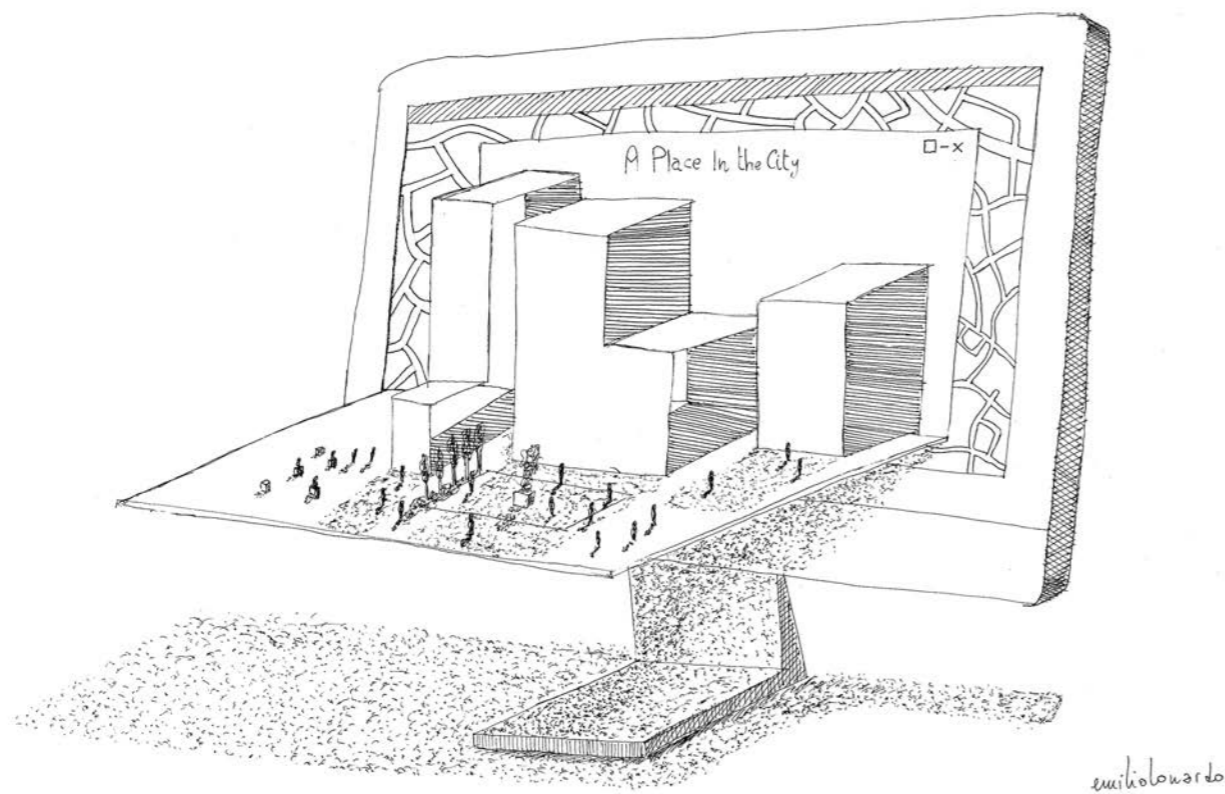


'E-urbanism': Strategies to develop a new urban interior design

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary world, the virtual dimension prevails over the physical one, but some interesting design experiments use social networks and channel their characteristic digital participation into a new urban sensibility, that we could provocatively define as 'e-urbanism'. Marketing strategies like placemaking, place-branding and crowdfunding involve the 'cyber-citizen' and give rise to a multiplicity of 'interior' territories, identified as 'ours'.



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INTRODUCTION

We usually pay little attention to the cities we live in, appreciating only a small percentage of the surrounding landscape and using just some of our five senses – mainly sight and hearing. We find ourselves enraptured by the beauty of some glimpses; alternatively seduced or horrified by contemporary architectures, which are often the result of administrative decisions of those holding powerful positions. Because of these overwhelming sensory inputs, we are nothing but sleepy viewers nervously jumping at the sound of cars' horns and at their relentless speeding up and slowing down. In an increasing number of spaces, moving around is as easy as a click, which considerably increases our space accessibility; we rest in those tiny and impersonal places that we used to call houses, without even realising that the 'spaces we live' actually no longer have walls and furnished floors but rather roads, pathways and surfaces.¹ We no longer have blood ties but de facto relationships based on virtual contacts and fortuitous encounters; we find ourselves swimming in an apnoea where social touch and the pleasure of commitment are drowsy senses, just like the sense of community. We are the inhabitants of contemporary cities.

In such a changeable and variable landscape, we still look for places that could welcome us and make us feel safe, recalling memories or suggesting new imaginative readings. When we explore the urban environment we focus on its various 'interiors', identifying them as familiar spaces because of their creation of a welcoming hospitality that is greater than that of undifferentiated housing. Conceptually speaking, the former can be associated with the definition of 'interiors' just because such open spaces evoke the pleasantness, readability and 'figurability'² of domestic living.

These spaces, still too few in metropolitan contexts, are ontologically similar to participatory experimentation where participation, as a means for putting city and citizens into a closer contact, could foster the designing of highly recognisable spaces marked by an 'aggregation of belongings' that enable them to be regarded as familiar by every individual. Therefore, if we mean by 'urban interiors' strongly recognisable, warm, readable and widely involving places, and we are confident that these places are the effect of participatory experimentation, they could also be regarded as a symbol of postmodern living which, now more than ever thanks to the new-technologies revolution,³ we can explore new ways of urban 'extension' as well as new forms of extroversion, storytelling and collective participation.

Indeed, in such a context, where virtual reality and communication increasingly prevail on physical conditions, some interesting experimental projects engage the participatory tool offered by digital technologies with a new urban sensitivity that makes 'cyber-citizens' become responsible and deeply involved players. It now seems possible to reply to Italian philosopher and politician Massimo Cacciari's philosophical and aesthetic question regarding the paradox of post-metropolitan cities as one of a 'de-territorialising and anti-spatial' destiny: '[I]s post-metropolitan territory the negation of any possible place, or will they "invent" suitable places for their time in which its life will appear

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Figure 1: A place in the 'e-city', 2015. Drawing by Emilio Lonardo.

to be eventually solved?⁴ Recent design scenarios seem to outline a possible answer to such a question: where, according to the traditional meaning of *urban planning*, these are unplanned reticular approaches that often spread around spontaneously. Today's urban planning seems mainly based on micro-initiatives, on 'bottom-up' processes that develop like a map of events and practical connections that in turn become ground for hybrid landscapes.

The result of this is increasingly predictable cities made of episodes which create spaces, and spaces that welcome urban living like theatre settings. We might ironically call this a 'pop-up' urban planning, a self-sustaining and self-dissolving mechanism which uses the web as a privileged 'building' tool. However, although being based on temporary actions and extemporaneous tools, such initiatives often leave indelible marks on cities' physical (and even mind) space: they contribute to structuring new identities and increasingly improve communication potential, quality of perception and usage comfort.

Nowadays, from the virtual, 'social' and communication dimension to the physical one; from the collective to the individual sphere (and vice versa); from 'co-urbanism' to what we might explicitly call 'e-urbanism': public space building processes can be summarised in a few operating macro-categories.

THE FORERUNNERS: FROM PARTICIPATORY PLANNING TO PLACEMAKING

Among the first experimentations aimed at actively involving the citizenry in a renovation of their living spaces, participatory planning still plays a crucial role. Originally, it did not use the web's customary tools, but it probably anticipated some of those dynamics that are now a commonplace – the involvement of many, ease of access, democracy and pervasiveness. Such operations have been a much debated issue especially over the last decade: detractors of participatory planning highlight its need to involve people who sometimes lack adequate design skills and who are not always able to understand the socio-cultural changes occurring today. On the contrary, its advocates maintain the strategy is a fruitful collaboration between administration and citizens, so as to (re)create a supportive and stable relationship with the territory that could not easily be imposed from the top.⁵ One of the first people to discuss participatory design was Patrick Geddes, a Scottish urban planner, biologist and landscape architect. Besides being a pioneer promoter of the importance of landscape quality inside cities, in the early twentieth century he developed land reclamation plans through generative matrices of participatory urban planning.⁶

According to this view, citizens are no longer passive individuals subject to a 'top-down' application of 'aseptic' statistical data. They become active players giving their contribution at different levels: sometimes by showing a conscious and respectful approach to the context, or giving a mainly analytical and cognitive support, or even planning a sort of creative workshop where every single inhabitant can give a substantial contribution to the physical building of urban spaces. Back in

1978, for example, in Otranto, architect Renzo Piano had already started one of the 'neighbourhood workshops' planned and sponsored by UNESCO for the requalification of some Italian historical sites, verifying the possibility for a workforce of craftspeople to intervene in the old town recovery process.

Since then many similar initiatives have followed: in 2012 in Calama, Chile, the people of a small village went out into the street to protest against the devastating social inequalities. In order to quell the revolt, the local administration initiated the development of a strategic urban requalification plan which owed its success to an 'open house' located in the city's main square; this provided a real operation centre accessible to the community, with housing debates and discussions broadcast by streaming, as well as design workshops, that became a strong civic and democratic drive in just one hundred days.

A participatory and planning-oriented workshop that saw the citizenry get involved in the building of a communication and exposition totem has been recently carried out in Lissone (close to Milan) within the wider framework of the *Lissone Work in Project* strategic plan. The result of that is the *Museo Verticale* (*Vertical Museum*) that transformed an anonymous area – a residual space between basic road networks – into a place with a potential identity and an inherent aggregation power: a new and metaphorical 'urban door', a symbolic visual and functional epicentre, a landmark which may offer the opportunity to create a small-scale economy and become a trigger for micro-events to increase the tourist appeal of the area.

These early experiments show that the interest towards this participatory planning practice has not disappeared, although law has never regulated such practice. Sometimes it is rather used as a justification to express the closeness of the administration to the community, and even as a 'self-protection' of the administration itself in case of failures.

Participatory planning, meant as a 'concrete system of multiple interaction',⁷ is today not just a democratic operation, but also a technical prerequisite supporting the local government.



These first experiments are the theoretical and practical basis for a more contemporary approach to participatory planning that can be summarised in the large movement of placemaking. The need by people to feel that they are full 'citizens' triggered these dynamics of spontaneous appropriation and free structuring of public spaces: these practices aim at breaking with the top-down urban planning approach to promote a bottom-up one which starts from urban experience, from the knowledge and initiative of the local people.

Above

Figure 2: MoVE in Lissone (MB), Italy. Photograph: Davide Crippa.

If comparing the above with traditional participatory workshops the gap is not so big, yet it represents an essential discriminating factor: the latter were still based on processes not imposed but rather guided and 'suggested' by public players, while the placemaking experience generates from the community itself and is based on unstructured logics.⁸ This approach became popular in the 1990s but actually dates back to the visionary ideas of urban planners and anthropologists such as William H. Whyte⁹ and Jane Jacobs,¹⁰ who already in the 1960s had tried to make citizens feel responsible by encouraging them to keep watchful eyes (the well-known 'eyes on the streets') and tried to spread a planning culture that was not solely driven by economic motivations.

Indeed, creating a place is not the same as building a house; the value of a place cannot be measured only in aesthetic or quantitative terms, but mainly by the way its spaces are used. For this reason a placemaking project must consider physical, social, ecological and cultural factors as well as psychological and personal ones, in which the community can find its identity and self-replicate.

Because this inherent form of wide representation constitutes its core aspect, placemaking is actually an open process; however, as urban planner Kevin Lynch reminds us, 'a landscape in which every rock tells a different story might make it difficult to create new ones. Although this might not seem a crucial problem in the urban chaos in which we live today, it [indicates] that what we are looking for is not a definitive order, but rather an open one that continuously allows further developments.'¹¹

In general, all the related experiences focus on the micro but actually contribute to structuring the macro, as a combination of individual contributions aimed at building a collective 'public image', a 'common mind framework that most of the people living in a city bring with themselves: consensus areas that might arise in the interaction between a single physical reality, a common culture and an identical physiological structure.'¹²

FROM CO-URBANISM TO 'E-URBANISM'

Today, the web is a source of nourishment and a ground for further stimulus and experimentation for these participatory experiences that promote an urban planning based on the active involvement of the population and suggest a collaborative approach – defined as 'Co-urbanism' – to the project. In a world where social life is often no longer physical but virtual, the digital element might be an engine for progress even from an urban point of view and require a shift from the traditional Co-urbanism to an updated E-urbanism. The emerging scenario has a twofold nature: the identification of new maps other than the mere geographical borders and the building of participatory dynamics supported by social networks.

In the first case, the famous Situationist motto 'Living is feeling at home everywhere'¹³ should be more deeply interpreted in the light of increasingly labile perception boundaries that go beyond

the pure physical extension: the spaces we live in are no longer composed of univocally defined areas; our pathways and relationships, even when ethereal, draw new urban sprawls that don't actually exist. These are fluid entities, subjective and changeable geographies that sometimes annul and sometimes amplify real distances, spaces of the mind rather than physical ones, points apparently scattered on personal maps that exclude each other and mutually mix with those of others.

The spread of social networks initially led every individual to extend their own 'habitability range', but now, due to the evolution of some 'location-based services', even people's personal movements and reciprocal connections have become visible: the geo-social-network Foursquare, for example, stores personal information to create intersecting maps that can be consulted online. On the other hand, Livehoods analyses users' behaviours according to their check-in areas and, by spotting the links between the places they visit, it highlights unexpectedly hybrid spaces whose hearts are defined by people's everyday use. However, the stochastic jump occurs when these social networks change from simple indicators of habits and pathways into collectors of physical territorial actions: they are becoming increasingly driving forces of neighbourhood solidarity campaigns, but also unplanned 'urban' or 'subversive intrusions' and 'guerrillas' outlining new appealing epicentres.

Neighbourhood blogs and sites like Nextdoor and Circle are becoming a widespread phenomenon, a platform focusing on the history of places and giving access to social and job opportunities in local areas. Similarly, the platform VicinatoVicino (very widespread in Denmark but also in many Italian, Portuguese and English cities) was created from 'bottom up' by listening to the streets and people sharing the same urban spaces and is meant for people who want to play a new role within the community.¹⁴

Streetbank is a project based in London in which a neighbourhood's inhabitants can exchange objects as well as simple favours, considering material and immaterial values as equally important for enhancing the intangible structure of the community and improving the tangible one, at the same time. In Italy, a phenomenon similar to Streetbank boomed thanks to the movement of 'social streets', established in Bologna by a group of people who started organising via Facebook a series of small events to be held at the local theatre, as a chance for the reciprocal sharing of knowledge: if in our anonymous contemporary neighbourhoods we live closely but we don't know each other – and in the amplified relationships that we build in social networks we become close friends with strangers – in the 'social streets' of Bologna the digital medium has paradoxically allowed the restoration of neighbourhood ties and facilitated a wide range of activities.¹⁵

The same approach was also used in a few areas of Milan such as via Maiocchi, where citizens turned a traffic island into a community garden, or via Morgagni, where people organise extemporaneous and provocative picnics in a flowerbed right in the middle of the street.



That said, according to the writer and philosopher Franco Bolelli, the internet 'has sparked a very important psychological revolution. People discover something and now they have the means to share it instantaneously, deriving from it a global vision of the reality in which they live and the desire to change it, to improve it through a collective use of objects and places. Once these were élite

phenomena that concerned vanguards of five hundred people, but now we are talking about the action of tens of thousands of individuals.¹⁶ If these spontaneous and associationist movements become viral and self-replicate through the web, it is simply because of the failure of institutions to interpret the territory's real and current needs.

CROWDFUNDING AS A NEW FRONTIER TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMMON GOOD

Another way to interpret people's commitment to the common good is their willingness to support co-funding, which is not based on pre-set project development practices but rather on an equally strong attachment to place. It is a different form of equally effective and emotionally involving participation. Indeed, putting an idea into practice requires exploring this delicate (and often inhibitory) phase of researching financial resources, which always leads us to seek new potential partnerships. In a time of financial crisis, where people's trust towards banks and institutions has significantly decreased, these new types of funding – generally called crowdfunding – are obviously getting more and more successful.

By crowdfunding we mean a tool that allows the collection of material resources, historically used by both public and religious institutions and based on small donations. Take, for example, the system of religious offerings or the more sophisticated mutual-aid initiatives, which already in the nineteenth century allowed workers and farmers to safeguard themselves through collective guarantees. While in the past this technique was based on door-to-door, limited-scale recruitment, today the use of the web allows this phenomenon to become viral and deterritorialised. Thanks to technological progress, crowdfunding has extended its traditional boundaries, going beyond local communities and reaching a global scale by means of portals working as real 'digital windows', in which each donor can choose among a wide variety of projects 'in search of trust'.

To sum up, we can identify four types of crowdfunding: in the 'donation-based' model donors get nothing in return; in the

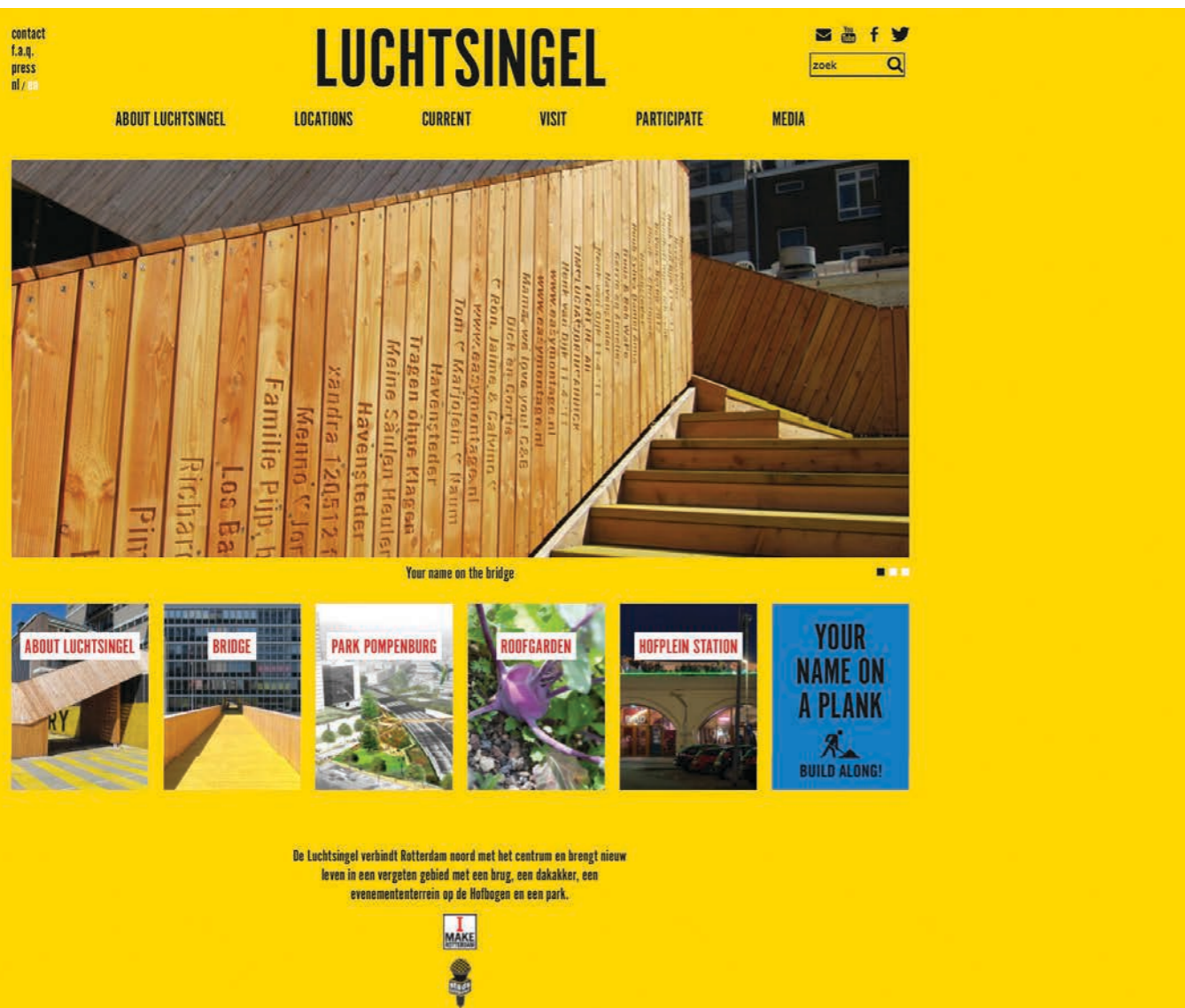
'reward-based' model donors receive a gift in return – usually acknowledgements, thanks and merchandising. These two types apply a Maussian anti-economic logic.¹⁷ A third is 'equity crowdfunding' where the donor becomes to all intents an investor, gaining property and corporate rights on the financed project. Finally, to these first three types we must add 'social lending', which is not really a donation, but rather a loan that allows people to help private citizens or social initiatives for a well-deserved cause.

Over the last few years many cultural and artistic projects and initiatives have been carried out thanks to crowdfunding campaigns launched on portals like Kickstarter or Voordekunst. The idea of managing to support assets of common use by joining collective resources also led to the use of crowdfunding at the urban level, making such tools extremely popular among environmentalists. The first examples of projects supported by crowdfunding campaigns can be found in the U.S. and the Netherlands. The most well-known example in New York is the floating swimming pool on the Hudson River: a high number of people were so happy with the project that they launched an online campaign that raised the US\$41,647 required for its implementation. Another urban project carried out thanks to the Kickstarter community through a reward-based campaign was the Whitelock Community Farm in Baltimore. Thanks to the support of over one thousand donors, the city can now use a big community farm and, depending on the contribution given, every donor received in turn personal accessories or fresh food produced by the farm. Crowdfunding is also successful in small communities like Atwater Village, near Los Angeles, whose residents created an ecological market based on Slow Food principles to provide everyone with fresh and healthy food.

A similar initiative, *Make Rotterdam*, was launched in Rotterdam by the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR) together with ZUS studio, which allowed the making of a bridge to link the Central Station with one of the main sites of the exposition. In this case the contribution made by every individual could be seen in the bridge's boards, marked with the name of each patron.

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Figure 3: Facebook home profile of 'Social Street Italia', May 2015.



The founding idea of these initiatives is to use private self-funding to finance works that do not garner the government's attention, yet are important for citizens who are no longer willing to wait for the intervention of institutions to give life to these projects.

Urban crowdfunding seems to be gaining more and more weight not only as a means to finance projects that would otherwise have never been implemented, but also, more importantly, for its inherent power to increase the community's civic sense. Indeed,

through this practice, citizens really manage to 'take possession' of fragments of their city, leading them to establish a deeper bond and sense of 'belonging' and, hence, 'care'.

A CASE STUDY: LISSONE WORK IN PROJECT

In building the identity of a place, a crucial role is played by the image that a specific geographical area, city or neighbourhood has for residents living inside and outside such place. In a time of loss and flattening of diversity due to the establishment of a now-apparent global culture, the concepts of territory and typicality are slowly becoming more relevant to local economic policies. Given the importance of communicating a clear image that could be useful and have a touristic and commercial appeal, some administrations are behaving like real enterprises and adopting innovative tools to convey their lost identity. Urban branding or territorial branding appears to be one of the most effective tools to give a strong identity to the city.

In particular, a territorial brand is the making of 'a face, a dress, a set of gestures that are typical of a city, [...] a sort of etiquette for citizens/users.'¹⁸ In other words, this can be considered an 'ongoing dynamic building process in the mind of the territory's users, who are therefore influenced by experiences, memories and judgments expressed by other users they get in contact with.'¹⁹ Mihalis Kavaratzis – a researcher on place marketing, place branding and place identity – clearly states, 'the object of city branding is not the city "itself", but its image.'²⁰ In his description of a territorial brand he mainly focuses on the weight placed on it by the target community and their view of it, analysing how the management of a city brand may influence spatial behaviour.

In any case, an effective city-branding strategy must consider the place's image for community members (collective memory which becomes a source of pride for the individual) as well as non-members (the imagination of each individual fulfilled by a collective *vision*): both these elements are essential for the correct development of the city's communicative and promotional potential.

Consider how an effectively applied city-branding policy may represent enormous potential for a community to both enhance their image to tourists and give residents a valuable sense of belonging to the territory. In 2013, the Municipality of Lissone started a complex plan of urban branding called *Lissone Work in Project*, consisting of a number of communication and project initiatives. These projects are interesting because they were developed with a strategic use of the web, through a 'call' for citizens as well as an opportunity for testimony and storytelling, as an engine for new spontaneous initiatives and a collector of common interests leading to concrete actions to improve urban quality.

MoVE, described above, has set the foundations of a much more complex strategy of place-branding, which saw the various 'peoples' of the city involved in a wide number of projects aimed at renewing the faded charm of the 'Furniture Capital' (Lissone is a centre for furniture production and trade) and increasing its appeal for Expo 2015, as well as rethinking its wider perception. The aim was to create an 'open-air territorial regional museum' built around business, design and craftsmanship itineraries, to be initially coordinated by public institutions but also supported by private initiatives all around the city: stories, installations and expositions that could occupy shop windows, colonising the streets and expanding public space living, mixing indoor and outdoor and eventually building new participatory and self-implementing spaces.

Thanks to a viral communication launched on social networks, the flash mob *Walking Design* performance in Milan during the 2014 Salone del Mobile attracted a high number of students and citizens, who took part in this symbolic parade to demonstrate the continuing propositional attitude of Lissone, a city that in the last few years has blended in with Milan's anonymous outskirts. Through this 'collective performance', Lissone claimed not only a craftsmanship heritage based on the status of the branding 'Made in Italy', but also a vision for the future that restated its value on today's global markets.

At the same time and as part of the same project, the building of the portal 'Design stories' aimed at involving well-known

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Figure 4: Homepage of the project Make Rotterdam, May 2015



designers and also citizens (students, artisans, retailers, designers and ordinary people) who gave their own definition of design, thus becoming part of a collective storytelling process of 'thinking' and 'making' design that has always found fertile ground in the Monza and Brianza province. The result was an informal 'museum of the immaterial'; a growing platform, an open project supported by the community that was self-sustaining thanks to the word of mouth that has now become a common good, witness and keeper of the community's aspirations and talents.

This impressionistic 'digital collecting' gave birth to the so called 'Design itineraries', a territorial marketing operation that saw the statements selected by the portal literally enter the city, becoming a graphic and decorative code as well as a clear



reference to the creative and productive value of the territory. It is the invisible memory of the place which now metaphorically emerges through expressions accompanying tourists from the station to the city centre, giving residents an imagined city in which they actively participate, or maybe just contributing to improving the quality of inconclusive, neglected and anonymous spaces. It is a pervading, limited and limitless urban graphic, an open-air museum made of memories and thoughts belonging to all of us: this is the heritage we share that permeates all the streets of a city; an 'urban book' yet to be written.

Colours also contribute to reinforcing this identity-building operation: the officially registered colour 'Lissone orange' becomes a further recognition element for a city that is painfully trying to gain credibility in the eyes of the world as well as, on the other hand, offering new visual and spatial quality to its residents.

In addition, with a view to improving the use of urban areas so far considered as neutral – a terrain vague where finally, as hoped for by anthropologist and architect Franco La Cecla, 'the misunderstanding [becomes] a boundary with a shape',²¹ a creative and imaginative force free from any pre-set standards

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Figure 5: Lissone Work in Project logo in the city, 2014.
Photograph: Davide Crippa.

– some new chaises longues were presented to the citizens. These seats were made thanks to the active contribution of the residents, who had regular meetings with the administration to give some input and raise critical issues also shared by the project designers. These are soft and playful seats where you can lie down and rest as if you are at home. Their curved structure makes them pleasant as well as comfortable, while the shape of the base allows flexible planimetric features that can fit any urban context: a square, a street, a pathway in the trees. The seats, which form a mobile block, can potentially be moved and rearranged for any occasion. This project is an opportunity to give shape to a new kind of square; a place to meet but also to relax and have fun; a new engine of socialisation and community sharing.

The orange colour, which recalls the tones used in all the new urban works, is the only decorative code applied as people's movements and the variety of ways they use the seats represent an unpredictable 'moving décor' in itself. Once again, although with an aesthetic and process-oriented approach rather than a planning one, people's direct contribution creates the physical matrix of a city that is increasingly investing in a participatory urban planning based on 'social' and self-organised activities.

CONCLUSION

All the approaches analysed above are frequently combined and mixed to create hybrid experiments, which find a possible synthesis in urban interiors. Indeed, the common objective of all these operations is to find a purpose for public spaces that are often too homogeneous and undifferentiated. Such initiatives are aimed at involving people in sharing personal 'mind maps' and physically building interiors and structures for an increasingly cosy city.

Using involvement as a method to get citizens closer to a space so that they no longer consider it an unknown place. The idea of a 'soft project'²² is pursued as an answer to heterogeneous 'human geographies' that no longer identify themselves in the previous pragmatic, often 'speciously objective' urban planning tradition;²³ a collection of microstories, not legends; an urban planning that structures precise and cosy spaces because they

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Figure 6: Performance of the 'flash mob' during the Milan Design Week 2014.
Photograph: Davide Crippa.

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Figure 7: Facebook home profile of Racconti di design, September 2015.

are recognised and feel familiar; an urban planning that sets up fragments of city around the individual (or groups of individuals) with the ambition of conceiving a new shared idea. This is the reason why, in this summary, through the individual and collective interpretations, urban interiors are the key points. They are already part of the shared urban space but are still perceived



as private spheres, as the first extroversions of the individuals into mutual spaces. It is within these semantically hybrid themes that it is possible to test out the 'layering of belonging', which develops the individual identity while at the same time creating the collective dimension. The result is a *collage* of situations, a mix of fragments that find a positive synthesis in this variety for a city made of memories, expectations and energies of individuals who literally 'network'.

All the planning processes listed in this essay – and codified as declinations of an emerging 'e-urbanism' – are fully contemporary, simply because they interpret urban space as a sum of 'weak thoughts',²⁴ highlighting those aspects of 'vulnerability',²⁵ that foster the sense of temporary and consider the space of fragments as a chance to give voice to small actions.

This provisional nature is what facilitates the creation of new planning alphabets that welcome the unknown and accept the uncertain and unexpected, and it is probably only in an urban interiors theme – intrinsically designated for experiments – that it could have found its first physical development.

These dynamics permeate all Western societies, as they contradict the *pensée unique* (mainstream ideological conformist thinking), too often disconnected from the real social corpus, while fostering that stratification of memories, thoughts, approaches and heterogeneous identities which constitute the wealth of the post-modern *urbs*, today made accessible by the power of the internet.

'E-urbanism' is a possible representation of this contemporary paradigm: it is a new 'bottom-up' urbanism, which reinterprets the traditional 'co-urbanism' in the light of the current tools, technologies and opportunities (such as social networks and information technologies). By recalling 'collective responsibilities' and by combining social and virtual dimensions with the physical one, the aim is to build places (both recognized and recognizable) and not only spaces.

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Figure 8: Graphic texts become a decorative and narrative urban pattern in Lissone (MB), Italy, 2014.
Photograph: Davide Crippa.

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Figure 9: New chaise longues by Studio Ghigos in Lissone (MB), Italy, 2014.
Photograph: Davide Crippa.