

Re-Start Italy: (post-)Covid19 Lessons for Full Scope Renovation of the Italian Public Space

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has suddenly upset the way we used to live. When eventually lockdown ended, the desire to return to open spaces while respecting social distancing has challenged the role of public space as a space for interaction. In Italy, one of the most affected countries, the piazza as public space par excellence has not remained immune to the issue. This contribution addresses four Italian design experiences that have tried to give an immediate answer to the needs of these precise historical circumstances. The Covid-19 emergency may become an opportunity for innovation in the project and in the way the piazza is perceived and experienced. New approaches lead to reconsider the role of the project and that of the architect. An updated idea of public space as a problem-solver space follows suit, turning the piazza into a space that does not need to project itself into the future, but aims to answer to current needs. The idea of the piazza as a permanent public space is replaced by that of an adaptive public space. Such an open phenomenology is starting to think of the piazza as a space for experiences - a space that allows people to return, in new ways, to social interactions.

Keywords: italian piazza, urban renovation, participatory design, community's creativity, space for experiences, adaptive public space.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 emergency has been affecting the entire world lately and has been a cause of instability for many companies, communities and individuals. The high death rate and the consequent grief have been closely linked to a period where individuals have been obliged to be locked at home, experiencing social isolation. If, on the one hand, this condition has been an opportunity to rediscover the value of our homes, on the other, it has witnessed a growing desire to resume enjoying open spaces.

When lockdown eventually ended in May 2020, a new phase of quasi-freedom emerged and people were allowed to leave their homes and meet again in public open spaces. However, social distancing is still in place. Thus, the important question of empty/unused spaces and their reconversion, which would imply a variety of challenges: from implementation timing to further investment and an effort to direct communities towards the use of new public spaces.

In Italy, one of the COVID-19 most affected countries, the role of the piazza as a public space par excellence - the heart of social life - can hardly be replaced. This is even more complicated at a time in history, like present days, when the reaction to isolation leads to an

atavistic desire for normality, for a return to interaction in those same places where people used to meet before the spread of the virus. Prior to thinking about new collective spaces, it is therefore important to redefine the role of existing traditional public spaces and how to use them again, such as the piazza. Recently, the Italian Government has worked hard to support and give answers to all affected sectors. In addressing a plan, metaphorically called “Italy’s Rebirth Plan”, a certain awareness of the importance of a return to a social life has been put at the core of the debate, but there is no trace of guidelines to manage public spaces and the piazzas in the cities. Nowadays - more than ever -, it would be extremely important to rethink the social role of public spaces, if we want to keep the pandemic under control and limit fears linked to contagion, leading to a public wound.

Most of the Italian piazzas are historical places, or spaces strongly connected to the past; however, they are still considered the main place of encounter and interaction nowadays. Italian piazzas may be divided into two categories: historical and contemporary ones. Historical piazzas have remained unchanged over time. They bear the city’s historical identity and their link with the past makes them untouchable, preventing any process of innovation or change in their function. Contemporary piazzas, on the contrary, include examples of spaces often located in the suburban districts. Nevertheless, there is no lack of contemporary piazzas integrated in historical contexts in Italy.

This paper aims to investigate the interactive ability of the public space within the city, in these specific circumstances, through suitable resources for the definition of new forms of urban socialization. The piazza as a public space, therefore accessible to all, is currently experiencing a crisis due to the vagueness of its role within the urban morphology - a role that certainly needs to be reconsidered. The analysis of some project experiences regarding Italian piazzas, that have been implemented as a reaction to the emergency, provides enough material to consider a new vision of the piazza as an adaptive public space. This updated vision reinstates the square’s role as a “vector” of socialisation.

1. ITALIAN PIAZZA VS COVID-19

Two main questions must be addressed. First: in circumstances where social distancing is a key issue, is it still possible to return to public space its role of urban symbol of sociality? Second: How can planning projects contribute to the definition of these new space contexts? A simple premise, before answering the questions: the role of the projects remains meaningful, exclusively if the project is able to consider space in its social dimension, in an attempt to accommodate traditional public space into new interactive forms, where innovative processes are confronted and integrated with habits.

So how can the public role of the piazza be combined with the need to respect the pandemic logistical constraints? Many have tried to address the topic by contributing in a scattered order. An initiative of the international architecture magazine *The Plan* has compared the opinions of some of the world’s starchitects on the topic and its impact on enjoying public spaces or socialising ones. Ben van Berkel, founder and head-architect of UNStudio (one of the most experimental architectural design firms) has offered his very concise vision: there is no need of speeding up or encouraging radical projects. In fact, it is still difficult to foresee what life will be like in the future, but it is certain that the current emergency cannot upset everything that has been in place for such a long time. It is not possible to look at the future by erasing the past, and neither is it possible to be impassive at a time, when changes and

adjustments are obviously needed. We must also take into account that individuals will travel less in the near future, which will turn their attention – and ours, too - to rediscover cities and public spaces in general, just as it has forced everyone to experience anew their private homes during the lockdown. It makes no sense and there is no time to think about radical projects, and yet a lot can still be done.

In this regard, two different time stages are worth noting:

- Stage 1. Short-term solutions are elaborated = the project is linked to the needs for immediate implementation.
- Stage 2. Medium and long-term solutions are elaborated = necessary, if the pandemic is here to stay in the immediate future.

In the uncertainty of the times and of the conditions, any project regarding the public space is deeply characterized by a temporary nature: in emergency circumstances, it is not possible to think of the project as permanent, but rather as transitory.

2. FOUR EXPERIENCES – AN OPEN PHENOMENOLOGY

This section focuses on four Italian design experiments, born from the need to give a concrete solution to the Covid-19 logistical constraints, by shaping new ways of experiencing the piazza.

2.1. Piazza Giotto – Caret Studio

The project on Piazza Giotto, in Vecchio, near Florence, represents the determination of a group of young architects, Caret Studio, to give an immediate answer to the use of the piazza after the Covid-19 emergency. The idea is to revive the piazza without affecting its structure. “I’m far away” is a temporary installation that translates social distancing restrictions in place into visual signs, allowing a conscious use of space. The project conceives the piazza as an enormous platform marked by a regular grid, identified as a generator and safety distance control element. The grid’s default size is 1.80 m, which is the distance imposed in public spaces by the Region of Tuscany to prevent contagion. The geometric figures have been drawn using a removable paint. Not only does the result encourage social interaction, but it is also aesthetically appealing for its ability to integrate with the surrounding urban context and offer new perspectives. The most interesting aspect of the new square is certainly the creation of new possibilities for additional uses, without properly defining them.



Figure 1. Piazza Giotto seen from above. Conceptual diagrams of spatial organization. View of the Piazza © Caret Studio

2.2. Piazza S. Cosimato – Association “Piccolo America”

Piazza San Cosimato is one of the few contemporary piazzas in Rome Historic Centre. This piazza has in some ways always been considered less important than the most famous ones, but has experienced a rebirth as a social connector thanks to the idea of a group of young people to use it as a free arena for outdoor cinema in the summertime. Back in 2012, the event was promoted and organized by the Association “Piccolo America”: Piazza San Cosimato turned into a cinema location to offer a new service to the city and its inhabitants. From that moment on, it has become the stage of one of the biggest cultural events in the Italian capital city. This year as well - despite restrictions - the Festival was held in a different way. The aim of the Association, which is also a sort of slogan for this edition, is to contrast social distancing, while maintaining physical distance. The piazza - previously freely accessible - is now marked by a series of small blue squares, designed with a removable paint. Each spot can hold up to 4 viewers, in case they belong to the same family, or a single one. The blue squares are numbered and can be booked in advance on a special website. Viewers are free to enjoy the outdoor cinema experience in their comfort: they can sit on a blanket, on a cushion or on a chair provided that they bring it from home. The free film arena in Piazza San Cosimato is the expression of the role played by urban activism in reactivating not only the physical and spatial but above all the socio-cultural aspects of a place. In San Cosimato, urban activism is combined with the desire for a culture-driven renaissance.



Figure 2. Piazza San Cosimato. The arrangement of the outdoor cinema. © I ragazzi del Cinema America

2.3. Piazza Istria – ND Studio

Piazza Istria in Sorgane, south of Florence, has faced a different reactivation strategy: the structure in itself was not modified, but temporary installations were integrated to help redefine the space function. The project was conceived by ND Studio, a group of young architects (all under 36) and funded by the European tender DESIGNSCAPES in collaboration with the City of Florence. The name of the initiative is TAM TAM (Temporary Architecture Module) and is based on the idea of temporary architectural installations that vary the piazza's configuration over time, through an adaptive process based on the citizens' feedback. The project has a participative nature, as citizens have played (and will play) an active role not only in the elaboration of it, but also in its realization. The community participation has encouraged the new definition of the piazza and has allowed for an immediate feedback, in line with the Covid-19 logistical constraints. The future of the new piazza is an official entrustment to the citizens, who have been directly in charge of it from 27th September 2020. TAM TAM is based on various principles, such as circular economy, incremental architecture and social innovation. The choice of the materials and their sourcing was one of the fundamental aspects of the project. The structural elements of the temporary installations are made up of prefabricated units, rented from a local company, thus reducing their overall environmental impact. All units (modules) are connected by a "screw-free" system, based on the combination of multidirectional pipes, allowing easy mounting and flexibility of use. The intervention on Piazza Istria is an expression of the well-known aphorism of the Italian architect Giancarlo De Carlo "Architecture is too important to be left to architects" - an axiom which, as early as the 1960s, challenged the often self-referential logic of projects that took little account of the end-users needs. The success of this public space is dictated by the direct dialogue between administrations, designers and citizens - a collaboration that reduces the possibility of error to a minimum. Participatory architecture as a form of architecture owned by its users is a concept that, some 50 years later, is more relevant than ever, a "realistic utopia" that has still much to teach.



Figure 3. Piazza Istria. Simulation of the flexible space of the piazza and photos of its actual condition. © Photo by Maginaria

2.4. Ar_Co-M3 Progetti.

Site-specific projects are accompanied by the idea of urban design not exclusively coming from the needs of a single place, but designed to organize a generic public or private space, granting users the appropriate safety distances. Ar_Co is a design element of minimalist style, consisting of two metal bases connected by an illuminated arch. Ar_Co project was created by the young firm M3 Progetti and designed to ensure the appropriate physical distance while avoiding real barriers. Ar_co is a project that finds its strength in the minimalism of the shape and in the possibility of providing a timely, functional and temporary response to the use of space. The fact that Ar_co is primarily a device meant to enlighten the space, rather than to separate, proposes an interesting way to overcome the issues imposed by Covid-19 restrictions.



Figure 4. Conceptual idea and simulation of Ar_co in a generic piazza. © M3 Progetti



Figure 5. Ar_co in different public spaces. ©M3 Progetti

The Italian experiences presented are a demonstration of how this emergency has led to reconsider not only the role of the project, but also that of the architect. The traditional notion of public space as an eternal and immutable location seems to have largely been deconstructed. The formal and compositional aspect has become subordinate to the social role of public space as a problem-solver space.

The architect's role has also greatly changed. The Italian scenario has welcomed an emerging generation of architects, mostly under their 40s. The long admired starchitects, on the contrary, have been vacant – unlike previous emergency circumstances. The new generation's rise is probably due to the latest phenomenology of the projects, based on temporariness and immediacy. Projects are no longer designing spaces that will carry the signature of their creator over time, but they are defining interventions intended for a limited time span. In this new perspective, projects are no longer presenting a hyper-designed or hyper-graphical space, but rather offering a space for everyday life aimed to satisfy the current needs and not obliged to bear same value in the future. The steadily state of crisis throughout the year 2020 that has affected and continues to define the global urban reality, has witnessed the emergence of a number of bottom-up transformation projects of the city, besides redefining the statuesque role of the architect. These phenomena, involving both participatory design initiatives and urban activism, have demonstrated how a bottom-up approach is capable of redefining the city and sometimes being a fundamental support for the architect.

While pursuing different strategies, the experiments on public space in the Covid-19 era have shown some common aspects:

- **TEMPORARINESS** The first and unavoidable characteristic of this new idea of public space is that it responds to a present need and consequently does not assume a configuration that will remain unchanged over time.
- **FLEXIBILITY** The public space is able to acquire new configurations and new functions with ease. Flexibility is seen here as a form of resilience.
- **FUNCTIONALITY** Another decisive role is played by the functions embraced by the public space. The Italian piazza has always been a location that could freely host the most varied activities. However, restrictions on social physical interactions require not only to rethink the way it is used, but also the type of functions it can accommodate. The previously presented examples address these needs through two prominent attitudes. On the one hand, the public space is meant to host specific events – such as Piazza Giotto and Piazza San Cosimato; on the other, new functions are redefining the use of the public space, as in Piazza Istria. This new idea of space is open to multiple and different events that can vary over time, thus the public space is better defined as a “stand-by location”.
- **REPEATABILITY** One of the most interesting aspects emerging from these projects is the possibility to replicate them elsewhere. This would allow interesting developments, i.e. the expansion of public space beyond the physical boundaries of the piazza itself.
- **PARTICIPATION** Architects are in many cases supported by the community. Projects are no longer an expression of a single individual, but of shared needs and will, making them a participatory project. Not only is participative design a guarantee for the success of the public space, but it also promotes the growth of a sense of shared identity. Thanks to their involvement in the design process, citizens feel at ease in the piazza and consider it an extension of the home.

Although confronted with short time frames, the design of the public space in the Covid-19 era has offered successful solutions showing flexibility, functionality, repeatability and its engaging power.

3. FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In the event that the state of emergency is extended, how will public space projects cope with the emergency? How will we experience the piazza?

We should maybe start using “voids” not as a distance, but instead as a starting point for approach and socialization, even though this concept has not emerged yet. New experiments on space, for example, could turn distance and void into a foundational element, not explicitly declared, but understood as a simple space between objects. Public spaces may turn into a **space for experiences**, i.e. a space in which end-users play an active role. This type of space must be able to offer experiences while respecting social distancing and without users perceiving it. In this regard, the aesthetics of the space plays a fundamental role. So does the type of experience that individuals can enjoy. It would be nice to start from real needs, but it would also be interesting to consider induced needs, which users should not perceive as such. Technology may help in this sense: supported by technology, spaces for experiences could be highly attractive because they offer an uncommon situation in everyday life. In addition to technology, spaces for experiences could make use of art or

creativity in general, as tools to break the rules of ordinary use thanks to their ability to (re)invent everyday life, thus leading to a renewed role for the piazza – no longer flattered by conventional ones. Creativity, like technology, is and has a great innovation power. Spaces for experiences may then turn into experimental labs –where a professional artist works and the community's creativity turns real. The result being a space with no goals in itself, but rather one that suggests new ways of living the piazza, for example through games, sensory experiences, and so on.

Not only can the piazza be reactivated, but it can also turn into an attraction for both residents and tourists. Creativity could also be a tool to boost mobility between cities and to revive tourism - one of the most affected sectors during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Last, but not least, the cultural aspect of the piazza must be addressed. The pandemic has underlined the importance of culture in everyone's life; digital access to museums all over the world has been freely granted around the globe, allowing individuals to visit places they might have never been able to see. The possibility of being a virtual user, however, cannot entirely replace the level of involvement that characterises the museum experience in itself, as a dynamic place where things happen and interactions between people create added value to it. On the contrary, spaces for experiences would give everyone the chance to live the dream of it. We may, for example, consider the opportunity to move or reinterpret some great works or installations to be enjoyed in the open space. Such approach would offer the opportunity to experience them, while respecting the Covid-19 restrictions. Would it be so extreme to see Michelangelo Pistoletto's conceptual labyrinth placed in one historical piazzas, like Piazza Navona, in Rome? This installation is made of wavy cardboard assembled in a round shape and acts as an eye-catcher, since the viewers get lost and find themselves in front of a mirror in the end. Despite its age – the labyrinth was first designed in 1969 – the installation is still a metaphor of our everyday life: we get lost and we always embrace a journey to find our way.



Figure 6. A visionary scenario of Piazza Navona with Michelangelo Pistoletto's conceptual labyrinth.

Sometimes the structure or the design of the pre-existing paving can offer an opportunity for new experimentations. In a visionary scenario, we can imagine the installation which animated Finsbury Avenue Square in London moving to piazza Vecchia, Bergamo. “Alphabet Chairs” is a project conceived by Kellenberger-White Studio that develops responsive, playful and process-led visual languages. The arrangement of the chairs respects the Covid-19 constraints, without users perceiving distance as a limit, in an attempt to return to interactions in the public space.



Figure 7. On the left. “Alphabet Chairs” installation in Finsbury Avenue Square in London. On the right. A visionary scenario of “Alphabet Chairs” in Piazza Vecchia in Bergamo.

Alongside the classical artists’ work, participatory art is gaining its momentum to make art engaging public participation in the creative process, letting individuals become co-authors and editors, and not only simple observers of the final work. This type of art is incomplete without viewers’ physical interaction. It is able to involve the community, even though it is the expression of a negotiated and organized artistic will and requires previous organization to guarantee the respect of the restriction imposed by the circumstances.

It may seem a paradox, but all this renewed attention to public space can become the opportunity for converting it from a declining space into a more successful one. We would love to imagine that, in the immediate future, Italian piazzas could thrive on the unstable balance between tradition and innovation, permanent and temporary. In this regard, it will be important to think, for example, of their progressive use, i.e. ways of socialising which may vary as the pandemic containment measures loosen up.

The traditional notion of permanent public space can therefore be followed by a more contemporary vision of adaptive public space, aimed at responding in new ways to different circumstances restrictions. The Covid-19 emergency has forced us to think that some experienced urban processes drafted as a response to the circumstances could instead be used in an instrumental way, even in a condition of normality, so that the piazza can rediscover its role of collective space par excellence, while educating citizens to new and more correct behaviours, avoiding old, outdated and unhealthy ones. The success of the public space project as a collective practice seems indisputable, but the question of the designers’ willingness to redefine their role and approach to the project remains open.

Conscious of the complexity of the subject and the fact that there are no unique answers, this paper’s intention is not to set out design guidelines; on the contrary, it aims at discussing some possible or desirable orientations regarding projects for public spaces. The outlined

ideas may well serve beyond the emergency we are still experiencing and push for new meanings and functions of the public space. Therefore, the public health emergency can become an opportunity to rethink and revamp the Italian public space par excellence - the beloved piazza - through the injection of renewed energy, vitality and beauty. Upgrading the piazza is an unavoidable necessity for a country like Italy.

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