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a cura di
Giovanni Caudo, Janet Hetman, Annalisa Metta



Roma TrE-Press

Compresenze

Corpi, azioni e spazi ibridi nella città contemporanea

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Active and sociable cities: the frailer elderly's perspective

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active city/
elderly people/
urban public spaces



The lady asking for shopkeeper's support. © Antonio Borgogni, 2016

A paradigmatic example of the frailer elderly's perspective on the city comes from the observation of a mobility-impaired lady during her daily shopping routine in Lisbon: she can walk only using a cane and leaning against the buildings' walls. Every day she runs errands along the narrow streets of the city centre, succeeding despite her functional capacities and the uneven sidewalks.

One could argue about the conditions allowing the coexistence of her non-fit body in the urban public spaces with those of office workers, other sounder housewives, and tourists. First, underlining the psychological aspects: her self-determination is so strong to face countless barriers to be active. Secondly, shadowing her slow gait, a social support perspective arises: the nearest shopkeeper delivers her groceries out of the shop window – being for her impossible to walk around the shop without double leaning – while also offering her his arm to cross the street.

Continuing to observe the old lady, further coexistences come to light: she reaches the street level food court of a nearby arcade; moseying, leaning, and easily finding a passer-by's help to open the heavy crystal doors, she eventually sits down at a table of a sushi restaurant showing her main aim: in fact, she pulls out a paper sheet and a pen thus starting to write.

The observation area is that of a stretch of Rua São José, in Lisbon, a sort of endangered last century enclave in which, despite the enlargement of the commodified city centre, the street life is still protected by small family-owned groceries, *tascas* [1], and handicraft shops. Rua São José is parallel to Avenida da Liberdade where major fashion firms and banks have their branches and shops, thus explaining the penetration of the arcade towards the Rua.

The described complexity of the themes is archetypical of the urban life and not exclusive of Lisbon; however, an interdisciplinary reflection focussed on human/urban bodies could be helpful, at least, not to forget that «to live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself» (Perec, 1997: 6). In this chapter, emphasising the role of the body, we face this complexity from a social, health enhancing physical activity (HEPA), and town planning points of view.

From a social perspective, it can be useful to recall Jane Jacobs' reflections on the social role of storekeepers: «One ordinary morning last winter, Mr. Jaffe [...] and his wife [...] supervised the small children crossing at the corner on the way to P.S. 41, as Bernie always does because he sees the need; lent an umbrella to one customer and a dollar to another; took custody of two keys...» (1961: 61), the richness and *mixité* of that urban stretch, in which a communitarian sense of belonging meets a more aseptic environment, provides the old lady the opportunities, and motivations, to leave home for her daily stroll. Without such supporting elements, she might not be able to accomplish her daily tasks, which are partly reproductive like buying necessities (Franck, Stevens, 2007), partly non-instrumental motivated 'only' by her wish to go out, to walk, to reach that writing desk.

From the HEPA perspective, the described environment matches only some of the acknowledged characteristics to promote physical activity: mixed land use is a supporting feature, but narrow and badly-maintained sidewalks are barriers to movement. Sedentary behaviours not only affect health but, often, lead to social isolation (real and perceived), associated with an increased risk of early mortality.

From a town planning viewpoint, as Pavia reminds us, «We are immersed in the XXI century, but we are not yet able to recognize the request emerging from a world in transformation» (Pavia, 2015: vii); a world increasingly urban, dense, and progressively ageing. These trends are also connected to issues of spatial segregation and spatial justice; as Bernardo Secchi highlighted, social disparities within the city framework represent one of the most relevant aspects of what could be defined as the ‘new urban question’ (2010) also because, as argued by Hervé Juvin, «ageing is becoming a social phenomenon rather than a physical one» (2010: 8). As Lindheim and Syme remind us: «a healthy environment may not necessarily be one that fits an idealized architectural or planners’ image but, rather, one that provides a range of opportunities for its inhabitants to shape the conditions that affect their lives» (1983: 338). It is within cities and for a healthier and more active and sustainable future of cities -and the one of their inhabitants- that today a structural reconsideration of the urban system is needed: cities should be radically rethought and reshaped in order to truly become the scenario of active, healthy living.



The emergent Active City approach could represent a manner to encompass the described perspectives if correctly considered in an interdisciplinary way. In fact, the approach has been firstly promoted by the public health sector (Edward, Tsouros, 2008), and lately investigated through town planning, socio-educational, and physical activity perspectives (Borgogni, Farinella, 2017). The Active City model should be able to guide the practice of urban planning, design and urban renewal towards more integrated and effective approaches, drawing within the legislation topics such as active and sustainable mobility; public health; urban safety and accessibility; sustainability and social inclusion. We can therefore argue that one of the global challenges of our contemporary world is to develop integrated approaches to the problem of urban living, in terms of sustainability, and the possibility for all citizens to acquire, and then maintain, healthier and more active habits and lifestyles (Dorato, 2015).

Public spaces designate the physical places (whatever their legal status is, either public or private with possibility of collective uses) which the whole population can frequent on a regular basis: streets, squares and plazas; gardens, parks and boulevards; beaches, paths and trails crossing all kinds of natural or artificial environments, etc. All in all, the urban connective network and all the other spaces attached and related to it should respect the fundamental peculiarities of accessibility and gratuity. These two characteristics could somehow represent a simplification of what Lefebvre’s defined as ‘the right

The lady walking in the arcade.
© Antonio Borgogni, 2017

to the city', including the «right to freedom, to individualization, to habitat and to inhabit» (Lefebvre, 1996: 173), as well as the right to participation and appropriation of the urban public realm.

A merging of interests is encompassed in the Active City perspective. In fact, the promotion of physical-activity-friendly urban environments and active lifestyles, directly tackles the escalation of non-communicable diseases, prolonging seniors' healthy fitness; plans more sociable and liveable districts; promotes active commuting; and encourages physical activity within the urban public realm. In the last two years, such perspective has been endorsed in Europe and Italy also thanks to the EU-funded IMPALA.net project, aimed at finding new planning criteria for urban public spaces to promote physical activity among the population. The contemporary 'urban dimension' is undoubtedly challenging many aspects of our everyday lifestyles and social conditions, as well as pressuring cities in their structural and functional systems, therefore making the Active City model increasingly valuable for its complexity and capacity to tackle many different issues at one time, in an integrated and multilevel way. However, despite the fundamental importance of advancing in the research fields - both quantitatively and qualitatively - political will still represents the greatest asset and, at the same time, the principal obstacle to a broader and more effective conceptualization of the Active City, and to its implementation. The main barrier is represented, both at political and academic level, by the lack of cross-disciplinary policies, actions, and researches.

That old lady, struggling to move around the streets of Lisbon grounding on her own willpower, experiences, during her errands, the whole spectrum of the effects brought by political and research approaches not focused on people everyday life, and on the human/urban body dichotomy.

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Endnotes

- [1] *Tasca* is a small low cost restaurant typical in Portugal.