The Liberty Network in Varese Province: Strategies for Its Knowledge and Enhancement

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Abstract Between the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century, the research of a national style produced various architectural experiments in Europe including the development of Liberty. In the Province of Varese as well as in the adjacent Canton Ticino, the diffusion of Art Nouveau was fostered by the creation of new rail links that became a source of tourism development. The great potential of Liberty valuable built system, connoted by a stratification of both human and natural elements that blended into a whole, is currently extremely vulnerable, its assets being often classified as minor examples and not subjected to law protection restrictions. Sustainable strategies for its knowledge and enhancement worth be promoted, adopting a holistic approach that includes both the preservation of the built heritage and the improvement of life quality, in a continuous dialectic between memory and design, tradition and innovation. Awareness should be raised about the importance of beauty as a fundamental right of human beings, considering the aesthetic experience as a normal attribute of our daily life and understanding that space livability is based not only on rational and functional aspects, but also on values and a sense of belonging with places. The purpose of this paper is to suggest possible perspectives to improve the people daily experience by enhancing the identity characters of a specific urban environment, inevitably including the preservation of the ecological conditions. Solutions based on a "space outfitting" approach could be proposed, which can be a response to current social changes, but also a transdisciplinary perspective to address the relationship between present and memory, relying upon reuse instead of new construction, low environmental impact, no waste, energy sustainability, social network and shared economy, participatory design, attention to the details, comfort and wellness.

Keywords Liberty · Cultural heritage · Beauty · Ecology · Identity

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1   Introduction

Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century, the emerging industrial bourgeois made the area of Varese, with its agreeable landscape characterized by the presence of several lakes and the Prealpine hills, one of its favorite holiday destinations. An essential support to this process was the construction of the railway that allowed the Milanese citizens to reach the countryside and spend their weekend time there. Many holiday homes, hotels, and leisure facilities were built according to the language of Liberty style that found here a perfect balance in the natural landscape [1]. Regardless its real influence to the Art Nouveau expression at a European level, this architectural heritage is strictly associated with the image of the city and still offers a significant contribution to its aesthetic quality despite the transformations suffered over time. In fact, beside few remarkable well-known buildings designed by influential architects, such as Giuseppe Sommaruga [2], Silvio Gambini, Ulisse Stacchini, today hundreds of noteworthy elements have emerged as a huge underestimated heritage spread in all 139 municipalities of the province of Varese.

However, in spite of its value, sometimes citizens and administrations seem not to be aware of the relevance of this little-known heritage to the quality of the urban space and the local identity. Many individual and social factors can prevent people to notice beautiful elements surrounding them. According to the American psychologist James Hillman [3, 4], a condition of "sensory anesthesia" can be pointed out as a result of fast movements, distraction, also due to the use of mobile devices together with our scarce aesthetic education and an increasing individualism, which leads us to focus on ourselves. In addition, the lack of protection laws and phenomena such as generational change, maintenance cost, etc. expose these buildings and artifacts to high risk of loss.

These little elements can also be considered from an ethical and ecological perspective, in terms of the impact of our everyday environment on the quality of life. In this respect, our city are not less significant in comparison to the scale of our relations. New technologies and the possibility of traveling low-cost make us perceive to be part of a global dimension in which the "proximity" does not seem to affect our well-being. Nevertheless, as Serge Latouche wrote [5], because of the lack of oil and the climate change, we cannot exclude that in the future our movements will be increasingly less distant, less frequent, less rapid and more and more expensive. However, independently from ecological and economic reasons, paying attention to our everyday environment is essential to feel at home in urban spaces and to improve our emotional attachment to places.

Appreciating the beauty of the little-known heritage asks for a particular awareness [6]. We need to look around with different eyes. How can we change our point of view? How can we enhance the beauty of the little things, to improve the quality of dwelling in the city? We believe that the best answer is to make places

"significant". We live in the cities with our body but also with our mind, spirit, ideas, imagination, memories and all these aspects should be taken into consideration.

Above all, we believe that to properly enhance the less known heritage we have to design actions aimed to improve people's awareness. Indeed, making places liveable is not only a technical issue; it should involve the inwardness of human beings, leaving space to people emotions, imagination, and stories. Usually, we experience the heritage mainly through cognitive faculties, by learning its history, or through physical engagement, for example by visiting sites, museums or buildings. However, we should design strategies which allow us to experience it also through emotions and sensations. Indeed, the urban spaces are part of our everydayness, and their value grows in time according to a complex system of relations that involve personal experiences. Many elements are involved in the everyday experience of the city and we should be able to interpret them in their complexity. Considering all these contributions within a "holistic" approach we could improve our aesthetic appreciation of the little-known heritage and recognize the reality of our mental life, both in its rational and fantastic dimension. Thanks to a transdisciplinary approach, we may weave humanistic and scientific aspects of knowledge, combining solicitations that come from the anthropological and psychological culture and from visual arts, making beauty identity and memory become not only public goods, but also essential dimensions for the collective and individual well-being [7].

2 The Features of Varese Liberty Heritage

The landscape identity of the Varese area is characterized by a complex of Liberty elements that form a diffused system of great aesthetic value. With the aim to support its knowledge and provide public administrations with tools to protect it, a project was started in 2011 addressed to the cataloguing of buildings and artifacts in Liberty Style. During this research, assets that are not always accessible and form the Varese Liberty heritage could be analysed [8].

Beside some masterpieces, well-known at a European level (e.g. *The Grand Hotel Campo dei Fiori* and the *Palace Grand Hotel* designed by Giuseppe Sommaruga, *The Poretti brewery* by architects Bihl and Woltz), most of Liberty Style buildings are constituted by private villas, generally inaccessible to the public. Indeed, in many cases, these assets are characterized by architectural elements, like turrets, painted bands, concrete window frames decorated with floral motifs, wrought iron railings, etc. that could play the role of embellishing the urban space. Whereas in many private villas distances, fences, trees, and other physical obstacles obstruct their view, in the case of ordinary residential buildings decorative elements of great interest are visible, as well as in the case of other remarkable catalogued buildings like hotels, leisure facilities, factories, funicular, tram and railway stations built according to the needs of the emerging industrial bourgeoisie (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Window frames decorated with floral motifs, Gallarate (VA)

Fig. 2 Wall fence of Villa Mauri. Gallarate (VA)

In many cases, the main facades are the only parts of the buildings that the citizens can appreciate, although sometimes the buildings' height cannot be easily perceived in its complexity due to the small width of the roads. Several remains of precedent buildings can often be found, like for instance window frames, ceramic tiles, painted decorations, graffiti, wrought iron railings, plaques, ornamental bands, decorative cement, as well as scattered isolated artefacts such as sculptures, gates, lamps. These details are typical features of the Liberty Style in Varese area, and can offer unpredictable occasions to discover beauty in our proximity.

Noteworthy interior decorations have been discovered inside the buildings made accessible thanks to the collaboration of the public administrations. Painted ceilings, wrought iron railings, decorated radiators, concrete tiles, etc. are all typical elements of the Liberty style in Varese area that in many cases went lost.

Among the catalogued elements, also many gardens and yards have been included, which often hosted beautiful elements such as vases, sculptures, gazebos, etc. (Fig. 2).

3 The Little-Known Varese Liberty Heritage, Strategies for Its Knowledge and Enhancement

Considering the current ways of using private and public spaces and the chronic lack of economic resources of public entities, a reflection is proposed, indicating some suggestions aimed at achieving a greater knowledge and enhancement of the described valuable heritage. These proposals are mainly based on a range of reversible and low-cost tools that can be adapted to specific features of the buildings and artefacts here considered. Specifically, all the interventions have been designed according to the following principles:

– all solutions should be temporary, flexible and reversible [9] and should not damage the heritage and the urban environment;
– all solution should be based on low cost materials;
– all proposals should try to involve citizens to take an active part in the enhancement process;
– new elements introduced into the landscape should be all the same color to help people to recognize them as part of the same project.

On this base, ten main actions are suggested in the attempt to define an approach in which many factors involved in the aesthetic appreciation of the little-known heritage are taken into consideration. Indeed, the aim is to increase people's awareness of the real impact that the beauty of the little things can offer to their everyday experience of urban spaces. Not only top-down procedures are suggested but also proposals that encourage citizens to take an active role in the enhancement process to improve their sense of belonging to the places and develop a natural attachment to them. Above all, actions are aimed to awaken people from the condition of indifference in which sometimes they experience the city, helping them to notice and appreciate elements in their proximity. Below, all these suggestions are briefly illustrated.

3.1 Look for Beauty

To increase the citizens' awareness of the importance of remarkable buildings, artefacts, details hidden in the city, they could be invited to look for them through a playful approach. Actually, top-down processes aimed to improve their knowledge are not enough to help people becoming aware of the potentiality of their role to the quality of the urban spaces [10]. By cooperating with local public administrations, an interactive platform could be set up to geo-localize elements already catalogued and to collect new contributions created by citizens using social media. At the same time, stickers with a QR code connected to the platform could be freely offered in
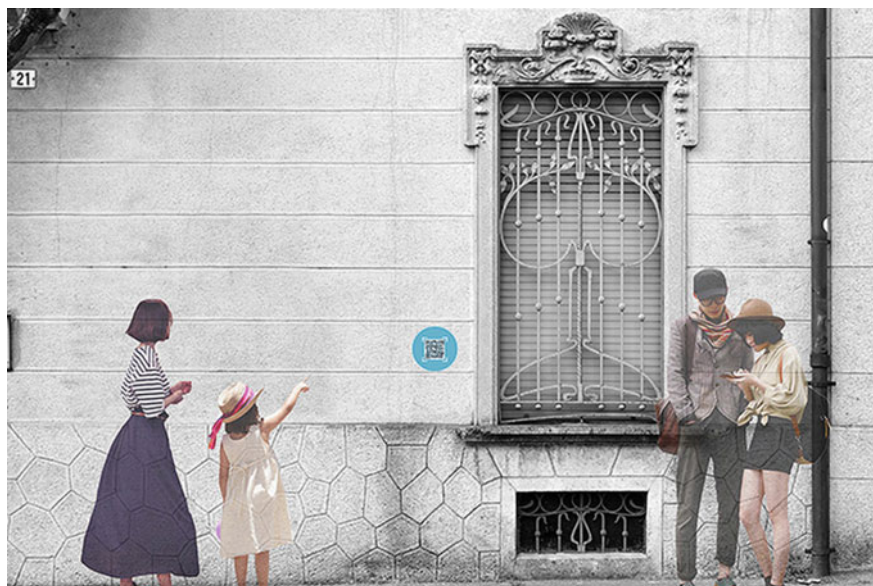
Fig. 3 Looking for beauty

public libraries, schools, city halls, etc. or could be downloaded from the website. This could allow people to know the project and encourage them to place the stickers near elements they consider noteworthy (Fig. 3).

3.2 Underline

To help people noticing already identified buildings and artefacts across the city, solutions based on removable and low-cost materials could be adopted. For example, an ideal link with noteworthy buildings could be created just by highlighting their presence through colored adhesive tapes. In order not to damage the elements surfaces, the tapes could be placed directly on the structures facade if possible or, alternatively, on the urban pavement. In this way, a path could be created linking important elements and driving the citizens to their discovery. Similarly, where possible, remarkable details on building façades could be evidenced always using adhesive tapes. This kind of temporary installations, that could be carried out occasionally, are an attempt to awaken the citizens' attention. Also, to encourage people to take an active part in the enhancement process, they may be invited to mark elements that they consider attractive by using the same tools.

3.3 Change Perspective

To help people perceiving urban spaces from a different perspective, some temporary installations can be suggested. By placing mirror adhesive films on suitable surfaces, beautiful elements hidden in the city can be discovered indirectly. An attempt could be carried out to allow some views that normally cannot be appreciated from the sidewalks, due to the buildings height or to the presence of physical obstacles.

3.4 Break

In the attempt to allow people to stop and observe beautiful city elements, some areas could be temporarily identified as places in which citizens have the "right to enjoy beauty". They could be marked on the pavement by using adhesive tapes, chalk sketches or other provisional solutions. This proposal is aimed to raise people's awareness about the importance to pause, as an occasion to experience the beauty of little things. According to this approach, to increase citizens' involvement, they could be invited to identify other areas around the city in which they would like to pause (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Changing perspective

3.5 Bring Out

As observed during the fieldwork, some beautiful objects are kept in private houses preventing people from their knowledge and appreciation. In an attempt to overcome the hindrance posed by the private property and to encourage the owners to display their goods, a temporary structure (like a container) could be used as a "museum" in order to host movable objects in public spaces. According to their availability, private owners could exhibit here their goods allowing citizens to see them. This small "museums" aim to soften the boundaries between inner and outer urban dimensions and become an opportunity for people to meet and strengthen their sense of belonging to places and communities. Moreover, according to the specific features of the Liberty heritage of Varese, widely scattered in the landscape, these museums can be moved from time to time across the 139 municipalities of the area to host the local heritage. By becoming "familiar", the "museums" could contribute significantly to raise the people attention to the enhancement project (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 Bringing out

3.6 Let People in

In the same attempt to connect private and public dimensions, owners could be invited to host occasionally an event in their gardens, allowing the outsiders to enter in secret areas. As emerged during the fieldwork, few owners of the catalogued buildings have taken part in similar initiatives in the past, for example hosting some vintage cars in their courtyards. Showing little-known elements and interior spaces of inaccessible buildings in private locations such as gardens, this initiative could offer a double support to establishing public-private connections. Considering the presence of noteworthy decorations in several buildings, the exhibition could also be housed in interior spaces according to their owners availability, allowing citizens to enjoy a secret heritage.

3.7 Give Voice to the Invisible City

Encouraging people to share their memories and stories about the little-known heritage and the city, some sketchbooks could be made available in public spaces. According to the book-crossing concept, people could find sketchbooks everywhere. Instead of reading a book, in this case, the users are encouraged to write or to draw their thoughts and interpretation of the urban spaces, also anonymously. Then, people are invited to leave the sketchbook in another place. The aim of this "sketchbook-crossing" is to increase people's emotional attachment to the places and to enhance the intangible city heritage. Periodically, these contributions could be collected and shared, for example in public readings, or using an interactive platform to signal remarkable elements identified by people. In addition, the most significant sentences could also be made public by writing them on posters affixed in public spaces.

3.8 Use Differently

In an attempt to enhance the little-known heritage of Varese through low-cost solutions, a proposal to use urban facilities could be developed referring to bus stops. Indeed, these structures form a system of elements scattered over the whole area of Varese that people are accustomed to see and use in their everydayness. The time spent waiting for public transport could become a precious occasion to catch people's attention towards the little-known heritage. In particular, some images of remarkable buildings or details placed in the proximity of the stop might be put inside these small structures, asking citizens if they could see them ("Can you see it?"). The attempt is to make people aware of close elements and to invite them to pay attention to their surrounding environment. Also, in this case, a playful

approach might be useful to achieve the expected result. The proposal could be developed in collaboration with the local public transport system.

3.9 Make People Feel at Home

To increase people's 'attachment' to the little-known heritage, noteworthy buildings and elements could become the scenery of some pleasant moments. To this aim, a system of areas could be identified, allowing citizens to use them peacefully. According to the principals underlying this project, only low-cost and removable elements could be used to equip these areas and make it possible to play, sit, read, meet, etc. The idea is that by making people feel at home in the city a deep interest towards the surrounding environment can raise. In particular, specific proposals addressed to children could be developed. Allowing the future citizens to grow up surrounded by beauty may encourage them to claim it as a fundamental need for their well-being. Moreover, by making people aware of the importance of the aesthetic quality of urban spaces, we can raise a careful attitude that can become a real safeguard action.

3.10 Take Care

Besides beautiful buildings and artefacts, some negative situations have also emerged from the study. Indeed, several elements are in a state of decay, and their presence worsens the aesthetic experience of urban spaces. Making citizens aware of the importance of beauty means also encouraging them to report these cases. A photography contest could be proposed that invites people to pay attention to damaged structures, etc. The same platform created to point out beautiful elements can also be used for this purpose. In this case, no physical elements are added to urban spaces, but city users become protagonists and the agent factors that can improve the aesthetic quality of urban spaces by acting indirectly.

4 Conclusions

The actions proposed should not be intended as a series of steps to be followed in sequence. Indeed, the expected outcome is not only to improve knowledge but to raise awareness of the importance of its aesthetic and identity value for the quality of life. Only by making people aware, they may require the beauty of urban spaces as a citizens' right. Besides cognitive aspects, also people's interpretation and experience are essential. Some possible strategies and tools have been illustrated to offer practical ways which can be transformed into guidelines. The solutions has

been outlined in the attempt to act immediately also in a period of economic and cultural crisis like the one that our society is going through. In fact, the heritage enhancement should not be a concern only in periods of well-being; on the contrary, it becomes even more necessary during difficult times, both to safeguard goods and to improve the quality of life. Indeed the perception of beauty is a real contribution to human well-being. The proposal shows some simple and low-cost solutions that, despite being tailored on the specific features and problems of the local heritage, can be easily replicated in other contexts, to enable people to appreciate the unique beauty of their everyday scenery. Consequently, each case becomes significant only within a more general vision, aimed to improve the quality of living in the city as a right for all. To achieve this goal, we need to open a perspective in which not only tools and strategies but possible actors—citizens, owners, local associations, institutions, etc.—should be involved according to their skills and responsibilities.

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