

14. BEAUTY, PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION¹

Designing with Homeless People

LIVING WITHOUT A HOME

Analysing the phenomenon of the homeless – the very definition of which is complex and controversial – means opening up an extensive and articulate reflection on interlinked aspects of urban complexity, poverty, marginality, difficulties affecting young people, the social exclusion of weak segments of the populations (women, the elderly, immigrants). It also opens up the themes of living, citizenship, social insecurity, economic precariousness, the welfare system and social policies. The problematic multidimensionality that characterises homeless people also imposes, both during the research phase and in the implementation of services, a complex response, which takes into account all the different components of discomfort. The lack of a home, job or health are all causes of difficulty or, in more severe cases, of lost ability to provide adequate answers to personal needs, especially in moments of crisis. Luigi Gui (2003) draws attention to the fact that many homeless people or adults in a state of severe exclusion are already at a disadvantage due to the fact that they lack any real endowment, especially in terms of emotional relationships.

In many cases, adaptation in the form of “sacrifice”, which hides a fear of failure, reduces the planning capacity of people who are already in difficulty. When self-perception is characterised by debasement and resignation, the social feedback could turn things around. This is where the work of social operators should come into play, by way of day-centres and public dormitories, before the adaptation to the new status becomes complete and every medium or long-term plan becomes an impossible, unimaginable aim (Meo, 2000). The social operator’s job is extremely delicate because while, on one hand, it is necessary to ensure that the “model user” is aware of the services and their mechanisms as well as knowing how to ask for and obtain what he/she needs and is entitled to. On the other hand, it is necessary to “deconstruct the user” in favour of the “person” and his/her independence. If we can manage to achieve the first aim only, we risk performing an assistance that makes the situation chronic:

As there is neither an exchange nor change, the user risks confirmation of his/her permanent status as a needy person requiring help. (Gui, 2003, p. 111)

Chiara Saraceno and Antonio Schizzerotto highlight how a lack of equality becomes disparity when it comes to obtaining rewards and privileges: influencing the behaviour of others so that it becomes advantageous (or, at least, not damaging) to us and to the groups we belong to as a whole; independently choosing the direction that our life takes and the characteristics of our daily existence (Brandolini, Saraceno, & Schizzerotto, 2009). Agency inequality affects the capacities of weaker people and prevents some individuals from transforming assets into possibilities.

The way we live is one of the most important dimensions of our self-construction as well as the construction of our wellbeing and the planning of our lives. The quality of life, the place and the context we live in reflect the structure of inequalities in society (Poggio, 2009). “Living without a home” does not mean living nowhere. It means building your existence in relation to different, often temporary spaces, shared with strangers (such as public dormitories). The more the “modern” home becomes a private and intimate place, reserved for family and the individual, the more those forms of living that differ from this model become stigmatised. Stigmatisation can then become “creative prediction” when residents internalize the negative portrayal that comes from the outside perception. In this context, is the public dormitory just somewhere to sleep or can it be a meaningful place for the improvement of the living conditions of people who live there for any length of time? What kind of social relations does the dormitory produce? Does it weaken or strengthen the social connections of its inhabitants? Is it a context which establishes links or does it generate more separation? Is it possible to talk about wellbeing in this kind of structure? The action-research entitled “Abitare il dormitorio/Living in a dorm” is part of a reflection on the capacity of places to determine the state of wellbeing of those who live in them.

INTERCULTURAL/INTERDISCIPLINARY IN ACTION

“Abitare il dormitorio/Living in the dorm” is the action-research set up in 2009 and led by the anthropologist Valentina Porcellana from the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences of the University of Turin and by the architect and designer Cristian Campagnaro from the Department of Architecture and Design of the Polytechnic of Turin. The project is dedicated to the social inclusion of vulnerable users and, more particularly, to the development of product and process strategies to strengthen the quality of temporary housing and the development of new forms of housing, which can be stable and durable, offering support to adults who are marginalized.²

The theoretical claim of the research is that housing service spaces for homeless people can only be redeveloped and transformed into places rich in symbolic content and opportunities for relationships, if social workers, guests and researchers reciprocally share knowledge, practices and customs in order to improve the daily life of the homeless. With a participatory approach, anthropology interacts with

architectural and design project culture to redesign the housing service and places that host them (Campagnaro & Porcellana, 2013).

In order to check how design could support the work against the marginalization suffered by homeless people, the research and the related actions have been investigating how architecture hosts services delivered to homeless people and how users interact with places and products in there. These actions will lead to the development of design concepts to solve the emerging issues detected during a preview ethnography phase. Services, tools, housing spaces, pieces of furniture, and communication systems, have been investigated and re-thought as part of the educational work carried out. Attention has been paid to the way spaces and objects interact with the biographies of the users and the operators and how these can qualify the service and act as enablers in the process of social inclusion.

The action-research project has involved services, social workers and local administrators. Through an anthropological mediation the language of bureaucracy, education, architecture and design are closer in the research. The reflection on spaces led us to rethink the purpose of housing for homeless people, not only in terms of cost reduction, but also in terms of development of territory, of citizens' welfare and cohesion and what is more, in terms of social recovery and positive reintegration of vulnerable people into society.

Inverted Question

This action-research project refocuses attention and agency on those “wasted lives” (Bauman, 2004), “non-people” (Dal Lago, 1999), the invisible, and homeless, who regain their human form and rediscover the taste for making decisions and choices that will also affect the lives of others. The American anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, within a perspective of critical medical anthropology, proposes to move from the foucauldian question “what kind of body society wants and needs?” to the question “what kind of society does the body want, dream of and need?” bringing back to the center of her investigation the subjective body. In this perspective

the body is the ground closer, more immediate, where social truths are shaped and contradictions staged, as well as the place of personal withstanding, creativity and struggle. (Scheper-Hughes, 2000, p. 284)

In light of the “inverted” question, the action-research develops, listening to what the homeless people who use public dormitories want, the needs that they express, starting with the chance to express their wants and needs. Active listening to unprecedented themes, which do not concern the condition of “user” but which make the most of know-how, skills, direct participation and the sharing of choices with regard to spaces and objects, triggers positive mechanisms in the entire hospitality system and is transformed into a gesture of care and attention.

The subjective body of homeless people is all too often secondary to the desires of the social body and the power of the political body, so much so as to generate the idea that they are nothing more than “users” of a service, “guests” who have no right to express their desires, requirements and specific needs. The incorporation of inequalities (Fassin, 1996; Scheper-Hughes, 2000), of the structural violence to which “non-people” and their “non-bodies” are subject to is expressed in sentences such as those pronounced by Aldo, aged 45, Italian, homeless, who has been using the social services circuit and dormitories of Turin for several years:

we do not deserve anything else.

The “Abitare il dormitorio/Living in the dorm” project tries to restore a sense of importance to those who feel that they are on the margins of life, useless, voiceless; including social workers who work every day with severe adult exclusion, rendered fragile themselves by a welfare system in crisis. They often have to make do without their wages for months, with no recognition of their social role. The action-research is also attempting to overturn the cultural attitude adopted by many people and public administrators, who maintain that beauty is a luxury for those in difficulty and that it can even be detrimental to their “reintroduction”. Sociology reminds us, however, that it is the deprived social spheres, including their housing, that

favour the adoption of unhealthy lifestyles. (Cardano, 2009, p. 137)

that contribute to creating a downward spiral of discomfort, with a very high social (and economic) cost. The activation of participative processes within health and social services creates new alliances between social science, the territory and public administrations but, above all, it builds unprecedented relationships, which are fed by listening without judging, by meeting people with very different life experiences, by the wellbeing that stems from mutual recognition.

THE SPHERE OF INTERVENTION

The project concentrates on the welfare system in support of homeless people and it does so starting from public dormitories, the services they provide, the quality of their architectures and the functionality of their furnishings. The actions aim to promote, around homeless people, process for the co-design and co-construction of new horizons of sense in relation to the housing provided for them, with a view to rethinking themselves. It brings in more people and organisations belonging to the economic fabric (operating in the fields of trades, creativity, academic research and education) in order to support the effectiveness of rethinking places and services.

Inside-Outside

In Italy, the places that provide hospitality for the homeless are sealed off with respect to their context and are anonymous within it. This absence of permeability,

as well as the stigma attached to them, creates a distance that translates into a lack of reciprocal acknowledgement and an absence of mutually advantageous relations.

There is no form of osmosis between hospitality for severe marginality and the areas they are in, which are often areas in precarious situations, weakened by the financial crisis and in conditions of considerable social, economic and cultural vulnerability.

Despite the often liminal differences between the status of “those inside” and “those outside”, despite the biographies and skills, that every user of the hospitality services possesses and the fact that they all have their own story, there is no communication between these two worlds other than mutual denial and conflict. Invisible and unseen, they arrive, they sleep and they leave the centre until the next night, without building up any form of constructive cohabitation.

In this sense, in Agrigento and Turin, where the multidisciplinary team is working, the research is tackling the difficult task of restoring and generating relations of positive reciprocity between the hospitality centre and the neighbourhood. In the Sicilian city, starting with the history of relations between building and neighbourhood, languages and projects are being developed, retraceable to the themes of town planning, design and the visual arts, which tell the story of the definitive transition of the building to a “place in the neighbourhood”, open to it and at its service.

In the capital of Piedmont, within the scope of the opening of a public dormitory for the homeless, a work project has been set up to plan a process of real connection of the dormitory with the active life of the neighbourhood and the district. It happens via the installation of neighbourhood services with high added value, which work with a view to reducing the stigmatisation of places for the homeless and to promoting

new forms of relations and economies within the city. (Galliani, 2011, p. 11)

Beauty and Change

In dormitories there is no beauty and no perception of an image of beauty; the users that sleep there have, for different reasons, lost the ability and the strength to imagine scenarios of quality and prospects for change in which the human element becomes central again.

The users make do with what is on offer, whatever it is, and feel as if they are in debt, suffering because of this feeling. An ambivalent, bipolar and contradictory relationship develops, alternating different behavioural trends.

The operators of the services endure the pressure of daily performance-related and quantitative demands, often limiting their actions to offering “emergency” responses to urgent requirements. If questioned about a possible intervention, they ask third parties to take a reparatory approach to structural shortcomings and seem to prefer to abstain rather than support a constructive interaction with the problem

of the fruition and working wellbeing of these spaces, which sees them involved in their re-planning.

The action-research project faces the processes of delegation and relative resignation to the status quo; these generate a tendency towards “conservation” against a change that might somehow upset the balance of things, of relations and possibly also of hierarchies.

Within the scope of the “Abitare il dormitorio/Living in the dorm” project, anthropologists and designers work through constructive communication and a participatory approach, using the tools of the design project and, more generally, the languages of creativity. They generate ecosystems in which the idea of beauty and change break through and the need for a qualitative dimension of the service acquires priority, despite the daily pressures and poor prospects of the service. The interventions aim to bring quality to the transitory presence of the homeless in these places and to simplify the assistance disbursed by operators in support of this housing.

In Turin at the hospitality centre in Via Sacchi 47, coordinating and facilitating a wall painting intervention and renewing the furnishings has taken place; in Milan, at the structure in the Via degli Artigianelli 6, dedicated to taking in homeless drug addicts and alcoholics, an attempt was made to improve the effectiveness of the slight amount of space available. Again in Turin, at the structure in Via Ghedini 6, the project included self-built micro-architectural interventions and information design in support of orientation, and in Verona which we will discuss later.



Figure 14.1. Milan, Via degli Artigianelli 6 at Fondazione Progetto Arca Onlus housing (Courtesy of Daniele Lazzaretto)

METHODOLOGY

Anthropology and Design implement the action-research by sharing, each in relation to its own repertory of tools and disciplinary languages, a method that envisages three important phases: ethnography, design and accompaniment. They “merge” into one another and lead first to the definition and then to the satisfaction of the demand for design. Constant feedback processes and sharing among stakeholders are envisaged in the pursuit of the actions, so that the participatory dimension of the process is always preserved.

Through the methodological tools offered by anthropology we are trying to bring out the perception of the “space-dormitory” from the point of view of those who experience it. To do this, in the different phases of the project we have used different tools: in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation and ethnography of the spaces. The analysis sought to take into account the ways in which the spaces and the objects interact with the biographies of the users and with the activities of the operators. It is mainly thanks to ethnographic research carried out in France that the “ethnography of domestic space” has been assessed (Segalen & Le Wita, 1996; Bonnot, 2002). Great attention was given to the common spaces of the house, like the living room, where the family usually meet at certain times of the day (Chevalier, 1999; Bonnin & Perrot, 1989). Ethnography of domestic spaces in Italy is no longer a secondary field of research within broad anthropological studies. In this context, we are experimenting with various methods of detection and analysis, which include the use of audiovisual and video tour, space mapping and object detection, drawing of tracking data to record the movements of the inhabitants of the house, autobiographies and “biographies of objects of affection” (Giorgi & Fasulo, 2008; Dei, 2009).

In the project “Abitare il dormitorio/Living the dormitory”, the ethnography of the spaces has contributed to discover the elements that characterize the structure and organization of the dormitory and the needs perceived by users and educators. Through the experience of those who “live” the dormitory, the space has been also explored in its symbolic meanings.

After listening to the needs of the actors involved, we provide an elaboration of the needs and perceptions with a view to mediation between the different instances of the stakeholders. The next stage of synthesis entails the creation of a document in which individuality is overcome to the benefit of a choral portrayal of the context of intervention; common features emerge which, as such, are portrayed as strengths of the process and diversities are portrayed on a standardised and contemporary basis and as a form of opportunity, with judgement on their solution suspended until a later date. This output is the first step towards intercultural dialogue and overcoming the possible conflict determined by the single positions and the eventual stiffening of the stance taken by stakeholders in the process. At this stage, the ability of mediation and suspension of judgment, typical of the anthropological perspective, is very useful to allow the construction of a community of practice acting within the project.

The act of presentation of the document to the stakeholders (restitution and storytelling) is the accompaniment of the gaining of awareness of the content. The two voices of the team, the architect/designer and the anthropologist co-construct the narration for the benefit of an audience that represents the people and the initial circumstances. The narration of the contents requires that we proceed with their elaboration and organisation towards a graphic synthesis and an iconographic language that facilitates acquisition and understanding.

In this first phase of the process, the anthropologist is no longer the “story thief”, but the person who enacts with the designer the direct engagement with the problem and its contextualisation and the one who supports “on-going restitution” as a tool to help the progress of the research. The architect/designer acquires qualitative data by interacting “with” the anthropologist (Ingold, 2013). The observation-participation method strengthens the maieutic process specific to design, analysis and definition of the demand for design, with a view to qualifying the complex of requirements in relation to everyday places, people and times.

The subsequent design phase envisages as its first activity, preliminary to and in preparation for design, the consolidation of the data acquired during the previous phase. The document is delivered to the user (use, management and context) for submission to a re-elaboration of the contents, which is also shared among all the stakeholders. The comparison, often mediated by the members of the research team to favour access to content by certain commissioning groups, aims at consolidating the scenario defined and described in the ethnographic process. By restoring a third-party aspect to the contents in relation to the circumstances from which they originate, standardising them and portraying them with a view to constructive synthesis, it is possible to fill gaps, make up for inconsistencies and contradictions and sanction convergences on themes, in order to proceed more securely and effectively.

We have said that this is a process that alternates moments of collection and elaboration with phases of sharing and consolidation. It is a model that repeats the same modalities, elaboration, sharing and consolidation, in every phase of the process.

In this second phase too, therefore, these attentions are adapted to the anticipated output, phase by phase. The alternation of hetero-direct moments, in which the team acts independently from the user system, employing its own skills, and shared and participated moments, allows the evolution of design-related thought. At the same time, the constant monitoring of the development of the design towards an adequate representation of users, with respect for them, creating responsibility among them and enhancing their value.

In this way, the design strategies that qualify the aims to be achieved, the tactics to adopt in order to attain them, and therefore the projects that convey consistency to the strategy, take shape within the consolidated scenario through the ethnographic process. Then the real and virtual prototypes provide a better understanding of how the proposals will work. In this way, the project is transformed into the tangible

forms of objects, products and services that it sees as appropriate and effective and which, as such, become a real element of the renewed scenario.

In this case too, design and anthropology interact, sharing skills and portraying their different viewpoints in relation to the process, in defence of the philosophy behind the research, because

the tendency of each form of knowledge to model reality according to the logic of its own speculations and languages would thus lead to a somewhat biased result, for only one of the components involved would tend to gain the upper hand. This means that it would not be an equalised mix of outcomes, not satisfying the mix of values that the product system requires if it is to emerge in the contemporary trading system. (Celaschi, 2008, pp. 19–31)

The action does not end with the start of the service; the team is called up to accompany the launch of the services and the consolidation of everyday activity (post-occupancy and follow-up). It is also fundamental that the team return to observe how the services interact with the biographies and how designers use them, day by day. The progressive dismissal of the design team is characterised by an observation and monitoring phase. Interviews and observations allow verification of the effectiveness of the planned interventions, the ability to serve and facilitate educational design and the insurgence of bottom-up enterprises with a view to creating responsibility and emancipation in the users of the service.

DESIGN ACCELERATORS

Within the scope of the design development process, the method envisages the set-up of intensive design actions that, concentrated in time and arranged with respect to themes and circumstances, facilitate the participative approach, the convergence of skills, sensitivities and biographies and the tangibility of proposals. The tool and the operational method for the development of these processes is that of the design workshop. It can be considered as the accelerator of the development processes.

The participative rationale is that with which the stakeholders – the homeless, service managers, educators and designers – become involved, being placed on the same level at the time of the design research and during the subsequent phases of construction, production and marketing. Design and anthropology/educational science students often take part in these moments, restoring an educative sense to the design experience, in which students play their role in a real context and gain experience. The model of conduction of the intensive design action is that inspired by the “empowered peer education”, where a variety of knowledge, on the basis of the biographies, meets and is compared in a relationship of exchange, within the sphere of a shared design experience, from which numerous outcomes and new meanings emerge (Pellai, Rinaldin, & Tamborini, 2002).

The process is one where every experience, every biography and the meeting of numerous sensitivities and cultures, generating scenarios, products and services

that are capable of sustaining the construction of an imagined system of change and design that goes beyond what emerges on a daily level.

BEAUTY ALWAYS WINS

“Beauty always wins” is the event which, in terms of complexity and verified effectiveness, portrays the most representative output of the research. It has allowed verification and consolidation of the methodological model. It has permitted an improvement in the spaces of the dormitory and day centre for homeless. It has supported the educational project in the production of forms of self-management of the service. It has increased the awareness that occupational laboratories, already existing in the structure, could result in original and authorial languages. It has given a group of students the chance to make use of untraditional forms of education, which have enabled a direct engagement with reality.

The event, a design workshop coordinated by the anthropologist Valentina Porcellana, was set within the broader collaboration entitled “Living in the dorm/ Designing with Homeless People” which the team entered into with the non-profit cooperative, Il Samaritano Onlus. It took place in Verona from 26 February to 2 March 2013, at the dormitory for homeless people run by the Cooperative, with Design and Visual Communication students, postgraduate students in Eco-design at Turin Polytechnic and professional educators who had graduated from the Faculty of Education at the University of Turin. There they were involved in a workshop, in which they had the chance to share a design process with homeless people and social workers.

They worked with these latter through a series of focus groups led by anthropologists, finally coming to define the emotional aspects of the use of space. The new insight into the perception of the places and services and their criticalities, enabled the participants to develop new strategies of intervention related to the organization of the building and design concepts about the facilities that will be provided in the dormitory.

The design activities were shared with users, operators and volunteers and resulted in the tangible accomplishment of the concepts: wall paintings abstract biographical elements of the homeless further characterising the environment and, over a weekend, users and design students performed them, sharing skills and tools. The information design system for orientation in the structure and the tools for using the outdoor space were self-produced by the homeless, created using the tools available in the joinery workshops. The canteen and café area, the relaxation areas in the common spaces and the bed-nightstand-wardrobe system for the sleeping area, destined to provide housing in winter, complete the system of interventions.

The development and embodiment of the ideas has respected the self-production strategies shared among the process stakeholders, making the most of the biographies, skills and professionalism of the users of the service. The designs draw on biographic

elements and specific circumstances of the homeless with respect to the housing provided and the service offered, giving them value, incorporating them into the general fruition of the structure and the service, which design culture identifies as essential. This generates products suited to the space and to the people, which are also worthy in terms of the relational and proactive value that they express. They tell the story of lives that have crossed paths in the everyday nature of moments of shared life and negotiations: lives that have compared themselves with each other and offered reciprocal support in the attempt to understand their mutual circumstances in a propitious context free from conflict (Bourriaud, 2010).



Figure 14.2. Verona, "Beauty always wins" process

A communion of intent has been created, along with a friendly complicity, a tendency towards change which continued beyond the hours of educational activity, beyond the five days of the workshops and during the construction phases.

Those who return to the structure today are received as though they were returning home, to their family, and are asked to say hello to those who are absent, because people start the project as technicians, anthropologists and educators and leave it as friends.

For young designers, the multidisciplinary experience was all-encompassing and exciting and it offered them interesting opportunities, on an educational level and with regard to the construction of responsible citizenship, to gain experience in the relationship with other languages and disciplines, and to discover the practical aspects of design and creativity in a social context of absolute necessity.

Design has created a tangible vision that hospitality centres have to be places for regeneration, where they offer discontinuity from the chronic drift of the state

of marginality, linked to the fact that people have no fixed abode. Hospitality centres have to offer relational and educational support to help intercept and interrupt the degenerative curve that afflicts those who have no network, family or friends, supporting those who have to face life's difficulties alone. In this sense, the multidisciplinary action has tried to promote the ecosystem necessary to this process for the reconstruction of the individual and his/her ability to be a citizen and accept the consequent entitlements, obligations, hopes and responsibilities. In this sense, the "Locanda del Samaritano" of Verona (this is the name of the centre which celebrated, together with the city, the completion of this transformation process in May) offers new prospects in terms of sense, suggests possibilities, stimulates and provides hospitality.

The solutions conceived and adapted, outline an idea of beauty that goes beyond the contemplative dimension and tends towards that of a functional and fruition-based nature, acting, also in terms of perceptive quality, to achieve a reduction of the conflict, of the psychological and ergonomic load, facilitate the use of a service, for the promotion of relationships. Pallets have become benches and flowerbeds where people can meet. Symbols accompany paths and tell stories.



Figure 14.3. Verona, "Ugo" chair from pallet wood at "La locanda del Samaritano" housing

Colours explode on the walls, among the furnishings of the café, canteen and sleeping area. The redundant presence of plants as a central element of the places conveys perspective and encourages responsibility for their care. A wall treated with blackboard paint invites people to write greetings, share thoughts and emphasise the duties that characterise community life. Beauty is a round table around which we

meet and eat but also an armchair with cushions that provides a place where one can be alone for a few minutes, because sharing constantly is tiring.



Figure 14.4. Round tables at “la locanda del Samaritano” housing

The project has been used to promote languages and contemporary shapes, which users have discovered as potentially belonging to them, which they have acquired and which they now use to talk about themselves and to plan their role in relation to the services they interact with. Several months after the completion of the project, they have pursued the joinery project, adopting the wood carving techniques conceived to create symbols and produce new items inspired by them.

They are still creating more seating systems using the same pallet construction system used to make the benches installed outdoors. Other users look after the plants that grow between the tables in the canteen. These activities are completely independent of the project team and are characterised by progressive emancipation with respect to the support of the structure’s operators.

In this sense, the beauty that wins is the participative process. It is the project that becomes your own because you have personally contributed to it by taking on responsibility, facing up to its limits. It is the assumption of a leading role, without delegations, without credits, without debts. It is the ambition to achieve something that you thought you were not entitled to. It is the request for an opinion. It is the rediscovery of long-forgotten emotions and deadened skills. It is a space, an opportunity to discuss and meet someone who wants to do something with you instead of for you.

NOTES

- ¹ Although the contribution is the result of a joint reflection, paragraphs 1, 2 and 4 are due to V. Porcellana, paragraphs 3, 5 and 6 to C. Campagnaro.
- ² The research is now part of the activities scheduled in the framework of the protocol of intent (2013) between the two Departments and fio.PSD, Italian Federation of Bodies for Homeless People.

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