

## Commons and public spaces

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### 1 ABSTRACT

In the contemporary city, beside public and private spaces there is a third type of spaces: the common places. These are spaces which are maintained and managed by people from the surrounding community. Such examples are community gardens and common allotments, and other open (or closed) spaces where people meet and work together.

Urban commons have a long history in Italian cities since the Middle Ages, where they were then mainly represented by untutored fields and grasslands. Modern town planning decided both a specific use and owner for every space, but in the cities there survive wastelands where people can experience the “self-building” of place and in this way express themselves, growing things, taking care of a common ground and building a community. There are many examples in Rome and other cities all over the world (some case will be presented in the session). These allotments and gardens, because of the self building of the people and the openness, have all the characteristics of user friendly spaces: as their use was never identified, people here have more freedom for use, only being sure nothing will be destroyed or damaged by them and respecting the common rules. The active existence of these common spaces, while the most are occupied, is tied to the wealth and the good disposition of either the private owners and the public institution holding ownership of the space.

The importance of these places for the city and its community should be recognized by the planners, who should find ways of both improving and protecting them.

### 1 COMMON SPACES IN TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY CITIES

#### 1.1 Commons. A tentative definition.

Which kind of goods are Commons? Many experts tried to answer to this question, giving definition based on the ownership and the openness. But it's impossible to have a list and to make a taxonomy, because in the concept of Commons you can't separate the thing (for example the water) from the community and from the rules of use that this community decided (Cacciari 2010). So when people call something “common” they simultaneously say that they want this thing to be open and free and that they want to decide the rules of the management (access and care) of this particular good.

Normally in contemporary city the space is divided into public and private space accordingly to the belonging and the openness. You can therefore find public spaces open for all (for examples the street) and also public open private spaces (for example shopping center – not very “public” because those are open only for consumers). In spite of the free entrance, there is not a free use: in Italy for instance most of historical places are tailored for tourists, and not for citizens. A few years ago the municipality of Firenze forbade to everyone to play football or other games, or to play guitar, or sit in the ground or in the stair of the churches, especially in the city center; and in Genova a policeman asked an old lady seated in a chair outside her door if she had the permission (and naturally if she had payed the fee).

In front of this *Public Space Crisis* there are thousands of *Tiny Resistances* (Sandercock, 1998): formal or informal groups of people that, with or without permissions, occupy untutored field and wastelands, clear the ground and begin to growing the field and to creating a common space open for other inhabitants.

This places are not properly private, and not properly public. They can be defined Urban Commons because of the openness, the free entrance, the free use and the self organization of the community that take care of the space.

## 1.2 Middle Ages

We have information about common ground since the Roman Ages. We know that the Roman law admit only two type of property: private and public, and states that private property is a natural right. Most of the modern occidental laws descended from this one. But in the same time we know that others populations, for example German people or Celtic one, have different ways of managing the land used for agriculture and grasslands.

With the fall of Roman Empire, different kind of organization appears, and in the Middle Ages in Italy the “civic use” became widespread. In feudal organization the right to use prevails up on the ownership. We therefore know that people can access some spaces and have the right to use wood, or go to mushrooms and chestnut picking, even in the land of the Lord.

In Italian Communes there is a lot of ambiguity between goods belonging to the municipality and goods belonging to the community. The managing of the goods is strictly connected with the use, and we know that when the municipality had to decide about the conveyance or the sale of a part of the good with a frequently use by the citizens, the citizens were involved in the choice. Because of this ambiguity and the strong differences between one city and another, we haven't a list of the commons, but we know that normally they included: streets and squares, river and riverside and island in the river, grasslands and untutored fields, walls of the city and places nearby, the mill and other building with common use, and so on. In this list we can find *Braide* or *Barcacce*, that were empty spaces sometime use like grasslands, but free for different common use, like military training, fairs, or civic and religious fests.

Because of the pestilence plague that infested Europe after the enlargement of the wall of the cities due to the need for new buildings, free ground and grasslands may be found even in the urban texture.

## 1.3 Modern Ages

In modern ages we loose track of the commons, because of the increase of the bourgeois importance, as well as the private property. Commons were treated like something archaic, not suitable for the Modern Ages, particularly in the Illuminism Ages, where people thought that rationality was the right way to proceed in all the life side, and that technicians had the instrument to decide everything.

We can find a track of the commons (or land with free access and use) in the Nolli Map of Rome. In 1748 Gian Battista Nolli drew a complete map of the city of Rome, that is the first example of a modern cartography. Houses, churches, monuments, as well as villas and gardens intra muros, and some near the wall are drawn in this picture. All the gardens are signed with the owners name “*Vigna de' Padri Penitenzieri di Santo Spirito*” or “*Orto Riccardi*” and so on. Near Testaccio a place is named *Prati del popolo di Roma* (Roman People Gardens). We can therefore argue that in the city of Rome there were few places that people could access and use freely.

## 1.4 Contemporary Ages. The case of Roma.

Planning in the contemporary ages doesn't contemplate the existence of places without ownership or with a free use; notwithstanding sometimes the growing of the cities create some empty spaces, that

may be too small for building, or are abandoned, or are of unknown property, or they are in places where it is impossible to build (for example on the riverside). Kevin Lynch defines these empty spaces like *Wastelands*; he also wrote that these spaces are strategic because they are free for experiments, and here a marginalized way of life survives and new things begin (Lynch, 1990).

A famous example of such cases are the community gardens of Loisada, New York. These gardens were created in the vacant lots that were empty for the abandonment and the demolition of the building, because of the crisis of the Seventies (in the city of New York there were 25 000 of vacant lots in 1977). These *Wastelands* were occupied by the inhabitants of the neighborhood for growing and improving the way of life. These gardens still exist. The groups are composed by very different urban farmers. Anyway the people involved in this practice while working can share experiences and knowledges, and of course tell each other the story of their life. The community gardens of Loisada are now famous all over the World and they have been strongly defended from property speculation.

The city of Rome had a very rapid and disorderly growth especially after the Second World War, thus there are a lot of wasteland or places without use, as they are hidden, or vacant. These places are often dangerous because they are filled with waste, or because they became meeting points for robbers or places for other criminal activities. People don't like those spaces because of this dangerousness, but also because they are simply dirty.

A lot of active citizens in Rome have decided to work together for growing and taking care of such spaces and for creating community gardens. More than seventy different experiences of groups that manage and take care of vacant lots now exist in Rome, and the number is still increasing.

Because of the self-building they are the right answer of the inhabitants' need of open spaces to meet each other.

Four cases in the city of Rome are here presented.

#### 1.4.1 Galli Garden

The Galli garden is located in a little hidden lot in Piceni street, in the district of San Lorenzo, Rome. It owes its name to the fact that it lies on the bed of the old Galli street, which no longer exists. Before the park there was a piece of asphalt left to itself, becoming an illegal dump. In 2001 this little vacant lot was occupied by a group of associations: the Popular Gym, the social center "32", the cooperative "Oltre", with the aim of creating a playground for children under the age of eight, as the district had no such space: its position, quite secluded from the neighborhood, and its shape, easy to fence being closed by walls and building on three sides, are ideal for the purpose.

The objectives for managing this garden are:

- ▲ creating a special playground especially for children under the age of 8;
- ▲ creating a social meeting point, different from pubs, restaurants, bars that are the only ones represented in the district;
- ▲ involving in the growing and caring activities the schools of the neighborhood, and giving to the children an open playground of which the schools are not furnished;
- ▲ opening the garden for all children and their families in the district and from outside.

When the will of these associations and citizens, to occupy and manage this space, became widespread, a man tried to appropriate the lot. He wanted to build a parking lot for his B&Bs in the same place. The result was a legal battle in which the Municipality and the Province of Rome together with the associations involved brought an action against this man, and after a few years the use as a public space was finally recognized.



Fig. 1: Galli Park.

After the legal battle the Province took in charge the early works like replacing asphalt with grass and equipment with some games for children. On 13th November 2006, the garden has been inaugurated and completely entrusted to the associations, who have had the license to open a small bar, run by two volunteers, whose purpose is to secure funds for maintenance and improvements. The other source of funding comes from the offers that are made by those who organize here birthday parties.

People self built the cabin of the bar with an available bathroom. For those who want it is also possible to use a barbecue, chairs and tables, piled in a corner so not to take away place from the children's playground.

The park is open daily. In the evening is closed with a lock, except when evening activities are organized: in 2010, some films were projected in the summer evenings, but after complaints from some neighbors and the occupation of an old Cinema in the district, which allows better projections because of the darkness and the equipment, in 2011 only occasional late afternoon films for children were shown.

In addition to the swings and slides, some games are available to children. These were given by the families of the children that are too big to continue coming here; these games belong to the park and the kids can use and share them how long they want and then put it back. Keep the area clean and tidy is a task for everyone and no one avoid from that.

The closure and the presence of other families give a sense of safety and security, so the children can play with lot of freedom and sometimes they are entrusted to other adults so their parents can fulfill other small duties (it is always time limited, but sometimes very valuable). Moreover, this represents an area of integration for newcomers to the neighborhood: they come here with their sons and begin to forge bonds with other mothers and fathers.

For the future they hope to increase the number of visitors, which is already of thirty families of regulars users, and they would make a covered room for the winter and a small library of books for children.

#### 1.4.2 The Land of Mandrione – Casilina Vecchia Committee

The area around Mandrione street and Casilina Vecchia street is about 4.5 km long and 800 meters wide. Its shape allow us to be so precise in tracing the boundaries: once you take this street, at the fountain of Porta Furba, you can count only three / four entrances or exits, and that gives the feeling of being in a long corridor flow: homes squeezed between the Felice aqueduct (built in Roman Ages) and the railway to Naples, and beyond the walls of the Bank of Italy and its sporting center, the precincts of the productive activities, the gates of houses and nurseries. All along the entire street there is a continuous line of parked cars and no footpath, so it's very difficult to cover it on foot or by bike, despite the charm of the place would require it. It's even more difficult to stop: there aren't places where it could be possible, except the space in front of Casilina station, that's not used. This little enlargement of the street it's surrounded by the station and the high walls of the Bank of Italy; here there is room to stop only if you drive a car: no benches, no sits and so on.



Fig. 2: Mandrione Street with the aqueduct

Here there is a little but active committee composed by around fifteen inhabitants. Most of them are born here and spent here their childhood, and now they are all retired they came back to live here and decided to improve the neighborhood.

One of the main needs for the inhabitants was then to have a public open space, to meet together. So they conquered, cleaned up, arranged and opened the *Land* of Casilina Vecchia.

This area, 500 square meters wide belongs to the Railways, which, after some passages that were not always easy and that prove the citizen's persistence in asking and following the affair, have granted free use of the Town Hall. Initially the Railways talked about a free transfer to the Municipality, which has literally missed the appointment. After that the land was offered directly to the committee, who declined because they wanted a public owned place, not belonging to a group of people, however great or small the group was and however they might decide to keep it open. So they continued to work in order to mediate between the City and the Railways. The committee mediation had its gain in this agreement of free use: the Municipality guarantees the opening of the ground to all citizens, and the committee take care and manage the area and the activities in it. After

the first works in charge to the Town Hall (the clearance from asbestos and other dangerous waste), the committee has always maintained and cleaned the *Land* and gradually equipped it with benches, tables, canopies for shade, fruit trees, children's playground and a barbecue, which lately has become a large masonry fireplace. It is a place that may be used to gather, get together, eat, read in the shade and sit in the ground. The fruits of the trees are available to all as long as you "do not come with the bag," meaning that if you leave it for others. It is a place that people define "*Se magna se non piove*" (you can eat if it's not raining - the rain is the only thing that can keep people out of here) and it's a user friendly space: you can place wherever you want and stay as long as you want, a sign at the entrance explains you that the only duty is to leave it clean, so there are even available ashtrays.



Fig. 3: the *Land* of Mandrione – Casilina Vecchia Committee

The constant presence of people and their almost daily care for its maintenance, cleaning and improving make this place very pleasant, but there is more: the ability of the people of the committee to enter into a relationship with the regular users of the *Land* makes you feel welcomed into a common space and makes natural for everybody to leave the space clean (the only accidents have happened at night, but we talk about unimportant things, met with a little of regret, but without much thought).

Thanks to these characteristics the land has become attractive not only for the residents of the street Mandrione - Casilina Vecchia, but also for the neighboring districts, for students, for people arriving from other parts of the city. Curiously this space, located right in the center of the neighborhood, is also the place of meeting between the committee and the city: a meeting place from which to gather support and news, to make known what are the requests and needs of the committee, to be together and socialize.

### 1.4.3 *Verdemarino* (Ladispoli, Roma)

The municipality of Ladispoli (Roma) made in 2011 *Sbilanciamoci col Verde*, a participatory process about the green areas of the city. During this process the municipality proceeded in the assignment (on call) of green areas to groups of citizens that wished to take care of this places. Some inhabitants responded to this notice and started the experiences of self-management of green areas, one of which is *Verdemarino*.

The group is composed by four active citizens, who already had the idea to do something in this little square before the call. The participatory process has been the occasion for everyone to meet each other and as soon as possible they started with the planning and the works.



Fig. 4: *Verdemarino*. View from above.

One of the main objectives, in addition to the beautification of the little square, is the involvement of other neighbors both for helping (cleaning, control, water the plants and the green) and for attending. The purpose is to make sure that the gardeners are doing something beautiful and useful for the citizens, and to make this flowerbed alive not only for the plants.

After assigning the area the work began as soon as possible, trying to involve other people and growing the ground. These work days are advertised through mailing, flyers and blogs. One of the first things built was the bulletin board, with the contact, the presentation and a calendar with the turn to water.

The second steps included the arrangement of benches in the shade for parking, fencing with low hedges, planting new plants, the implementation of initiatives for the entertainment of the place and the search for new employees to take care of the place. In addition, the longer term, they want to build an irrigation system and a little footpath.

Last summer parties and concerts took place there in order to let the people know this area and to include other citizens; in June and July they organized the “Flower cooks party”, with cakes and meals made with flowers. The parties have also the objective to find some money for buying other plants or equipments.

The hope is to enlarge the group from four to thirty persons constantly involved, everyone with small tasks distributed according to ability and willingness.

The financing of the work is done through donations of plants, furniture and funds. The initial money was found through the sponsor: donations were made by some retailers and operators of bathing area and by a nursery.

The people of *Verdemarino* have a friendly attitude with the majority of the City and the municipality. They hope to get help, especially in future, but they prefer to be disconnected at the initial stage, to show that people can make it on their own and have some independence. They would like to pass the idea that you must be active and move to try and improve things, but this message sometimes encountered indifference or mistrust on the part of those who prefer to delegate to the appropriate office. Despite this, the objective is to arrive after a year of opening, to have some visitors, helpers, new members, people who love spending time here and who recognize the value of the place.

#### 1.4.4 Gabatella Garden

Garbatella Garden are located in a lot of 4.500 squared meters near the building of Lazio Regional offices. This lot has been empty for many years. The city planning destined this area for a public park, but nothing was done accordingly in the last 15 years.

The park is in the side of a very big road with a lot of cars and noise and could be a green barrier among the houses of Garbatella and the pollution of the road.

In these 15 years of battle to defend the green area from property speculation and waiting for the park, the associations and the inhabitants have seen in that place a circus, a car dealer open air, a dump of rubble, and so on. All these activities damaged the ground and left a soil of broken asphalt were it's impossible to grow anything.



Fig. 5: Garbatella Garden.



The need of a green area was so strong that some associations decided to put there some allotments. They choose this destination because of the continuous presence of the gardeners and because of the wishes of some inhabitants that knew the experiences in other European capitals. It was also because of the many aged people that are over the sixty years old that live in the neighborhood, and that have the frequent wish to grow a garden: in Italy most of retired people have one allotment, or are waiting for one. Moreover for younger people and families the garden could be a little income, which is important as there are some unoccupied persons. Naturally, because of the management of the locale association and neighbors, the rule for the assignation and the maintenance of the garden are less bureaucratic than the ones of the municipality.

Because of the gravel and the asphalt there was no chance to grow in the area, so the association “Orti di Garbatella” had to dig some “pool” of 40 squared meters and fill them with fertile soil. This initial pools were 15 and were assigned to individuals and little groups and families according to their being retired, unoccupied, or of their contribution in the project. The gardeners are very different people: there are young anarchist, family, squatters and old people.

The gardens are closed only to avoid the dog entrance, but the door is always open and you can have a walk whenever you want. The gardens exist since three years and nobody took away tools or fruit without asking. In growing together people share some tools and some fruit: the main rule is “everyone grow, everyone eat”: the main objectives are to defend the green in this area and to create a meeting point for people to socialize.

A part of the area is dedicated to establishing relationships: there is a table with chairs for meeting and common dinners, a place where children can stay together and play, and they made an handmade a scarecrow.

In another part they created a Japanese – style garden, which is the second biggest in Rome (the first one is in the Japanese embassy). Every week an expert teaches to everybody who wants to attend how to create and care a real zen garden.

For the success of the initiative “Orti della Garbatella” decided to increase the number of the allotments and now they are digging 10 other ground pool. One of them will be a didactic garden.

### **1.5 Answering to community needs.**

We can individuate a specific use for each of these common spaces, namely the answer to a need of the neighborhood. In the case of Galli Park what the people needed was a playground for little children, because there wasn't one in the district; the need of the community of Mandrione street and Casilina Vecchia street was to have a place where they can stay together and hold meetings of the committee; *verdemarino* was made to have a pleasant place near home and a place where people can socialize; Garbatella Gardens were created to have a green area in the neighborhood and to save this area from property speculation. Therefore the groups that organized themselves to create and manage this places made them with the equipment that was needed, but there are many other things that can be done there.

## **2 CONCLUSION**

We can say that those are user friendly spaces because instead of the specificity explained before there is many freedom of use: Galli park was made for children less than eight years old, but if you are twenty years old, you can also stay there and have a beer, or maybe you can go to meet someone and have a chat, or organize a family lunch using the grill. Everyone can go in the *Land* of Casilina Vecchia street, not only for the meeting of the committee: you can stay there and read a book, or sleep in the ground, or use the grill for a dinner together with your friends, children have a little

swing and last year there were two graduate parties. In *Verdemarino*, that was designed as a meeting point, you can also go to stay alone, seated in a bench in the shadow of the tree, and so on. In Garbatella Garden you can have a walk even if you aren't a gardner.

Traditional public spaces aren't so friendly: in the park or green areas you cannot sit in the green, sleep in the ground, cook lunch with a grill, or grow something (in the city of Latina a policeman fined a man that was growing a vacant lot and oblige him to remove all his plants); in commercial line you cannot stay without buying something (you are hardly invited to); in touristic place you cannot go to play guitars, or sit in the ground, in some public spaces bench are designed for short stops only and anyway to avoid sleeping on.

We can therefore say that common spaces self managed by a community are more friendly than public spaces managed through bureaucracy. This is because bureaucracy works only with single parts of your person: you are a man or a woman, a child or an elderly or an adult, you have a job or you are unoccupied, and so on.

Insurgent common spaces, because they are made by persons without specific rules can satisfy exigences from many parts of you.

Common spaces are very important for the urban life. Planners should protect and improve them by staying among the communities, the public administration and the owners, for example encouraging the municipalities to let people self manage spaces and to do call like in the case of Ladispoli; while private owners planners should foster agreements to let people using their lots.

As it is impossible to create a common space without the initiative of the inhabitants, planners could let some spaces without destination while projecting the urban fabric, in order to let the neighbors free to create a common space.

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