



Urban Agenda Platform

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# Participatory redesign of an abandoned public space with local communities, refugees and public institutions in the outskirts of Rome, Italy

Region	Europe and Central Asia
Award Scheme	Dubai International Award
Start Year	2017
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

## Summary

The project described below represent an innovative practice of participatory redesign of an abandoned public space developed in 2015-2016 by the team of women architects of Interazioni Urbane, in a complicated outskirts of Rome with local communities, refugees and public institutions.

## Background and Objective

The project was realized in an outskirt of Rome suffering of many problems, mainly related to the lack of job opportunities (60% of people unemployed) and of social integration among local communities. The area is grown spontaneously in the '60s and is also affected by the lack of public spaces and social and cultural infrastructures. Within the area are living approximately 44000 inhabitants. The social groups affected by the projects are: women, children, young, immigrants and refugees.

## Actions and Implementation

The project was articulated in a long process, lasting about one year, which, starting from the first preparatory meetings, led to the ultimate realization, through a continuous involvement of local communities, local associations and public institutions. This process allowed the planning and implementation of various low-cost interventions, which involved both the redevelopment of the existing and the introduction of new elements, mostly built into selfconstructing and using recovery materials; the consumables needed were found on the market at cost prices, excavations and construction works involving the use of specific machinery were entrusted to specialized companies. Preparatory phases that did not need to be carried out in situ were realized at the nearby facilities of a partner local association. This participatory process started with initiatives of involvement of various local realities, such as decorating and drawing workshops for children coming from nearby schools and meetings with local community based associations, during which the project and the calendar of activities were presented. The final design of the area, according to a shared project, was defined as the result of participatory design laboratories during which parents and children of the neighborhood were invited to express their proposal and suggestions for the playground. The realization phase was opened with a cycle of weekly laboratories aimed at designing and constructing furniture for the area with recycled materials. The final settlement of the area was realized through a self-construction workshop, during which students coming from all over the world were called to build some of the games for the park and to contribute to the works of arrangement of the ground, such as the tracing of the areas, excavations and land movements. This phase culminated with a final event of inauguration of the playground during which numerous recreational and cultural activities were organized for both adults and children. All the phases of the process were conducted under the supervision of members of the association and with the active collaboration of local communities and partner associations, as well as of some guests coming from the nearby refugee reception center, who were involved both in designing and furnishing activities and in the area's arrangement works.

## Outcomes and Impacts

This project, based on low-cost interventions, mostly built into self-constructing and using recycled materials, has allowed the costs to be cut. As far as the post-construction management is concerned, a spontaneous committee of local parents has expressed its willingness to manage the area for at least two years after its implementation. The active involvement of local associations, neighborhood residents, school children and refugees both in planning and in realization stages, without distinction of gender, culture and geographical origin, has ensured the respect of the principles of equality, democracy and social inclusion, and allowed a free exchange of technical knowledge and cultural experiences. The environmental sustainability of the operation has been



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guaranteed by the use of recovery materials and of easily replicable construction techniques. The involvement of different actors, including children and students, in the various phases of the process, has also allowed to spread the culture of recycling and resource saving. The project was implemented under the patronage of the local administration, which has the use of the area, still of private property. The interventions have been carried out in compliance with the local legislation on construction activities and in respect of archaeological constraints, resulting from the presence of a site of historical value in the vicinity. The games and furnishings have been made in compliance with the safety standards imposed by European rules, even though they have been made with recovery materials, which are not certified. At the present, however, there are no laws both at a national and at a local level which assign to community-based organizations a technical role in the execution of public works and which assign decision-making roles to the various social actors involved in transformation processes of public space.

## Gender and Social Inclusivity

The transfer developed during the process of urban redevelopment of the public space consist in multilateral and multidisciplinary exchange of competencies, tools, methods and social values between the different partners and beneficiaries of the project. The transfer was initiated when the CBO composed by the local families called the Interazioni Urbane asking for a support to upgrade the only public space of the neighborhood and, during the first meeting, the NGO composed by 10 women architects, explained that their active engagement during the phases of planning, building and “post-operam”, for the maintenance, were the mandatory conditions to start the project. The competencies transferred by the architects and facilitators of Interazioni Urbane can be summarized as following: • Organizational and management methodologies, during the weekly meeting of Interazioni Urbane with the CBO (Comitato Famiglie Borgo Ticino), by the explanation of matrix, diagrams and other tools and showing presentations, photos and videos of other projects developed by Interazioni Urbane in similar contexts. • Creative tools for community engagement, as participatory planning simplified drawings and community games. • Technical competencies to find appropriate materials for recycling and upcycling, to use for selfbuilding, according social and environmental criteria and local legal framework. • Leadership skills, mainly transferred to active women, to coordinate similar projects and extend the impact of the project. The values that we consider shared and transferred are mainly related to the following concepts: • Public space as tool for social inclusion and community developments. • Urban space as a “common good” to be respected, protected and loved. • Social inclusion of minorities, refugees and disadvantaged people as an objective to achieve a sustainable urban development.

## Innovative Initiative

The main lessons learned during the project planning and implementation are the following: 1. The participatory public space rehabilitation can be an important tool of social engagement and community empowerment. 2. Local institutions and other public actors, in complicated urban contexts, need the support of a team of facilitators to interact with local communities, to plan an appropriate urban intervention – according the real needs – and to build trust. 3. Trust and engagement of local communities are fundamental tools to develop a best practice in sustainable urban spaces redevelopment, mainly in contexts of urban poverty and/or where institutions are not equipped with budget. CBOs and minorities can have a strategic role in the urban redevelopment if they are actively involved in. 4. The participatory design and constructions of urban furniture for a public space, if facilitated by professionals with sensitivity, and both technical and social skills, can be a tool for social integration of minorities and disadvantaged people, as the silent but powerful creative dialogue - through the use of materials, colors and construction – can be more effective than million of words. The lessons learned listed above are the main principles for other interventions to develop in other neighborhood characterized by the lack of public spaces, problems of social integration, low public budgets, but equipped with active citizens and CBOs open to participate in a collaborative process of urban redevelopment for the “Common good”.

## Conclusion

The project described represent an innovative practice as it is the result of experimental tools and methodologies developed by the women architects of Interazioni Urbane during 7 years and 32 projects developed in the outskirts of Rome, building urban social interactions through the urban redevelopment of public spaces. Today there are no public policies or legislation related to participatory rehabilitation of public spaces with local communities and institutions. At the local level in 2014 the Municipality of Rome developed a “Regulation of participation”, but any practical tool it is there explained for intervene in the urban redevelopment. Other cities in Italy, mainly Torino and Bologna, are developing experiences of participatory planning and community engagement related to public space strongly supported by the municipalities, but at the national level the urban legislation and standards remains very old (Law n. 1150 of 1942) and any innovative tool of urban redevelopment is actually included in a law. Among our goals, as architects and planners with a social mission, we are actively working for the introduction of innovative urban planning tools in the Italian regulatory framework. We recently (July 2017) were invited to present this project as a best practice for the establishment of innovative methodologies and tools at the Biennial of Public Space of Rome, in the international panel coordinated by UN-Habitat.