

#14

Planning for all generations

Per una pianificazione multigenerazionale

Edited by GU | Generazione Urbana

settembre_dicembre 2017
numero quattordici
anno cinque

URBANISTICA 
giornale on-line di
urbanistica
ISSN:
2531-7091

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Progetto grafico / Nicola Vazzoler

Impaginazione / Giulio Cuccurullo

Data di pubblicazione: Roma, gennaio 2018

In copertina:

Roma, Parco degli Acquadotti.

Foto di Serena Muccitelli

edito da



con il supporto di



per informazioni



#14

settembre_dicembre 2017
numero quattordici
anno cinque

september_december 2017
issue fourteen
year five



in questo numero
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a cura di / edited by GU | Generazione Urbana

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Planning for all generations

Per una pianificazione multigenerazionale



Can Regeneration be Multigenerational? A case study of Piazza Alessandria

La rigenerazione urbana può essere multigenerazionale? Il caso studio di Piazza Alessandria

@ Adam Bronfin |
@ Rachel Liu |
@ Kai Walcott |

Regeneration |
Multigenerational
planning |
Public space |

Rigenerazione |
Pianificazione
multigenerazionale |
Spazio pubblico |

This research proposes that regeneration, a process typically geared towards the working age population at the expense of the young and old, can be multigenerational. We rely on a case study of Piazza Alessandria, a wealthy neighborhood northeast of Rome's historical center. Over a period of four months, we studied the community's physical and social environment to assess its child- and age-friendliness. For our analysis of the physical environment, we considered pedestrian infrastructure and communal spaces for rest and play, comparing them to the literature's pre-established criteria for child- and age-friendly cities. To understand the social environment, we relied on intercept interviews to glean user perceptions and experiences of local regeneration projects. Although some regeneration interventions neglected to engage community members and were perceived to diminish the community's character, other interventions were much more inclusive and improved public spaces for both the young and the old. This was important in a neighborhood that, being wealthy, saw one of its major challenges to be the privileging of private space over public space. High connectivity via a range of transit options and a diversity of services for various needs were two other factors that, while attracting working age adults, also catered to the needs of children and the elderly. The regeneration efforts in Piazza Alessandria prove to have both positive and negative effects on the neighborhood for all ages. The community, thereby, serves as an example that regeneration can indeed be multigenerational, provided the concerns of each group are taken into consideration and every group is actively engaged in the planning process.

Considering Children and the Elderly in Regeneration

When urban areas deteriorate, or their decline is perceived to be imminent, cities often engage in a process of urban regeneration to avert or reverse the decline. This process — laden with connotations of top-down overhauls and eventual gentrification of blighted urban areas — has been defined as a comprehensive vision that attempts to introduce long-term solutions to economic, physical, social and environmental problem of a community (Roberts 2016). But these solutions are often not targeted at everyone. Cameron (1992) shows regeneration efforts on city centers favors young, single adults. By focusing on working-age adults, regeneration pushes out the retail needs



Fig.1 Site map of Piazza Alessandria, Rome. Image: Google Maps edited by Rachel Liu.

of the poor and the elderly (Pascual-Molinas and Ribera-Fumaz 2009). Inadequate attention has been given to children even though well functioning neighborhoods are able to integrate young people into community life (Elsey 2004, Chawla and Malone 2003). Other regeneration initiatives have targeted outside users — students and tourists — effectively undermining social structures and disregarding the needs of residents (Murzyn 2006). These trends arise from the capitalistic approach to cities, which marginalizes the two age groups at the peripheries of the life course — children and the elderly — deemed to be dependents or burdens on the system (Warner et al. 2013).

Some scholars have responded to this bias by making an economic case for children and the elderly. Warner et al. (2013) argue that families with young children contribute to economic growth because of their large spending, their demand for child-targeted services, and the potential investment in a productive future workforce leading to long-term growth. The WHO (2015b) proposes that the elderly contribute to the economy through formal channels of taxation and consumer spending, and informal modes such as care provision to grandchildren that allow parents to participate more actively in the workforce. Others have defended the interests of children and the elderly more emphatically — they constitute significant segments of the urban population regardless of their economic utility to society. Biggs and Carr (2015) contend that recognizing peripheral demographic groups conceived to be less economically productive “implies that cities are more than simply rat-runs between centers of work, consumption and closed door domesticity” (p. 109). Buffel et al. (2012) posit a “paradox of neighborhood participation”, in which the elderly tend to spend the most time in their neighborhood while being among the last engaged in decision-making processes, a juxtaposition of de facto and de jure participation in the right to the city. Both economic and rights-based approaches highlight the necessity to address, if



not prioritize, the needs of the two peripheral age groups in planning.

The UN and the WHO have established prototypical frameworks to address these needs. UNICEF's (2004) Child-Friendly Cities model advocates a rights-based approach on the basis of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It defines a series of twelve rights "of every young citizen". The WHO's (2007) Age-Friendly Cities project lists eight topic areas that cover the "structures, environment, services and policies" of a city. The manifestos have been fundamental to the development of child- and age-friendly planning respectively. But while successive discourse has expanded the conceptualization of each field, there has been relatively limited literature consolidating the two; child- and age-friendly approaches have predominantly remained discrete in practice and in theory (Biggs & Carr 2015, p. 104).

The convergence of child- and age-specific interests has been termed 'multigenerational' or 'intergenerational' planning, which recognizes potentially complementary and synergistic overlaps in the needs of these two age groups. This can include the physical environment (e.g. safe and walkable neighborhoods, access to public spaces, availability of fresh food and reliable public transport to support independent mobility), social elements (e.g. welfare services, civic engagement), or a combination of both. For example, schools that serve as community centers and senior centers might also offer childcare and afterschool programs, and can thereby simultaneously provide for the physical and social needs of both elders and children (Rowles & Bernard 2013, pp. 227-8). Lui et al. (2009) have also suggested that bottom-up efforts tend to be more successful than top-down ones. A synthesis of criteria from the WHO (2007), UNICEF (2004) and Haikkola & Horelli (2002) yielded eight general domains: transportation, public spaces, housing, services, environmental quality, communication and information, respect and social inclusion, and civic participation. This list establishes a comprehensive pic-

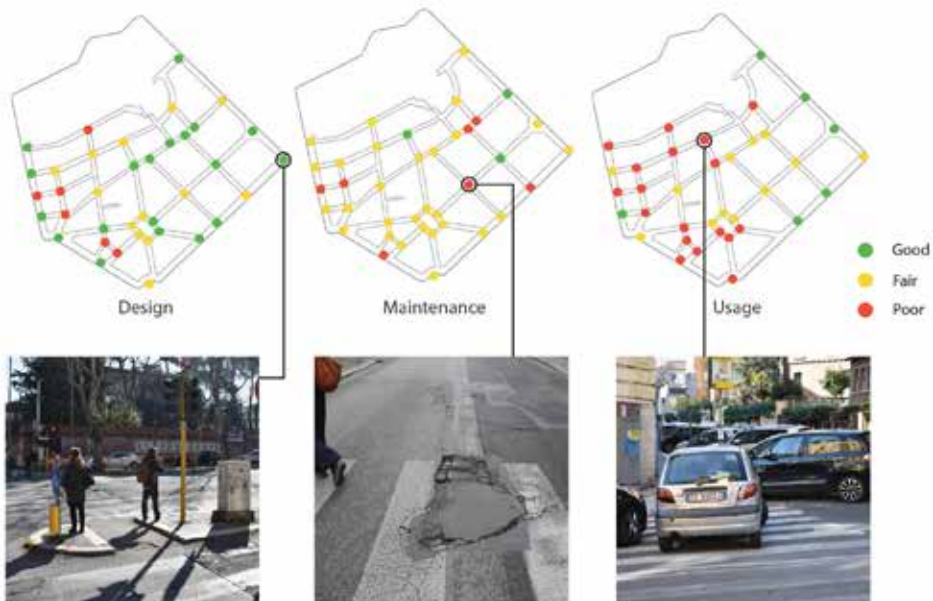
Fig.2 The Peroni courtyard is occupied by older residents in the morning but is then overrun by working-age professionals by the 1 pm lunch hour. Image: Adam Bronfin.

WALKABILITY

SIDEWALKS



INTERSECTIONS



ture of a community, holistically addressing child- and age-friendly qualities.

The utility of this multigenerational planning approach is still indeterminate. Some scholars warn that it could be problematic because: “a rhetorical shift towards environments for all ages may indicate the use of the term as a trope, to advance the cause of design that takes specifically older adults into account while hitching it to the wagon of a universal good.” (Biggs & Carr 2015, pp.104-5). Our research tests the concept on the neighborhood of Piazza Alessandria. In this study, we try to understand where the needs and interests of children and the elderly in the neighborhood converge or diverge, according to the listed criteria.

Methods & Limitations

We used an interview methodology adapted from Haikkola et al. (2007), targeting three different groups of people: children and their parents (eight interviews), the elderly and their caregivers (10 interviews) and working adults (seven interviews). Participation was split evenly between residents and commuters, with the latter tending to be working-age adults. The interviews took place at six different public spaces within the neighborhood, where members of the public might be inclined to engage with us. We also prepared attractive A5-sized bulletins with a more formal description of our project and contact information. Since many elderly we attempted to engage on our trial sessions were hard of hearing, we printed versions of the interview questions translated into Italian.

Since we were largely dependent on our Italian-speaking teaching assistants and professor for translation, our interviews were limited to Monday and Thursday mornings and early afternoons. This inadvertently marginalized the viewpoints of students and workers who commute out of the neighborhood during that time. However, we tried to address this bias by conducting field visits during weekday evenings and on the weekends, although interviews conducted on those occasions were less effective without a translator. We were also only able to capture the perspectives of individuals who agreed to talk with us, which was a minority compared to those who rejected our attempts to engage in conversation. This self-selection bias results in a limited sampling of people who are willing and able to speak with a group of strangers. This partiality potentially leaves a considerable section of the population voiceless in our research.

Additionally, the element of translation may leave out important parts of interviews. While our translators were certainly fluent in both Italian and English, it is important to bear in mind a perfect translation from Italian to English for every word or phrase does not exist. The idiosyncrasies of Italian may have been lost when our translators relayed the subject’s message to us.

Piazza Alessandria, a neighborhood in Regeneration

Piazza Alessandria is a mixed-use neighborhood located northwest of the historical center of Rome, just outside of the Aurelian Wall. The neighborhood has a population of 5,040 people within 0.37 square kilometers (92 acres)¹, giving it a density more than eight times greater than Rome’s average. The Villa Albani, a private estate, occupies the northern end. The rest of the neighborhood is relatively built-up in a gradient of *villini*², condominiums and blocks, and these structures include a variety of residential, office, institutional and mixed-use functions. Major landmarks include a covered

Fig.3_ Walkability Analysis: While most intersections and sidewalks are well designed, they are usually poorly maintained and often blocked by cars and motorcycles. Image: Piazza Alessandria Team.

1_ The calculated density of 18,622 persons/km² in Piazza Alessandria excludes the land area of the Villa Albani. The average density within Rome is 2,232 persons/km².

2_ Villini are a freestanding low-rise building typology on a smaller lot than a villa, without an attached sprawling garden estate.

RESULTS

LEGEND

- Good for children
- Good for the elderly
- Good for working-age adults
- Bad for children
- Bad for the elderly
- Bad for working-age adults
- Outcomes of regeneration

transportation

- **Public transit** makes the neighborhood well-connected
- Car traffic makes **walking and biking** unsafe on some roads
- **Parking** is expensive
- Roads are **perpetually congested**

services

- Plenty of **services** are within walking distance, **more than before**
- Most **retail** is expensive
- **Fresh produce** in grocery stores and some dining options are affordable
- **Too many new lunch places** oversaturate the local market
- Many **schools and daycares** are available nearby
- **Recreation** options are better found outside the neighborhood
- **Activities** provide **cultural vibrancy**

housing

- Living spaces are large
- Is too expensive for new families — **offices occupy residential space** and **large companies lease apartments** for transient employees

communication information

Fig.4_ A conceptual diagram detailing users' perceptions of the neighborhood's social and physical environment. Image: Piazza Alessandria Team.

public space

Parks allow for social participation and are mostly accessible, pleasant and clean ●●●

Dirt and gravel paths of Villa Torlonia are not stroller-friendly ○

Sidewalks are safe from crime, but are dirty and not well-maintained ○○○

Mercato Nomentano is a good place to meet friends and socialize ●



multigenerational planning

balancing the complementarities between child- and age-friendly planning principles

respect & social inclusion

Community identity is diminishing ○○○

MACRO gives the community prestige, but is not inclusive of local residents ○●

Residents **trust** local vendors ●

New users add life to the community ●

Convenient to meet up with friends ●

civic participation

Unengaged with **community improvement projects** ○○

&

environmental quality

Wealthy and high-class reputation ●●●

General tranquility and quiet ●

market that stands on Piazza Alessandria and Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma (MACRO), a contemporary art museum in the center of the neighborhood.

The community is relatively wealthy and diverse. It is populated throughout the day by a mixture of residents, working commuters and visiting users. The residents of the community are on average older than the residents of Rome, with one in four inhabitants older than 65. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of families with children aged 5 to 19 (ISTAT 2001, 2011). Given the financial, legal and professional services located in the community and its environs, thousands of workers commute to the neighborhood daily. Its proximity to the historic center, network of major arterials and range of public transport options make it highly connected to the center of Rome, and thus Piazza Alessandria is also frequented by transient users who patronize the myriad retail and food and beverage options, or consult the professional services in the neighborhood.

The wealth of the neighborhood plays a role in the neighborhood's privileging of private space at the expense of public space. This preference is reflected by the dearth of quality and accessible public space. The community also disrespects sidewalks and intersections in the neighborhood, demonstrated by the poor use and maintenance of pedestrian areas despite the relatively well-designed sidewalk infrastructure. The abuse of public space and lack of civic pride is typical of many of Rome's wealthier neighborhoods: "Sin and be pardoned... Everyone washes their hands off it" (Cellamare 2014).

Several projects in recent years have been driven by an agenda of regeneration of the community. We define the process to be: attracting working-age adults in order to avert decline, potentially at the expense of children and the elderly. These projects have had varying degrees of success. Large-scale interventions like the redevelopment of the Peroni Beer factory into a contemporary art museum demonstrate the city's interest to attract a new audience to the neighborhood. Parallel to this, smaller scale grassroots interventions — like the Amici di Porta Pia, an organization composed of residents and shop owners — have also attempted to renew Piazza Alessandria, although a lack of community engagement and ineffective government support have limited these groups' effectiveness.

We posited that the nature of the neighborhood could have two potential effects on the experiences of children and the elderly. On one hand, wealthy residents seem to have private access to amenities for a comfortable quality of life without being affected by changes in the neighborhood due to regeneration. On the other hand, transformations in the neighborhood could be targeted at the working-age population and marginalize children and the elderly — having observed, for example, the displacement of elderly users of public space by workers particularly during the weekday lunch hour. We carried forward our investigation of the effects of regeneration on the neighborhood based on this dilemma.

Regeneration for all Generations in Piazza Alessandria

To assess Piazza Alessandria's child- and age-friendliness, we began with a thorough neighborhood analysis, examining the history, users, buildings, streets and circulation, public services and community actors of the neighborhood. With this preliminary research completed, we moved towards a

more rigorous stage of engagement, using the literature to shape our research approach. Based on Haikkola et al. (2007), we conducted a series of intercept interviews with children and their parents, working-age adults, and the elderly and their caretakers. We engaged in five interviews per category, most of which involved multiple participants such as a group of senior citizens at the market, or a mother with her child. These took place at six public locations in the neighborhood. Our questions focused on patterns of activity to elicit users' interactions with and perceptions of the neighborhood. By providing interviewees with baseline maps, we oriented users of the community and allowed them to better talk through the types of places they like or dislike. We were particularly interested in, for example, how users socialized because of our observed theme of disparity between public and private space. Therefore, questions had a spatial dimension — where activities occur — and a social dimension — why these activities occur in that specific space.

We categorized their responses into the aforementioned eight domains of child- and age-friendliness, as well as identified their responses that related to changes due to regeneration interventions. Firstly, all age groups appreciated the connectivity and range of services available in Piazza Alessandria. However, there was ambivalence about the quality of public space available. While the neighborhood is in close proximity to large public parks like the Villa Borghese or the Villa Torlonia, a unique asset particularly appreciated by children and elderly residents, public space within the neighborhood was perceived to be “boring” and inadequate. Other common concerns were shared regarding the pedestrian experience and the lack of community identity. Top-down regeneration projects like the MACRO were perceived to have negligible or even malignant effects on the community, by increasing visitor and vehicular traffic without engaging or contributing to local needs.

It is apparent that all groups shared both physical and social concerns — and while physical criteria were largely met, the social layer consisting of methods of governance and community-enforced behavioral norms seemed to have fallen short. This imbalance may be particular to the history and privilege of Piazza Alessandria, but it also serves as a clarion call for more inclusive regeneration efforts to pay attention to social methods and impact. We can be optimistic that children, working-age adults and the elderly alike shared these concerns, which provides strong motivation to address them. In fact, there were no domains that concerned both children and the elderly, but did not concern working-age adults — which demonstrates that meeting the needs of children and the elderly does not have to contradict the regeneration agenda.

Conclusion

We contend that yes: regeneration can indeed be multigenerational. In our study of Piazza Alessandria, we found that children, working adults and the elderly shared many complementary needs and interests. Planners should prioritize these areas within the agenda of regeneration — improve the pedestrian experience through better maintenance and the cultivation of positive norms of use, and build stronger community identity — in order to make regeneration a more inclusive, multigenerational process.

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QUADERNI

#14

settembre - dicembre 2017
numero quattordici
anno cinque

URBANISTICA tre
giornale on-line di
urbanistica
ISSN:
2531-7091

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