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What do we have to be careful about public space in the age of planetary crisis?

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1. A planetary crisis at different speeds

Since the 70s, environmental, social, economic crisis are increasingly frequent, so that today we can no longer consider them as exceptions (among the others, see Schön, 1971; The Foundational Economy Collective, 2018; Balducci, forthcoming). Indeed, they are rather progressively featuring a constant state, an age of planetary crisis, as this conference suggests. Latour invites even to quit using the term "crisis" as it could suggest reversibility. Indeed, he avers that "we are not in a crisis. We can no longer say "this, too, will pass." We're going to have to get used to it. It's *definitive*. […] The imperative confronting us, therefore, is to discover a *course of treatment* – but without the illusion that a cure will come quickly" (Latour, 2017, p.13).

Before discussing some aspects related to 'treatment' and 'care' dimensions, there is a primary distinction that will be relevant to the development of this paper. Indeed, our current age of planetary crisis is a composite state, consisting of problems expanding at different speeds. Roughly speaking, some of them are 'fast-evolving' while others are 'slow-evolving' issues.
On the one hand, if we consider one by one each pandemic, each wildfire in California, each risk of shipwrecks of migrants on the Mediterranean coasts, and so forth, these are all examples of 'fast-evolving' issues. Comparing them to a disease, these are like a stroke, which when it arrives immediately shows its effects. These events are recognisable in approximately rapid time. Everyone –from public institutions, private bodies, the voluntary sector, practitioners, and citizens– is on the alert and contribute in responding to the event. The responses to 'fast-evolving' issues are mostly limited to that single issue, neglecting its interdependency with other 'fast-evolving' or 'slow-evolving' issues. At most, circumscribed answers only allow containing the situation. Keeping on with the medical metaphor, they enable recovering from a single stroke. But if interdependent relations with other issues –especially with 'slow-evolving' ones– are overlooked, then the next stroke will be just around the corner. Looking for solutions that answer a single 'fast-evolving' issue is not enough in the age of planetary crisis.
On the other hand, climate change and progressive erosion of social cohesion are examples of 'slow-evolving' issues. These are similar to a long degenerative disease, whose effects at first are mild, thus often neglected. Still, if not treated in time, they worsen and become lethal. As with degenerative diseases, also for 'slow-evolving' issues, the risk is not to feel the emergency. Moreover, actions in response to them rarely bring results in the short term; they are a long path which is unlikely to get immediate benefits or rapid consensus.

To take care of our age of planetary crisis, I argue that at least two considerations emerge for architecture and urbanism researchers and –reflective– practitioners concerning the distinction between 'fast-evolving' and 'slow-evolving' issues. First, actions should be combined to respond not only to 'fast-evolving' but also –and above all– to 'slow-evolving' issues. Second, we ought to be aware and careful about the actions taken in response to 'fast-evolving' issues. Mainly about those put into practice during the initial 'state of

emergency' and provided only to respond to a specific 'fast-evolving' issue. Indeed, these rapid actions can be counterproductive in the long run. I.e. single-use personal protective equipment as face masks are useful against COVID-19 but pollute the environment if not disposed of properly (Kassam, 2020).

2. What do we have to be careful about public space in the age of planetary crisis?

Let's consider the 'fast-evolving' issue that is currently hitting the planet hardest: the COVID-19. Since it assumed the degree of a pandemic –in March 2020 (WHO, 2020)–, all over the world practitioners and researchers of architecture and urbanism set to work to understand how design disciplines could help in overcoming it. In this general call to action, public space has been particularly under the spotlight of design projects and speculations (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020).

A first typology of architectural and urbanism actions is composed of solutions with a broad scope, working both on the 'fast-evolving' issue of COVID-19 and on the main 'slow-evolving' issues such as climate change or social inequalities. These are actions capable of 'gaining' from the crisis (Davoudi, 2012; Taleb, 2012), that is to say, they use the pandemic as an opportunity to accelerate the implementation of decisive projects already planned –at least partly– but slow to implement. A prominent example of this typology is given by the temporary cycleways that in Paris, as in Milan, Bogota, and many other cities have been rapidly built to support slow mobility as an alternative to collective public transport and private cars. In many cases, these cycleways are going to be progressively transformed from temporary to definitive, to implement urban cycle systems stably. This is the case of the city of Paris, which declared to make permanent the current 50km system of temporary *corona cycleways* to implement the current "Paris Breathe" scheme and support the next "15-minutes city" programme (Whittle, 2020).
A second typology of actions consists of immediate and specific solutions to respond to the pandemic seen as a single 'fast-evolving' issue. Many of these concerned the introduction of social distancing devices into public space. Among this sort of intervention, the most clumsy and rough solutions fuelled dystopian imagery, such as transparent dividers between seats, at bus stops, in squares and parks. Some other examples have reached a higher formal quality and effectiveness. However, they are more models of urban furniture then urban design projects, as in the case of the *Gastro Safe Zone* designed by Hua Hua architects and first tested in Brno's Liberty Square in April 2020. *Gastro Safe Zone* consists of a minimum dining table unit with three fixed seats placed inside a circular perimeter indicating the radius of the safe zone where a facial mask is not required. The minimum unit can replicate according to a grid suggested by the context and measures of the physical distancing. The objective is both to stimulate a safe permanence in public space and to encourage the reopening of gastronomic businesses tried by the pandemic. In other examples of first response to the pandemic considered as a single 'fast-evolving' issue, the interventions echo the recent legacy of temporary and tactical urbanism interventions. That is the case of Caret Studio for *#stodistante* project in Piazza Giotto in Vicchio, a small town near Florence. For the square, Caret has used removable paint to draw a grid of squared placeholders 1.8m apart, which lends itself to playful interpretations and suggests the minimum safe distance between people.

The first section of this paper has mentioned how crucial are carefulness and vigilance on responses which are developed for a sudden 'state of emergency' due to a disruptive 'fast-growing' issue. Thus, our carefulness should recognize when quickly responses –as actions, design projects, but also policies, norms, bans, etc.– risk threatening the caring needed by major 'slow-growing' issues. For example, during the COVID pandemic, the various forms of stay-at-home orders put in place by regions and national governments brought out and magnified existing economic, social, and spatial inequities (see among others Kluth, 2020; Przeworski, 2020). Let's focus on spatial inequities, so to continue the discussion on public space.

With different declinations, stay-at-home orders temporarily introduce “unprecedented restrictions in the use of public spaces worldwide” (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, within the same urban area, region, or nation, the restrictions have been and are the same for the entire population of that geographical area, without distinction. However, not all the population is equally equipped to live in a quarantine situation. Not everyone has the same access to essential public services, public transport, public spaces such as parks, gardens, squares, cycle paths, and accessible sports facilities close to home – actually, some do not even have a home. Indeed, also in normal condition “vulnerable groups tend to have less access to green spaces, public or private. Furthermore, green spaces in lower-income neighborhoods are often smaller, under-maintained, and less numerous than those in wealthier neighborhoods” (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). But the pandemic has exacerbated and made these inequalities more evident.
What do we have to do to avoid answers to the ‘fast-growing’ issue of the moment which damage – temporarily or permanently, voluntarily or involuntarily– collective rights such as the equal access to public space and the right to live in a safe, healthy, and sustainable habitat? I argue we need to be vigilant and keep working on the foundational issues of urban public space in our age of planetary crisis.

A few months before the pandemic spread, within my PhD research, I began working on the definition of a ‘new topicality’ of public space. I have started from a review of the existing literature as well as case studies, and I aim to focus on the aspects that in our time –which I consider from the global economic crisis of 2008– constitute the most significant features of public spaces, their design and use.
Some of these can be defined ‘foundational’ aspects, that is to say, basic aspects which respond to fundamental human rights. Among these aspects there is *the right to access public space* –increasingly crucial because of the proliferation of privately owned public spaces–; as well as *the right not to be excluded from public space* –as new forms of exclusions are emerging, as green gentrification (Anguelovski *et al.*, 2018); and also *the right to be free from overabundant control* in public space. Here I want to focus on the latter, dealing with control in public spaces. I think it is crucial to be careful and vigilant about this topic, so to take care of the ‘slow-evolving’ progressive erosion of social cohesion, no matter what ‘fast-evolving’ issue distracts the public attention at that moment.
Control is not a new argument for studies on the production and management of public spaces (Németh, 2012). Control can take place in physical-aesthetic forms –which can be the most diverse, from beautified counter-terrorism measures as massive flower boxes instead of concrete blocks, to the presence of single-place benches so that no one can use them as a bed. However, control can also take place in hybrid physical and digital forms. Let’s deepen this facet.
In connection to the disruptive spread of ICTs in the last fifteen years, new forms of control have emerged, based on digital and phygital (physical + digital) means of surveillance. These new forms can be grouped into two main families.
The first family gathers *locative media* –i.e. personal devices as smartphones, watches, and tablets using GPS. If, on the one hand, these technologies have an unprecedented positive influence on our lives, spaces, and networks of relationships (Farman and Frith 2017). On the other hand, location-aware technologies can also be the vehicles to unprecedented modes of surveillance connected to privacy and control –i.e. tracking of user’s location and connection with other users (Gordon and de Souza e Silva, 2013). But, even if privacy policies of apps, software, and hardware are often complex to be understood, we explicitly give our consent to be tracked by location-aware technologies (Farman and Frith, 2017). We do this every day by agreeing to the rules of locative apps. In many cases, we do it without realising it., for example, by agreeing to social networks’ policies, which are only apparently not locative.
The second is the family of *digital coding of discrete population* (Chadwick, 2013), that is to say, systems as facial recognition, which pervade public spaces. Unlike the locative media, no consent is required for the forms of digital coding of discrete population. Previously introduced in strategic places as airports and major train stations –especially after September 11 2001–, today devices as facial recognition cameras are also used in public spaces, mainly in privately owned public spaces (The Guardian, 2017). Their use is not only for

security issues but also for collecting information on users for commercial activities surrounding public space. Chadwick avers that "by bringing together old and new forms of surveillance, novel forms of control, with their own strategic agenda, are brought to life" (2013).
To give an idea of the scale of the phenomenon, in 2019, London had 627,727 surveillance cameras (Bischoff, 2020), becoming the third-largest city in the world in terms of quantity of cameras. Further, for the next future, the Metropolitan Police of London recently announced the use of facial recognition technologies on the –public– streets of London (BBC, 2020).
In addition to direct control, there is a second level of control –on which it is more difficult to be vigilant–, Zardini calls it the control of data and manipulation of behaviour (2020). On this subject, Zuboff (2019) emphasises that the real crux of the matter is not so much the collection of unlimited data –the first level of control– but rather by who use them and how –the second level of control. This is an issue for which national and international laws are still loose, struggling to keep up with the pace of ICTs evolution. The European Community is an example, as, for many months, it has been weighing the possibility of 5-years ban on facial recognition technology, without having yet reached a decision (Stolton, 2020).
As this typology of control especially proliferates in public spaces –whether they are 'built' as stations or 'open' like streets and urban parks–, control becomes a relevant issue to be careful about for architecture and urbanism. Indeed, it concerns us as researchers and practitioners in the way we inquire and shape public space and how we interact with the stakeholders of a project.

3. Conclusions. New shared ethical responsibilities

I have explored *the right to be free from overabundant control*, an aspect that I have called 'foundational' for the design, implementation, use, and management of public space. Further, when 'fast-evolving' issues are more evident and almost monopolise the public discussion, as practitioners and researchers, we need to remain even more aware of foundational spatial needs and rights.
As –reflective– practitioners and researchers, this is an ethical and deontological issue for us. Until very recently, we would have said that this deontological question concerned only practitioners. Now instead there is a growing conviction that practitioners are increasingly curators (Ratti and Clodel, 2015; Ecosistema Urbano, 2018) and facilitators (Boano, 2019) which feed and support (Manzini, 2015) the design process, as also other actors are involved in the design process. Among these different actors, there are researchers, other professional figures, civil servants, activists, engaged citizens active in the field of architecture and urbanism, etc., who all together must be vigilant on these aspects.
Thus, the ethical and deontological role of the practitioner is no longer only to be personally careful, aware, and vigilant, but also to contribute to nurturing this 'collective carefulness' throughout the entire design process. Becoming a 'curator' of this collective ethical carefulness is and will be an effort that requires an inevitable shift from the current education and practice of architecture and urbanism.

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