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Critical landscapes: an opportunity for a new public space's design approach

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“Tasting the Landscape” IFLA 2016

53° World Congress International Federation of Landscape Architects 20th-22nd April 2016, Torino. Italy

Thematic strand 1: **Sharing Landscapes**

SHORT PAPER

Title: **Critical Landscapes: an opportunity for a new approach to public space design.**

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The peri-urban system of the Plain of Florence today can be drawn as the exact negative of Debord's maps¹ of significant places of the city: it is a miscellany of unconnected spaces characterized by an implicit nonsense: pure inconsistency. Such spaces are Trembling Landscapes: their identity being gradually annihilated, they see their ecological functioning being compromised, still waiting for a project that never comes. In our most recent Landscape Design Lab (2015) at the Faculty of Architecture, we started to work on Critical Landscapes to trigger a new design approach that uses the project as a process able to involve the landscape in a progressive recovery of its resilience. To deal with the complexity of the system, we first needed to focus on the relationship between these hybrid areas and the Arno, which crosses and reaches all of them. The area of Argingrosso today is the clear example of critical landscape: its total alienation took place on the sly since the Basin Plan of the Arno River was approved in 1999² so that its 120ha turned into the biggest area of a system of detention basins for floods, with a return time of 50 years. Over the last 15 years, the area has undergone a process of ceaseless accumulation of different - sometimes abusive - uses and overlapping marks which were not designed according to a broad vision of integration with the function of hydrological reserve. Instead, such uses pose an additional risk factor in case of flooding. In addition, its embankments restrict the interaction with both the system of public spaces in this portion of the city and the overlooking Parco delle Cascine. Instead of being perceived as a resource for people's safety (under extraordinary circumstances) and for their leisure (during the rest of the time), Argingrosso today is a neglected area whose configuration allows for a detention basin no larger than 1/3 of what had been expected, with a reduction in the capacity to more than 2.5 million m³.

The original project of the detention basin was conceived so that its hydraulic function would not reduce the overall volume of flooding water. Therefore, thanks to the Lab's innovative design approach carried out in the form of a creative and participative design workshop, the concept of “hydrological risk” - intended as a restriction - is completely turned into an opportunity for dynamicity and flexibility. This way, it now becomes a useful tool to design the coexistence of different functions dealing with the area as a systemic unit. Such a view enables us to devise the project not by formal attributes but by site-specific strategies which generate a landscape capable of self-determination and self-regulation in its ecological and social components.

Temporary landscape against flooding risk first operates on the **Continuity** of the network of public spaces and creates a connection with the neighborhood, Parco delle Cascine and the river. Multiple patterns

¹ Debord Guy, “The Naked City”, 1957.

² Approved by D.P.C.M of 5.11.1999, the Basin Plan of the Arno river - Excerpt Hydraulic Risk involves the construction of a series of structural measures aimed at mitigating the hydraulic risk on the bed of Arno and its tributaries. By the resolution n°142 of the Institutional Committee of the Arno River Basin, March 15th 2000, the Region of Tuscany has been appointed to supervise the implementation of such interventions. The design of the expansion basin is completed by the Memorandum of Understanding between the Tuscany Region and the City of Florence, January 3rd 2002. Despite the additional document of the Plan of the Arno River Basin in 2005 and the L.R. n. 79/2012 (New rules on land reclamation consortia), the expansion basin of the Argingrosso in 2015 has yet to get the result of the feasibility studies preceding the preliminary planning stage.

of pedestrian and bike paths act as rhizomes by shaping the embankment between the river and the neighborhood and by responding to the different needs of each part of the basin, including the flooded configuration to ensure accessibility. In addition to this milder infrastructure, the ecological connections are now restored by “adding urban nature”³, which allows working on **Biodiversity** in what is the seasonal destination of a rich birdlife. The abovementioned operation creates the second important green-blue layer of this unitary concept, where vegetation is involved to improve air and water quality; simultaneously, it provides different levels of intensity and different shapes, smells and colors according to the seasonal changes.

A parallel action aimed at increase the landscape lasting resilience employs agriculture as a tool with two main features: it restores the quality of the soil through cultivation and it boosts direct interaction among citizens **sharing** a new kind of public space. The direct involvement of people through agriculture strengthens their ties with the area and produces a strong sense of belonging and identity, this way making citizens willing to take care of their own territory.

The project through this reversal in conceiving the relationship with the river and water states: “geography - despite its capricious connotation (ed) - must not be removed from the urban space”⁴ but rather becomes an added value. The criticality of large voids for hydraulic regulation in peri-urban systems can be solved through projects contemplating high resilience whose role can be defined as a “temporary installation”: it would not affect the strategic role of the area (as a detention basin) and, rather, it would strengthen its ability to reduce the hydraulic risk. People living close to these areas play a key role in the regeneration process. At the same time, they help produce a new landscape imagery that replaces degradation with a new “aesthetic” dimension of the landscape, a “mosaic” of perceptions fostering curiosity or generating surprise and amazement.

³ Lambertini A. “Urban beauty! Luoghi prossimi e pratiche di resistenza estetica”. Editrice Compositori, 2013

⁴ Batlle E., “El jardín de la metrópoli”. G.Gili Editorial, Barcelona 2012.