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### **Piazza Indipendenza in Florence and the local Filipino community: the effects of migration on historic public spaces**

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New Cities  
and Migration  
An international debate

*edited by*  
ROBERTO BOLOGNA



IT IS NO LONGER  
POSSIBLE TO SEE HUMAN  
MOBILITY JUST AS  
BACKGROUND CONTEXT  
FOR DEVELOPMENT, OR  
EVEN WORSE,  
AS A BY-PRODUCT OF  
LACK OF DEVELOPMENT.  
RATHER,  
WITH THE SDGS  
[SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT GOALS],  
MIGRATION IS AN  
IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTOR  
TO SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT.

William Lacy Swing, 2017  
Director General of International  
Organisation for Migration

New Cities and Migration  
An international debate

*edited by*  
ROBERTO BOLOGNA



UNIVERSITÀ  
DEGLI STUDI  
FIRENZE

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THE TENSION GENERATED  
BY DIFFERENT WAYS OF  
APPROPRIATION OF A  
SAME SPACE INCREASES  
ON ONE SIDE ITS  
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THESE ARE NOT ALIEN TO  
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RESULT EITHER IN THE  
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OF ITS PLURALITY,  
REINFORCING ITS ROLE  
AS A CATALYST OF SOCIAL  
SUSTAINABILITY OR, ON  
THE CONTRARY, MAKING  
OF IT THE LITMUS TEST  
OF THE CONTRADICTIONS  
AND SOCIAL DISEASE IN A  
SPECIFIC URBAN CONTEXT.



**PIAZZA INDIPENDENZA IN FLORENCE AND THE  
LOCAL FILIPINO COMMUNITY: THE EFFECTS  
OF MIGRATION ON HISTORIC PUBLIC SPACES**

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**Abstract**

Public space may be the place either of integration or conflict between locals and immigrants. The paper is focused on the case study of Piazza Indipendenza in Florence, elected by the Filipino community living inside and around the city as its main meeting and recreational place, where both aspects co-exist. Because of its location in an UNESCO heritage site, as well as its peculiar features, which are analysed in the paper according to different parameters, the case is presented as a significant example of how migration, in the lack of *ad-hoc* policies, may affect from different points of view the perception and the ‘publicness’ itself of public spaces in consolidated historic contexts.

**Keywords**

Historic city, immigration, public space, social inclusion, urban conflicts

## Potentials and contradictions of traditional public spaces in the time of migrations

Meaning, use and image of public spaces change according to time and place, reflecting social and economic transformations, as well as physical and functional ones in the concerned urban areas. Very important are also the material, psychological and self-representation needs of users (either individuals or groups), their system of values and the way they perceive public space.

In compact, pre-automobile urban fabrics, built with regards to human dimension and measured on walking mobility, the availability of public spaces, that have maintained or re-conquered an easy accessibility by foot or bicycle, represents, according to Jan Ghel (2010), a strong attraction *per se* for recreational activities of a wide range of social actors. Such ‘optional’ activities, interweaving themselves with the movements generated by ‘necessary’ ones — due to business, study or health needs — relaunch and update the idea of the city as a meeting point: a vocation, traditionally recognized in public spaces, that the development of ICTs, and especially mobile devices, may reinforce (instead of threatening it, as commonly assumed). In democratically governed cities, the presence together of aleatory, unpredictable uses, may be considered as an indicator of social sustainability:

It is a significant quality that all groups of society, regardless of age, income, status, religion or ethnic background, can meet face to face in city space as they go about their daily business. This is a good way to provide general information to everybody about the composition and universality of society. It also makes people feel more secure and confident about experiencing the common human values played out in many different contexts. (Ghel, 2010, p. 28)

For Marcel Roncayolo (1993) the greater or lesser propensity of urban spaces to play in the contemporary city a supporting role for social practices is closely linked to their connotation as ‘espaces multiples’: that is spaces able on one hand to host multiple activities at the same time or at different times of the day, and on the other hand to put in relation urban functions, different in kind or level, directly or through the connection with other spaces. Access modes to such spaces should not be strictly specialized as well — as it occurs in exclusively pedestrian areas:

*Il y a un ville à partir du moment où c'est à la fois ludique et industriel, piétonnier et mécanique. Les véritables problèmes urbains sont des problèmes d'articulation et non pas des problèmes de division.* (Roncayolo, 1993, p. 37)

These considerations may lead to highlight a list of characteristics that can make the difference between urban spaces classified as ‘public’ and really living public spaces. Richard Ingersoll (2016) identifies five major indicators:

1. accessibility (more than 3 points of approach);
2. human scale (5 minutes to cross);
- 3) density of political and commercial functions;
- 4) democratic attractions (water, art, sports);
- 5) crossed programs (biographical diversity).

The first one is a precondition for use; the other ones seem to confirm the potential that the compact, not functionally segregated traditional city may still have in the provision of social spaces of aggregation. The last indicator refers, in line with Rocayolo’s point of view, to the polysemy of public space, resulting from the subjective projections of users — individuals or groups — among which differences (age, income, status, religion or ethnic background, but also gender, education, personal attitudes and inclinations, etc.) play once again a significant role.

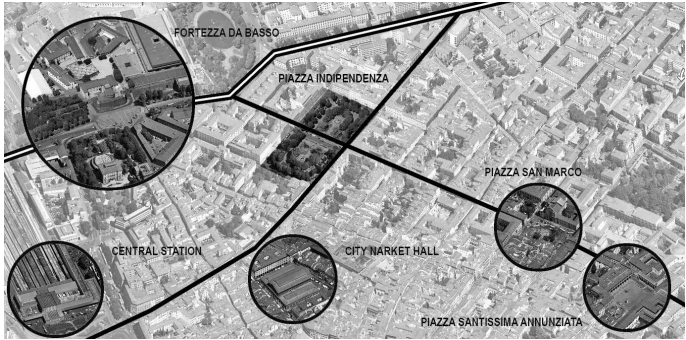


Fig. 1. Piazza Indipendenza is a nodal public space in the North-East sector of the historic city centre of Florence.

The tension generated by different ways of appropriation of a same space increases on one side its anthropological significance, but obviously may on the other lead to conflicts. These are not alien to public space, but can result either in the increase or diminution of its plurality, reinforcing its role as a catalyst of social sustainability or, on the contrary, making of it the litmus test of the contradictions and social disease in a specific urban context.

Piazza Indipendenza in Florence is a public space at the same time full of potential and contradictions, and certainly an interesting case study for the combination of several factors:

- its 'absolute' position, inside the perimeter of the UNESCO area of the city (Fig. 1), as well as its 'relative' position with respect to the topography of relationships, defined by the movements of different typologies of users;
- its hybrid nature — both square and garden — inside a high density urban fabric, lacking of alternative public spaces, which makes it even more precious in the eyes of locals — a place to preserve at any cost from the change of surrounding conditions;

- the presence, gradually grown over the last two decades, of groups of migrants from different countries, and, especially, of a significant part of the Filipino community living in and around the city, which has chosen Piazza Indipendenza as its main meeting place;
- the weak, if not ambiguous, role played by the municipality, siding in turn opposite positions while facing the ongoing situation: the demand of protection of the square or impactful sectoral solution for the traffic, social inclusion or 'zero tolerance'; on the other hand, the parallel role played by Catholic institutions for the religious and, in part, also social integration of the Filipino community in the city;
- the image of Piazza Indipendenza as a symbol place of the historic centre's urban decay, as it has been often depicted by local media, amplifying the inconveniences caused by the difficult coexistence between old residents and 'new citizens'. This sort of message usually brings to a vicious circle between perceived and actual risk conditions, rather than to an in-depth collective awareness of real problems, aimed to progressively overcome them in a positive way.

### **Piazza Indipendenza in Florence: past and present of a twofold urban square**

Piazza Indipendenza is a wide rectangular public space (100x230m) in the regular block pattern of a neighbourhood, built in the 40ies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century inside the late-medieval urban walls, between the Fortress of San Giovanni Battista (also called 'Fortezza da Basso') and the first railway station of Florence. Both the square and the



Fig. 2. Piazza Indipendenza in 1860 ca.

Fig. 3. Piazza Indipendenza today.

station were originally dedicated to Maria Antonia Borbone, wife of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. The present name, dating back to 1870 ca., refers to the pacific revolt for independency started in the square in 1859, which triggered the process of annexation of Tuscany to the Reign of Savoy.

In the following decades the square was more or less directly involved in great infrastructural works that modified the urban structure of the district, as well as its layout (Fig. 2). These works are:

- the opening through the historic centre of an access road to the Maria Antonia station (Via Nazionale), tangent to Piazza Indipendenza (1861);
- the demolition of the city walls and the construction in their place of a ring of large avenues (1865);
- the completion of a direct access road from the ring avenues to the city centre, by means of a stretch crossing the square exactly in the middle, that has divided it into two symmetric halves (1929);
- the building of the new big central station of Florence in the place of the old Maria Antonia station (1935).

The present arrangement of the inner gardens (Fig. 3) is the result of different interventions carried out between 1869 and 1953. In 1983, such an arrangement was about to be completely upset by the construction of one of the

big underground car parks planned in that time around the historic center. Against the project, the first civic committee in the recent history of Florence was formed by neighbourhood residents. After a long standoff with the municipality, the committee obtained the cancellation of the car park at Piazza Indipendenza from the plan. Thirty years later, the construction of an automated car park under one half of the square was newly admitted by the Planning Regulation (Regolamento Urbanistico) approved in 2014: a decision that ignited again the controversy and pushed back the neighbourhood committee on the war-path against the municipality.

Talking about the present role of Piazza Indipendenza as a public space, it's easy to see that all five performance indicators proposed by Ingersoll are fully met (Tab. 1; Fig. 4a-e). Different 'publics' frequent the square, among which a remarkable number are immigrants, especially from Philippines, North Africa and East Europe. Some of them live in the neighbourhood (in the centre of Florence, the area between the Central Station and the Central Market Hall is one of those with the highest concentration of foreign population) and have children who attend kindergarten, primary or secondary classes at the comprehensive school Gaetano Pieraccini, a few steps from the square. Other immigrants frequent the closest surroundings of Piazza Indipendenza attracted by specific functions: the Immigration Office of Florence (where non-EU citizens have to go for residence permit in Italy), the railway station, the Market Hall and the street market of San Lorenzo, where many foreign people work.

For Filipinos, the points of interest around Piazza Indi-

ACCESSIBILITY	<p>The square is close to the ring avenues and to the central railway station.</p> <p>It is located at the intersection between two important roads of the historic centre and has seven points of access from the street network (in restricted traffic zone).</p> <p>Bus stops, a taxi park, bicycle racks and a charging point for electric vehicles are present in the square.</p> <p>A light rail line is under construction, with a stop at the Fortress of San Giovanni Battista (Fortezza da Basso), 2 min. walk from the square.</p>
HUMAN SCALE	<p>Well-balanced ratio between the buildings and the empty space.</p> <p>The square may be crossed diagonally on foot in less than 5 min.</p>
DENSITY OF POLITICAL AND COMMERCIAL FUNCTIONS	<p>Inside the square:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• newsstand and flower kiosk.</li> </ul> <p>Functions located along the perimeter of the square:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University (Faculty of Economics), student hotel;</li> <li>• Clinic and medical test centre;</li> <li>• 2 hotels, 1 restaurant, 2 bars (one with outdoor terrace);</li> <li>• Hairdressing salon;</li> <li>• Several professional practices.</li> </ul> <p>Many shops and activities are located in the adjacent streets (via Nazionale, Via S. Caterina d'Alessandria, Via 27 Aprile).</p> <p>Functions and places within 5 min. walk from the square:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School complex "Gaetano Pieraccini" (kindergarten, elementary and middle school);</li> <li>• Central market hall;</li> <li>• Central railway station and shop gallery;</li> <li>• City Exhibition centre (at Fortezza da Basso), Business and Congress centre;</li> <li>• State police – immigration office;</li> <li>• Piazza San Marco (Saint Mark's Museum, Fine Arts Academy, University headquarters).</li> </ul>
DEMOCRATIC ATTRACTIONS	<p>Lawn, trees (Piazza Indipendenza is one of the few shadowed public spaces in the city centre).</p> <p>19<sup>th</sup> Century urban furnishing (street lamps and seats).</p> <p>2 monuments to prominent figures in the history of Florence (one in each half of the square);</p> <p>Children playground;</p> <p>Drinking fountain.</p>
CROSSED PROGRAMS (BIOGRAPHICAL DIVERSITY)	<p>Different kinds of public during the day, that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dogs owners (morning and evenings);</li> <li>• Neighbourhood residents;</li> <li>• Tourists;</li> <li>• Italian and foreign university students;</li> <li>• School children with families;</li> <li>• Clients of the bars and the restaurant;</li> <li>• Little groups of migrants (generally only men or only women with babies);</li> <li>• Meeting point for the Filipino community (esp. on Thursdays and Sundays – until late night);</li> <li>• Other.</li> </ul>

Tab. 1.



pendenza include also their Consulate in Via Ridolfi and the church of Saint Barnabas in Via Guelfa, home to a Filipino Catholic community. Moreover, the present Honorary Consul of Philippines, with Italian nationality, is the owner of the medical test centre in the square. The church of Saint Barnabas was granted in 1988 to the Filipino community by the Archdiocese of Florence as a place of both worship and social gathering. The connection between the church and Piazza Indipendenza was not immediate, but within 10 years a significant part of the Filipino community began to use the square as a meeting place and then also as a place of recreation, making of it a space of community identity.

With 4,500 legal immigrants, Filipinos are the third biggest foreign community in Florence, after Romanians (7,000) and Albanians (5,000). It has been estimated, however, that the real number of people with Filipino nationality in Florence is about 8,000.

If we look at how 'new citizens' use the square in relation to other kinds of public, we'll see very different situations in the two halves of the square. In the northern part, where the children from school Pieraccini and the adults who are with them flock after the class, the image that comes out is mainly that of a 'square of integration': a place where the differences among people with different nationalities (Italian included) fade away with the momentary sharing of universal human values, stimulated by the presence of many children of different ages

In the other side, we are faced on the contrary with a 'square of separation', mainly frequented by groups with different geographic backgrounds — migrants, tourists, a

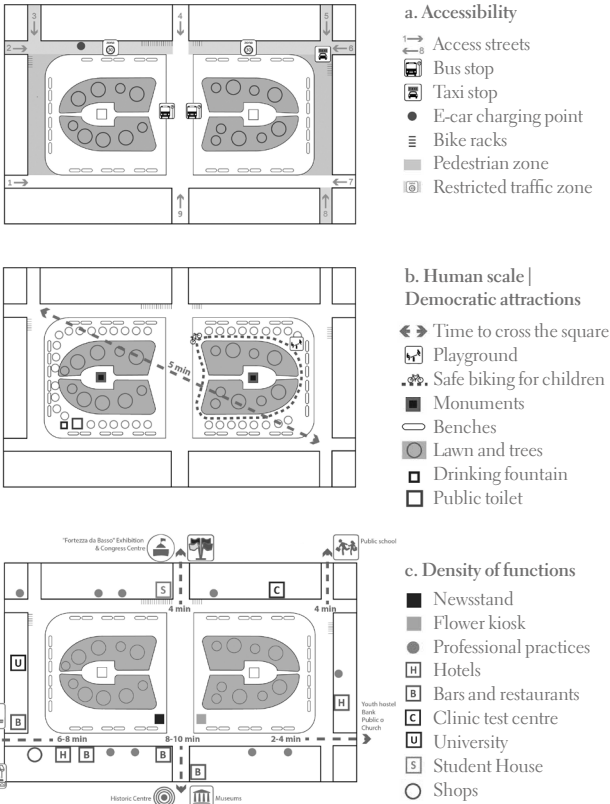
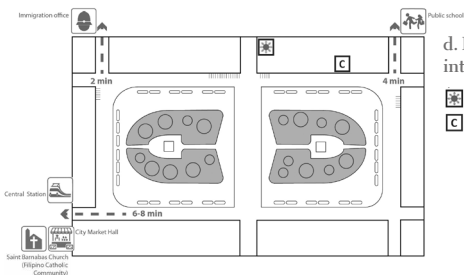


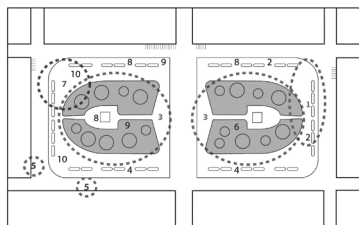
Fig. 4. Interpretative diagrams of the main characteristics and uses of Piazza Indipendenza (graphic: P. Guerriero).

few Italians — occupying distinct spaces with no contact with each other. Among these, the far more significant group is Filipino, which spends in the square many hours a day, eating altogether on the benches and having fun in different ways (street games, cards, etc.). This is especially on Thursday afternoons and Sundays, that is on days when the adults — who for the most part work in Florence as domestic helpers, babysitters, nannies or caregiv-



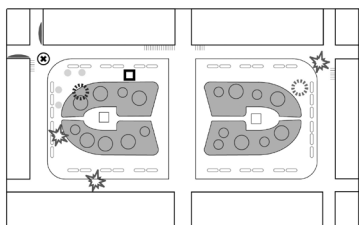
**d. Density of functions of highest interest for migrants**

- ☒ Honorary Consulate of Philippines
- ☒ Clinic test centre (property of the Honorary Consul of Philippines)



**e. Crossed programs**

- ① Children's play
- 2 Family groups
- ③ Resting areas (mainly tourist and students)
- 4 Short stops on benches (all kinds of users)
- ⑤ Bar/restaurant terraces
- 6 Outdoor games
- ⑦ Filipino community weekly meeting place
- 8 Other migrant's meeting places
- 9 Students
- 10 Dog owners (mornings and evenings)



**f. Anti-social behaviours and illegal acts**

- ⊗ Illegal alcohol dealing
- Drunken people's meeting places
- ☒ Corners used as toilets
- ☼ Night drum players disturbing public peace
- ☐ Telephone box used as hiding place for drugs
- ☼ Night vandalism acts against the playground
- ☼ Place where knife attacks have occurred

ers — are off work. It is an essentially peaceful, but exclusionary, 'occupation' of public space by several dozens of people — which in summer goes on until the night. Seen from the outside, its worst aspects (like alcohol consumption, some unauthorized trades, gambling, waste production, use of trees and some street corners as toilettes) stand out in the foreground, overshadowing the convivial essence of these reunions.

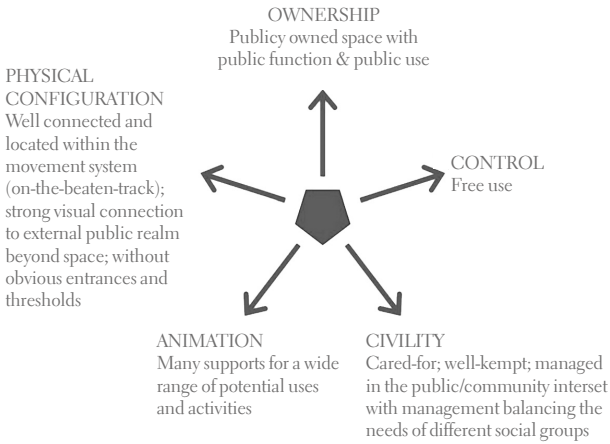
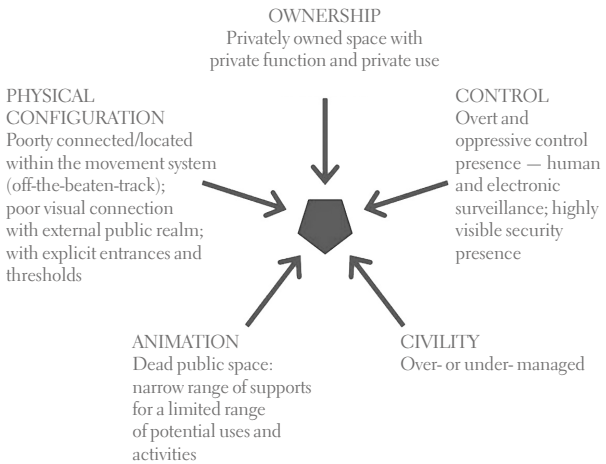


Fig. 5. Characteristic attributes of ‘more public’ and ‘less public’ places (source: Varna & Tiesdell, 2010).

These aspects have provoked on Italian residents a reaction of general impatience, which, added up with the opposition to the underground parking, has exacerbated along many years the tension toward the City government, accused by the civic committee of negligence in the protection of the image and liveability of a historic place, as well as, more recently, in providing security to citizens. At night, when the social control in some way exercised by usual visitors is over, and Piazza Indipendenza actually becomes a magnet for the most borderline segments of the immigrant population, it's notable that most anti-social behaviours (like alcoholism and breach of the public peace), illegal activities (drug dealing) and acts of violence (including drunken brawls, which are rather frequent, and the single episodes of knife attacks, occurred in the last two years) concentrate in the southern part of the square — the ‘square of separation’ — which suffers more from the negative influence of the central station (Fig. 4f).



### The challenged ‘publicness’ of public space in the historic city

An inductive, critical realist approach to public space in the contemporary city has been proposed by researchers George Varna e Steve Tiesdell of the University of Glasgow (2010), on the assumption that the ‘publicness’ of public space is a value in itself, to be assessed in its real applications on the basis of objective parameters, which therefore must be independent from the different aspirations of social actors.

For these authors, the many factors that affect the publicness of a public space — whatever it is: a historic square, as well as a gas station (Giovannoni, 2016) — can be traced back to the following five core ‘meta-dimensions’, any of which including a range of situations easily recognizable as ‘more public’ or ‘less public’ (Fig. 5): *ownership*, *control*, *civility*, *physical configuration* and *animation*.

Referring to the case of Piazza Indipendenza — an urban space, which is under the *ownership* and management of

the City — we have already seen that thanks to its *physical configuration*, it provides extremely favorable conditions to the concentration of people and ‘optional’ activities, which are actually reflected, as far as *animation* is concerned, in the high frequentation, for better or worse, of any part of the square. Therefore, it is only on the balance between the other two ‘meta-dimensions’ — *control* and *civility* — that it depends whether it will be possible to reconcile the two ‘souls’ of the square, or, on the contrary, options for a reduction both of publicness and social sustainability will prevail.

According to this approach, publicness decreases, when police control increases in presence and visibility (up to the militarization of the territory), and, on the side of the civility,

where places are either over-managed or under-managed [...]. Because both over and under-management deter at least some publics, each makes a place less public. (Varna, Tiesdell, 2010, p. 583)

At one extreme, the imposition of strict regulations for use and a rigid exclusive management bring to a substantial privatization of public space; at the opposite extreme, its permanent occupation by a closed group of people, with its own rules and codes of conduct, results in turn in a reduction of the rights of other people to enjoy it.

A spontaneous balance of the two dimensions — in which the control action is softly exercised by users themselves — characterizes, at least in the daytime, the northern half of Piazza Indipendenza, where the principle of sharing, coming from the main activity that takes place there, that is children’s play, prevail over the rules of group.

It's far to be reached, instead, in the southern half of the square, where seemingly incompatible logics of group face each other. On one side the Filipino community, while exercising its right to meet in a public place, carries some borderline or illegal activities (particularly, alcohol dealing and gambling), socially accepted within the group but not outside. On the other side, the citizen committee (the same one engaged against the project of a car park under the square) invoke a continuous presence of the police for increasing security, as well as a strict application of an in-force municipal regulation, which, especially in the UNESCO area, provides strong constraints on the use of public spaces (for example, it forbids camping, that for the most intransigent people includes also pick-nicking). Underlying the regulation, there is a restrictive idea of 'civic co-existence, livability and public decorum' — which is the reason why it has never been literally applied until now. Facing this situation, the initiatives carried in by the City have been wavering and completely ineffective.

As far as the dimension of civility is concerned, a dialog was promoted by the President of District I (Historic Centre) in 2013-14, by organizing periodical meetings among public officers, delegates of the Filipino community, the Honorary Consul of Philippines himself, members of no-profit associations engaged in the field of cultural mediation and integration, the parson of Saint Barnabas Church, municipal and state police representatives. However, this experience was abruptly interrupted after the City elections in 2014, before it could have visible effects. Anyway, a weakness that has immediately become clear, is that the Filipino participants to the meetings didn't real-

ly represent the part of the community that take part to the reunions in Piazza Indipendenza.

On the other hand, the decision of the City government to minimize maintenance interventions on the square, waiting to find an investor for the underground parking, to be charged with the costs of renovation, didn't help to create a favourable condition for the relaunch of the place.

As far as the dimension of control is concerned, a special commission established by the District with the task of contrasting the decay of the historic centre, promoted during spring 2015 systematic interventions of plain-clothes agents in some critic areas, that also brought to identify and prosecute the illegal alcohol dealers of Piazza Indipendenza. As a result, not completely unexpected but surely negative from the point of view of the publicness, all the Filipino group moved away for some months to another place, the garden at the Fortezza da Basso. However, after the commission was closed and controls over, everything went back to usual.

Today, control is limited to occasional demonstrative actions (patrol car parked in the middle of the pedestrian areas, passport checks to all foreigners, etc.), showy but useless, or, what is worse, counterproductive to the goal of refusing the ongoing conflict. The message they convey is in fact contradictory: discriminatory and repressing on one side, *laissez-faire* on the other ('Barking dogs never bite'). A new phase is therefore necessary.

The only way to confirm and strengthen the role of Piazza Indipendenza as a pluralistic public space with a strong social vocation, in an urban context otherwise subject, for the most part, to functional normalization processes in-



duced by mass tourism, can only aim to reconcile the contradictions, acting on two levels:

- on one hand, the full renovation of the square, overcoming the idea, frowned upon by the majority of residents, of an underground parking, while preserving the fundamental role of the playground in the northern side;
- on the other hand, resuming the dialog among the actors in the southern side, with the aim of a common acknowledgment of the rights of each part, and, as social behavior is concerned, “distinguishing between ‘harmful’ and ‘harmless’ activities, controlling the former without constraining the latter. Increasing the general tolerance toward free use, while stabilizing a broad consensus of what is permissible” (Varna, Tiesdell, 2010, p. 582).

From a political point of view, too, the semantic shift of a historic square in Florence from symbol place of urban decline to pilot project of social integration should have nothing but positive feedback.

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The book brings together contributions to the discussion on the relationship between the future of our cities and migration, which took place on the occasion of an international meeting held in Florence (Italy).

Scholars, educators, researchers, professionals, policymakers and students interested in the contemporary challenging question of migration within, across and beyond cities participated from different countries where migration represents a big challenge. The socio-spatial transformation of the everyday urban environment due to the migrations movements has been debated under an interdisciplinary approach. In general terms the workshop aimed to address questions related to cities and regions that are resilient to change (climatic, social, cultural), and to discuss new forms of residential patterns and urban life, with the purpose of jointly developing global visions regarding future cities in transformation. Immigration being but one of the most important expressions of this change.

The purpose was exploring new forms of appropriation of the urban territory, in a multidisciplinary way, involving the various fields related to the project, as well as the humanities and social sciences.

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