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Cultural Production in Peripheral Urban Spaces: Lessons from Barriera, Turin (Italy)

Authors:

Carlo Salone (first author)

DIST, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning

Politecnico di Torino e Università di Torino, Italy

Via Mattioli 39, 10125 Torino, Italy

Mail: carlo.salone@unito.it

Sara Bonini Baraldi (second and corresponding author)

DIST, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning

Politecnico di Torino e Università di Torino, Italy

Via Mattioli 39, 10125 Torino, Italy

Mail: sara.boninibaraldi@unibo.it

Giangavino Pazzola (third author)

DIST, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning

Politecnico di Torino e Università di Torino, Italy

Via Mattioli 39, 10125 Torino, Italy

Mail: gianga.pazzola@gmail.com

Abstract

Practices of cultural production within a peripheral urban neighbourhood can contribute to foster the sense of place, community belonging and local collective action. Starting from a critical perspective on the interconnections between cultural practices and urban regeneration, and developing on the concept of place-making, the paper has two main purposes: to investigate the nature of embeddedness of these practices and explore the ways of self-organisation of cultural actors and their relationships with public policies.

The case-study concerns 'Barriera di Milano', a large peripheral area in Turin (Italy), formerly one of the most industrialised zones of the city. Over the past few years, and particularly after the real-estate bubble burst of 2007-2008, in Barriera a lively concentration of initiatives of culture have been taking place, re-defining the urban and social space. These initiatives seem to be innovative for many reasons: firstly, while demonstrating a peculiar but significant embeddedness in the neighbourhood, they are mostly self-generated; secondly, the institutional assets, the economic self-sufficiency and the low degree of connection among initiatives support new forms of citizenship and place-making based on a 'not for profit entrepreneurship'.

Keywords

Cultural production, Turin, place-making, embeddedness, urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the nexus between culture and urban development has received close attention, involving many authors and mobilising a considerably large range of scientific perspectives (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Scott, 2000; Landry et al., 2001; Evans, 2001; Young, 2008). However, scholars devoted to investigating the culture-led processes of urban development have privileged the aspects concerning the interrelationships between the use of cultural elements – especially, but not exclusively, material artefacts such as installations, iconic architectures, open spaces designed by artists and so forth – and the transformation of urban spaces. At the same time, much more attention has been paid to formal, top-down processes of public cultural policies than smaller independent practices of cultural production (Quinn, 2005; Sharp, Pollock and Paddison, 2005; Evans, 2009). Less frequently, international literature highlights the connections between cultural production and place-making processes. In other words, not so much has been written about the concrete practices of cultural operators acting within a specific urban context and the various tangible and intangible actions contributing to shaping the form, meaning and material use of urban spaces.

This paper deals with the collective process of potential place-making which can be implemented by cultural producers, analysing the behaviour of a number of cultural organisations working in a peripheral neighbourhood of the city of Turin (Italy), affected by deep social and economic transformation in the course of the last two decades. In order to highlight the nature of place-making processes we investigated, on the one hand, the nature of embeddedness of cultural practices in the neighbourhood, and on the other, the role of public policies in this context and the degree of ‘spontaneous’, self-organising action.

The paper is conceived as follows. The second section introduces the debate concerning the role played by culture within urban regeneration processes, underlining the limits of large-scale physical interventions and the exploitation of art and culture in urban transformations. Starting from a particular family of regeneration policies based on social integration, the third section develops on the concept of place-making and embeddedness, privileging an approach focused on practices. The fourth section introduces the case-study, firstly describing the overall approach to urban regeneration issues experienced in Turin, and secondly focusing on cultural practices in “Barriera di Milano”. The analysis reveals the peculiar but significant nature of embeddedness of cultural practices and their relative

independency from public policy and support. The final section summarises the major findings and reveals a new entrepreneurial approach of cultural actors and their role in place-making processes.

2. Urban regeneration and culture: a critical survey

Over the past few decades, the goals of tackling the physical decay, economic decline and social marginalisation of inner urban or peripheral areas have been chased through a heterogeneous set of tools. During the 1990s, in the old industrialised European countries many urban regeneration initiatives were often technically assisted and financially supported by supranational organisations like the European Union but they were undeniably modelled according to some national influential large-scale urban rehabilitation programmes, launched years before in the framework of the so-called urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989) and flourishing under Thatcherism (Thornley, 1991).

Many of these regeneration policies include cultural facilities and events as instruments of urban requalification and development (Gibson and Stevenson, 2004; Pratt, 2010; Edwards, 1997). The significance of these policies is evident in the wide range of initiatives such as festivals, exhibitions, international congresses, meetings, and so forth, which have been implemented by governments across the world in favour of culture and the arts.

According to this approach, cultural policies began to be accredited with very diverse benefits at the urban scale (Cuesta, 2004; Stevenson, 2007; Tornaghi, 2008) concerning the city image (Gibson and Stevenson, 2004; Stevenson, 2007), the attraction of new economic activities and the renovation of central urban spaces (Bailey, Miles and Stark, 2004; Kaasa and Vadi, 2008; Santagata, 2004), and the impulse to real-estate market (Mathews, 2010). Culture is considered and represented as a useful way of reinforcing both urban competitiveness and cohesion, and as an efficient tool to achieve not only economic growth and competitiveness but also social development (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007; Stern and Seifert, 2007; Sacco and Segre, 2009).

The many criticisms of these approaches raise different issues. Firstly, most of these initiatives propose banal and stereotyped interpretations of urban spaces, and apply standardised recipes according to global models (Andersen et al., 2012; Peck, 2005; Ponzini and Rossi, 2010). Secondly, well-known

gentrification processes have followed or accompanied urban renewal actions since the beginning (Peck, 2005), generating a fast increase of real-estate values and, consequently, fast expulsion of the lower-income residents. Thirdly, other negative effects come from the instrumental use of the culture and art involved according to elite interests (Salet, 2008; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Fourthly, many recent urban development policies have been matched with cultural action, in line with the general belief that interventions on culture are able to activate regeneration processes transforming 'decaying' areas into something attractive and 'glamorous'. In actual fact, the results often diverge from those expected and the long-term impact of culture-led regeneration policies is far from being demonstrated (Hall and Robertson, 2001; Bailey et al., 2004).

Against the utilitarian imperative consistent with the neoliberal agenda (Florida, 2002; Landry, 2000; Santagata, 2007; Scott, 2000, Vuyk, 2010; Tucker, 1996), an emerging set of independent and radical movements has recently been demanding new unconventional approaches (Sharp, Pollock and Paddison, 2005, Belfiore and Bennett, 2007). Such actors experience practices that are often involved in integrated urban policies and impact more deeply and intensely on the socio-spatial mechanisms unfolding in cities. These initiatives can produce place-making effects in neglected or abandoned urban spaces and seem to offer a more meaningful tool for fostering urban transformation than conventional regeneration policies based on physical cultural facilities, big events and support to creative industries (Bridge, 2006; Stern and Seifert, 2007).

3. Place-making and embeddedness: theoretical insights

Criticising the size and banality of large-scale urban renewal and expansion operations implemented at the beginning of this century, many authors have recently claimed smooth place-making processes and 'everyday' forms of urbanism, where the evolution and the recovery of the urban space through social practices is more important than the creation of new spaces (Campo and Ryan, 2008; Mould, 2014).

Place-making is a concept that transcends the boundaries of the potential effects of technical practices on space: its original formulation could be attributed to an encounter between the practical orientation of urban planning and community development studies - mainly concerning the material

handling of space and the built environment (Jacobs, 1961; Rapoport, 1997; Friedmann, 2010) - and humanistic geography, which may have appropriated and reformulated the meaning of place-making. Descending from the seminal work of Tuan (1974), orbiting around the concept of “topophilia” and its corollary of “field of care”, and the complementary reflections proposed by Relph in his book *Place and Placelessness* (1976), humanistic geography brings together the concepts of ‘self’ and ‘place’ which are considered mutually constitutive, and stresses the role of the subject – the self – as an autonomous actor who, interacting with other actors and nature, society and culture, transforms environments (Sack, 1997; Creswell, 2004; Entrikin and Tepple, 2006). In this process, elements such as individual and collective experiences, representations and intentions acquire increasing importance as powerful engines of urban transformation. Therefore, spontaneous cultural practices can be powerful catalysts of these elements both supporting their production and leading them to coherence (Rota and Salone, 2014).

The concept of self-organising ecologies developed by Campo and Ryan (2008) with regard to the functioning of entertainment zones in some cities, clearly show how “independent actors collectively contribute to the larger-scale thematic nature” of their initiatives, “creating a coherent cultural geography within a larger and often undistinguished urban context” (p. 293). The internal coherence described by Campo and Ryan (2008) is exactly an outcome of that ‘everyday urbanism’ we mentioned before, in which the “lived experience [is] more important than physical form in defining the city” and city building is a “human and social discourse”. These self-organising ecologies are the outcomes of a process of place-making undertaken by a composite range of social actors – individuals, organisations, movements and, seldom, institutional planners – acting together and struggling over conflicting values in order to give meaning to specific spaces (McCann, 2002).

However, the prevailing planning approaches tend to trivialize the theoretical premises of place-making offering practical recipes for fostering “urbanity” (Montgomery, 1998), and revealing some significant links with more traditional movements such as New Urbanism (Katz et al., 1994). Nevertheless, our inquiry does not deal with this increasingly fashionable and mainstream concept of place-making, but rather concerns the shift from large regeneration plans to small, interstitial, sometimes informal transformations in which independent individuals and collective actors play a crucial role.

In this perspective, the need to better ascertain the socio-spatial relations that structure place-making processes leads to mobilize a concept that has profoundly influenced the geographical approach to the way firms and social actors can affect local and regional development: the concept of embeddedness. In spite of its background in the economic anthropology and sociology (Polanyi, 1957; Granovetter, 1985), the reflection on embeddedness has rapidly crossed disciplinary borders, influencing the geographical analysis of firms' spatial behaviour. Inspired by Granovetter's (1985) work, many scholars have attempted to demonstrate that not only social action, but also economic action and their outcomes are deeply affected by the "actors' dyadic relations and by the structure of the overall network of relations" (Grabher, 1993, p.4), criticizing the 'utilitarian' representation of a world of atomized and anonymous social actors competing for resources.

In Grabher's view, the existence of reciprocity, loose coupling, interdependence and power relations among actors allow the establishment of strategic alliances, vertical cooperation among disaggregated units, or industrial districts, which constitute an effective (or more realistic) analytical alternative to perfect market and hierarchies. In particular, the notion of industrial district as derived by Marshall (1919/1937) and recalled by Grabher, is based on physical proximity of actors, which explain the emergence of an "industrial atmosphere" characterized by "the easy exchange of ideas, information, and goods; the accumulation of skills and innovative capability; and the development of a cultural homogeneity allowing cooperation, trusts and consensus" (Grabher 1993, p.21).

Torre and Rallet (2010) question the link between localization - or, better, proximity through localization - and embeddedness, somehow implicit in the notion of industrial district, distinguishing between geographical proximity and organized proximity. In short, the two scholars affirm that permanent geographical proximity, derived from a localization choice, is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain positive socio-economic interactions.

While leading to diverging reflections, all authors dealing with embeddedness and urban or regional development focus on competitive firms and industrial markets (see also Oinas 1997), disregarding both the characteristics of localization processes and embeddedness dynamics in non-industrial sectors and, at the same time, the role of non-profit sectors in urban and regional development process. As some authors highlight (García, 2004; Degen and García, 2012), the majority of works on

cultural districts and urban regeneration focus on the provision of flagship cultural facilities and large scale culture-led urban development processes (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993), with an often unclear definition of the causal nexus between arts, culture and economic development (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). Conversely, few surveys have been dedicated to analysing the progressive cultural policies addressed to inner cities' neighbourhoods (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007), anyhow disregarding the concept of embeddedness.

What explains localization choices in realms characterized by mostly non-profit-seeking and non-competitive actors? What is the role of actual or potential relationships in such contexts? How choices of proximity and the existence of (potential) relational networks among cultural actors affect urban development processes? These questions are not trivial, as they form the ground for a better understanding of the role of cultural production in small interstitial place-making processes and urban regeneration practices.

Within this perspective, the following paragraph will further investigate and develop the concept of embeddedness in culture-led place-making processes, taking into consideration the reasons for locating in a specific area and the mutual relationships between cultural actors, urban spaces and the inhabitants, while also investigating the degree of spontaneity and independency of such initiatives. In short, echoing the words of Oinas (1997) - but substituting the word "economic" with "cultural" - we are interested in exploring the "nature of [cultural] action and the relations of [cultural] actors with their socio-spatial environments" (p.24)

Due to its profound process of de-industrialisation that created a large range of spatial 'porosities' for informal place-making actions, Turin offers some significant empirical evidence in this field: here, the peculiar modality of embeddedness of cultural practices and their – controversial – relationships with urban policies seem to deserve particular attention, highlighting not only micro-transformations of the spaces, but also social conducts and entrepreneurial models that are very different from the past.

4. The case-study of Turin, Barriera di Milano

4.1 Regeneration policies in Turin

Across Europe, the last two decades of urban interventions have been dominated by the combination of a large number of urban regeneration programmes, both aimed at contrasting the decline of old industrialised areas with injections of new economic functions, and proposing long-term spatial development perspectives.

In many respects, Turin reflects the same trajectory as that experienced by cities such as Lille, Birmingham and Barcelona or, on a megacity scale, by London or Paris. Therefore, talking about urban regeneration in Turin means re-constructing two whole decades of planning interventions, guided mostly by the local authorities but also involving private partners such as real-estate developers, big industrial players, Universities, professional agencies and public bodies. This very broad coalition of interests has deeply influenced the public debate on the recovery from the long crisis of the one-company town (once dominated by the Italy's most important automotive conglomerate FIAT), and agreed on a common agenda based on the need to overcome the supposed ineffectiveness of traditional regulatory planning, the fascination for integrated approaches to the urban project (Parkinson, 1989; Lawless, 1991), and the effort to replace the increasingly weak financial capacity of local authorities with private funding and non-profit energies.

In 1997, the Municipality inaugurated the Special Project for Peripheries (SPP) office, a pioneer programme which progressively gathered under its control all the regeneration initiatives, whatever the referred programme (European, national or local; Governa and Saccomani, 2008). Similar experiences were carried out in major Italian metropolitan areas and, after an early experimental phase aimed at innovating the urban policies through 'open' participation procedures, ended in strong institutionalisation (Governa and Salone, 2005). A significant place in this regeneration framework is occupied by the Urban Programme, which involved two areas within Turin: Mirafiori Sud and Barriera di Milano. In the latter the Municipality of Turin used the Urban Programme as a general framework for guiding several actions aimed at revitalising the district.

At the end of the same period (1999), the Municipality assigned to an external agency, *Torino Internazionale*, the pivotal role of managing the multi-lateral process of negotiation leading to a joint

design for the envisaged future of the metropolitan area. The overall purpose was to reverse the negative cycle engendered by the industrial crisis and to accompany Turin on its post-Fordist pathway (Pinson, 2002).

Over the last years the strategic planning activity seems to show signs of difficulty: after a second Strategic Plan, published in 2006, a third edition was recently launched (Torino Strategica, 2015) but the economic and social context is radically different from the past. Despite the new branding discourses focused on consumption services – especially in the food and wine culture – and urban ‘smartness’, the city is struggling to find new paths for overcoming the ongoing crisis (Vanolo, 2015).

At the same time, the current austerity seems to have made significant impact on the large scale regeneration initiatives that characterised the programmes previously experienced. The urban regeneration cycle now seems to have come to an end. While the Municipality seeks to update its approach, many actors are defining and implementing their spatial strategies according to an informal but intentional behaviour, aiming to adapt the built environment of the post-Fordist city to their own practical needs. In many parts of the city, a number of tiny, widespread and deep physical and social interventions are gradually changing the functional and physical geography, privileging derelict or misused areas, formerly occupied by industrial activities. In the following section we will present the main results of a one-year research project conducted in a large neighbourhood of inner Turin, exploring such practices of place-making processes through cultural productions.

4.2 Interstitial transformations and place-making processes in Barriera di Milano

The case-study concerns the neighbourhood ‘Barriera di Milano’, for short Barriera, a large inner area of 47,163 inhabitants located in the north-eastern corner of Turin, formerly one of the most industrialised zones of the city. Barriera (in English “barrier”) was founded in the second half of the XIX century as an unplanned settlement near to the ancient custom border that surrounded the city of Turin. It developed fast at the end of the century, as some of the biggest Turin factories began to work, linked to the car industry FIAT, attracting in a few decades thousands people from the countryside and later, between the fifties and the seventies, from southern Italy. More recently, relevant flows of immigrants from Africa

and Eastern Europe have joined the area, which has lost many of its original residents after a population peak (about 110.000) in 1975 (Beraudo et al., 2006).

The neighbourhood has been the heart of a regeneration effort made by the Municipality in the period 2007-2013, with the launch of an ambitious Integrated Programme of Urban Development (*PISU*). The programme aimed at improving the quality of public spaces and the mobility in a district where the demographic density is about three times the city average, and the large interventions of social housing have been realized paying scarce attention to environmental amenities (Armano et al., 2016). Furthermore, the last official proposal of urban transformation presented by the Turin's Municipality in the neighbourhood – the so-called “Variante 200” - envisages a huge development of dwelling and related retail and leisure functions, using the foreseen subway line as a catalyst for investments. While the effects of such a large scale initiative (if realized) will be visible and assessable only in the future, in recent years a lively concentration of cultural initiatives has been taking place in *Barriera*, so that it has been called, with some emphasis, the “Chelsea of Turin”.

Our inquiry was conducted within a larger research project recently developed on the whole city of Turin and focused on investigating new forms of urban development from a spatial and economic point of view (Santangelo, 2015). The specific objective of our working group was to understand the dynamics of socio-spatial transformation of *Barriera* based on current cultural and creative practices. In particular, to investigate the nature of the place-making dynamics in *Barriera*, we were interested in understanding, on one hand, the nature of embeddedness of the practices investigated in the neighbourhood and, on the other, to what extent these practices are led or at least strongly supported by explicit public policies, rather than an outcome of spontaneous dynamics.

The first step involved the mapping of the cultural initiatives in the area by integrating a database that had already been developed by one of the authors (Bertacchini and Pazzola, 2015) with a complete list of actors working in the contemporary art sector set up by a local player. From this mapping, 18 actors were identified (see Appendix 1) for which we decided to further investigate the relevant dynamics (links with the neighbourhood and the role of public policies) using a highly qualitative investigation method (Yin, 2011) and focusing on the ethnology of the organisations (Zan et al, 2015). The choice of the 18 cases did not aim in any way to be statistically representative, but was rather based

on criteria of pertinence, relevance and the accessibility of the selected organisations. A number of interviews and field visits (around thirty) were done with each organisation over a period of approximately eight months of field research, which led to the development of trusting relations of exchange between the researchers and the organisations analysed.

While focusing on the topics described, the interviews and meetings were non-structured or semi-structured, seeking to underline the most relevant topics and issues without steering the contents in any pre-set manner. To facilitate the interpretative framework, however, when drafting the report we thought it useful to organise the material gathered on the basis of some specific analytical dimensions. In particular we decided to describe the investigation into the link with the neighbourhood (the nature of embeddedness) through three dimensions: the original link with *Barriera* and the reasons for locating in the neighbourhood; the reasons for staying (Shamai and Ilatov, 2005; Painter, 2010); the relations with other cultural operators in the neighbourhood (Granovetter, 1985; Costa, 2008; Rota, 2010). In addition, 50 questionnaires were distributed and collected in several bars and in the neighbourhood market in order to sound the population perception of the cultural offer of the area and its level of acknowledgment. This further data collection allowed us to deepen our comprehension of the nature of embeddedness reached by the 18 initiatives under analysis, shifting the focus from the cultural actors to the inhabitants.

On the other hand, the role of public policies is expressed through three dimensions: the origin of the initiatives (spontaneous, or the result of public policies), the weight of the public contribution to the organisation's activities (and therefore the level of economic independence of the initiatives), and the type of relationships established between the various initiatives and the Urban Programme.

4.2.1 The nature of embeddedness

As emerged from the literature (see paragraph 3) the type of relationship existing between the 18 analysed organisations and the *Barriera* neighbourhood is fundamental for understanding the place-making processes (see table 1). The starting point of our analysis was not so much the actual study of the cultural production practices, but rather the transformation of the social relations in space through the reiteration of cultural practices, and therefore the presences of place-making processes.

[Insert table 1 here]

A first important element in this sense concerns the motivations explaining the location of the 18 organisations in the Barriera neighbourhood (and not elsewhere). Surprisingly, the initiatives implemented by organisations originating in Barriera are the minority (see column (a) table 1). The strong attraction of the neighbourhood for external organisations not linked to the territory by personal history or birth therefore emerges.

Among the organisations from other areas, there seem to be three main motivations for locating in Barriera (see column (b) table 1). On the one hand, the desire to work in a fragile neighbourhood with mainly social intentions (marked as ‘social’ in table 1), through actions targeting inclusion and participation in a multicultural setting:

“We chose this zone because we thought that, in this context, our presence could trigger social transformation”.

“In this neighbourhood around 70% of the children registered with primary schools are children of immigrants. I was interested in working with them and for them”.

On the other hand, the availability of low cost residential and professional spaces, with certain physical characteristics suited to the settlement of cultural operators and actors (‘real estate costs’):

“The buildings in the neighbourhood are easy to buy or rent. They have particular architectural characteristics: lofts, low buildings, workshops offering expressive places for the creativity present in the city at advantageous prices. [...] We noted that many artists have decided to settle here to take advantage of the economic convenience”.

Overall, the availability of low cost premises seems in any case to be a determinant (it is not perhaps by chance that all the initiatives – with only one exception– were set up or transferred to the neighbourhood from 2007/2008, the year in which the financial crisis began – see column (c) table 1), and is certainly prevalent on the fact of originally belonging to the neighbourhood.

In several cases, the motivations linked to the real estate market are added to a general perception of a pleasant and lively neighbourhood, where actors recognize each other as belonging to the same ‘ecology’ and underline the special cultural atmosphere in which the newcomers are subsequently imitated by other organisations, creating the reputation of the place and an increasingly significant interdependence according to the logics of belonging and similarity mentioned at Section 3 (‘real estate costs/atmosphere’):

“The Barriera brand exists, and is emerging. People and organisations was to enhance this, because it revitalises the neighbourhood and its image”.

“Yesterday we had a meeting with Urban to map the cultural practices in the neighbourhood: we were more than 40 among artists, architects, gallerists, graphics and designers. We noticed that many artists have their atelier in Barriera and have decided to establish here to take advantage of the spaces low cost. Taking into consideration this potential, we have decided to choose this

location because of its atmosphere, hoping that our presence could trigger a change in the neighbourhood.

The analysis of the relationships among cultural actors in the neighbourhood has shown a variety of linkages, including the co-production of cultural products/activities, hospitality and co-working, collaboration with schools, co-lobbying and the existence of personal relationship (familiarity). To summarize our findings, we have marked networking as weak when actors experienced up to two cooperative forms (almost all actors are involved at least in co-lobbying activities through Tavolo delle Arti Contemporanee¹), medium when their networking covered from three to four different categories (for instance, school, co-production and hospitality) and strong when they are active in all categories (see column (e) table 1). Results are quite significant and have been further weighted according to the self-evaluations expressed by the interviewees. Despite the expectations of some actors when choosing the location, and in contrast to what we may have expected, several actors report a relative weakness in establishing cooperative relations, defining activities mainly on an individual basis. Other players, on the contrary, have activated multiple relationships both in terms of partners and relational forms, sometimes shaping their own identity, cultural offer, and sustainability model according to the inputs of the relations. Altogether, however, these experiences still show a limited capacity to form a long-lasting wide collaboration in the form of collective action. The only attempt made in this direction (Tavolo delle Arti Contemporanee set up by MEF in collaboration with Urban) has in fact raised some scepticism and struggles to find its path:

“The aim of this initiative is not clear. And our experience has demonstrated that it is difficult to build a shared route”

¹ The “Tavolo delle Arti” is a cooperating initiative among actors working in art and culture, established by Urban Barriera at the request of the Ettore Fico Museum. The purpose of the Tavolo is to map the realities and seek to develop an organised system for the proposals and needs of the different cultural organisations.

Despite the composite and ambiguous picture of network relationships among cultural actors, almost all organisations interviewed show a strong and increasing affection for the neighbourhood, demonstrated by the establishment of direct relationships with its inhabitants. In some cases (marked as ‘target’, see column (d) table 1), such link takes the form of a traditional producer-consumer relationships: the cultural services offered by the various organisations are increasingly attracting the local inhabitants who become a privileged – while not exclusive - reference target.

“This project was supposed to develop over a series of steps which made our space into a kind of heritage recognised by the local citizens, [...] a place for the people living nearby. These users are often far from traditional, elite museum circuits, while we address a more pop audience [...] with a very varied range of events”.

In other cases the local population becomes an active actor within the cultural production processes, being increasingly involved not only as passive recipient but also as a source of initiatives, energies and inspiration, even where the social component was not an original feature (‘involvement/inspiration’).

“In the beginning we had some problems with the local residents because our events caused some disturbance. After the soundproofing, we invited people to come and see us, and take part in our everyday activities. Over time we created a small community for working on the allotments; the elderly, kids and families. Now we have a waiting list of people wanting to take over from anyone who’s not interested anymore”.

“My artistic work has been deeply inspired by the life in the neighbourhood. The local population and the life in Barreria is part of my work in many ways”.

The increasing level of affection to the place also seems to develop from an embryonal consciousness of the operators concerning the effect their own actions can have on the local dynamics.

“Working here has changed the local area and continues to do so. Perhaps we invented a way of doing this even though initially we hadn’t planned any activities with the local area. Even involuntarily, our activities affect our surroundings, transforming the urban space”.

To fully appreciate the quality of the relationships between the 18 initiatives and the neighborhood, we have also taken into consideration the voice of the residents. We have conducted 50 questionnaires to randomly selected inhabitants focusing on many complementary aspects: the acknowledgment of the cultural offer of the area, the recognition of cultural actors, the active participation in events and cultural activities, the feeling of improvements in the livability of the neighborhood thanks to cultural initiatives, the perception of the physical transformations of the district, and the role of government in this process.

Despite the limited statistical reliability of our sample, it is worth noticing how 22 on 50 of the respondents to the questionnaires confirm to have perceived an increase in the cultural offer in the area in the last 10 years (on the contrary, 21 do not perceive any increase, while 7 do not have an opinion). This is surely a positive result, considering the negative economic cycle characterizing this period and the increasing limited investment that culture has received at the national level. In addition, the 18 initiatives under analysis demonstrate to be quite known by the local population (12 over 18 initiatives have been explicitly recognized by at least one respondent), and even if few of our respondents have participated to their activities up to now, 17 respondents affirm that the cultural activities specifically proposed by the 18 initiatives have contributed to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood. Furthermore, according to 14 respondents, cultural organizations have positively affected the physical transformation of the neighborhood, while 25 explicitly deny a specific role of the government in leading the overall transformation of the area. These results confirm the perception and the social recognition of the cultural activities initiated in the neighborhood, while a significant process of audience development seems to be still in (yet positive) progress.

4.2.2 *The role of public policies*

The centrality of practices introduced by the concept of place-making and the focus on the organisations which – in their action and interaction – shape the environment, tend to relegate public policies to a secondary role in the dynamics of urban and spatial transformation. One second important dimension of our analysis therefore focused on the role of public policies and players in facilitating, supporting and/or guiding the practices of cultural and artistic production developing in the area.

In this regard, one first element of interest concerns the processes explaining the genesis of the initiatives, highlighting three possible pathways: ‘oriented’ initiatives, those generated within a given institutional framework; ‘incubated’ initiatives, born from specific university paths and subsequently managed autonomously; totally ‘independent’ initiatives, run by individuals or small groups in a bottom-up logic (see column (f) table 1). Curiously, the first include only the initiative of Bagni di Via Agliè, one of the *Case del Quartiere* promoted by the municipality of Turin funded by Compagnia di San Paolo with predominantly social purposes². Apart from two other realities developed from university projects, the vast majority of cases are authentically independent initiatives. What clearly emerges is therefore the fundamental role of the private initiative (whether individual or group) in the cultural dynamics of *Barriera*, characterised by strong personalities each ‘visionary’ in their own way, who have wanted to invest and risk (not only/so much in economic terms but rather with their own professional and personal life) in new activities, combining resources, staff and ideas: a sort of “non-profit entrepreneurship” in which the passion of individuals and groups takes the concrete form of organized activities.

A second proxy of the role of public policies is the degree of economic independence of the various initiatives, whatever is the original path (see column (g) table 1). Also here, there is a strong contrast with common belief. The majority of the organisations analysed are relatively independent from public

² The “Case del Quartiere” network includes thirteen “open public places; social and cultural workshops expressing collective thoughts and experiences; spaces offering opportunities for participation, involvement and self-organisation”.

funding: some of them are fully independent (marked as ‘absent’), while others access public funds only for specific projects (‘single projects’), and therefore not to develop everyday activities (‘stable’), far away from the logic of public support developed in the past. In interpretative terms, one of the causes can certainly be found in the lack of public resources over the past few years: in many cases the public support comes as non-financial contributions, such as the free or discounted use of the spaces of action. The wish for independence, “going alone”, in a purely entrepreneurial perspective, without however being oriented to profit, emerges from many of the interviews.

“To remain independent we never applied for funding. This was an explicit desire right from the start, which stayed a part of our everyday action”

A brief reflection on the legal status of the organisations and the emerging business models – in other words the logic whereby an organisation is able to work and support itself – confirms this interpretation. While non-profit activities (‘associations’, ‘foundations’, and ‘social cooperatives’) clearly prevail of profit-based ones (‘companies’ and ‘cooperatives’ - see column h table 1), what is furthermore surprising is the low presence of foundations on one hand (a very much celebrated yet underused form?) and cooperatives on the other (an endangered species, a heritage of the past?). What also emerges is the presence of single or in any case unstructured subjects, that can clearly be seen in the case of single artists as well as others: this is the case, for example, of Atelier Héritage which, while enjoying a number of collaborations and voluntary relations, has not yet been able to develop a formal structure.

Beyond the formal aspects, it is however interesting to see how the majority of organisations develop some kind of commercial or entertainment activities, certainly not driven by a logic of profit but in any case with a view to meeting supply and demand in the market (see column (i) table 1). Some organisations – marked as ‘cost reduction’ - survive by focusing mainly on the creative ability to reduce costs: their business strategy is thus focused not as much on increasing revenues but in lowering cash expenses through alternative practices (from voluntary work to recycling for restructuring and furnishing works, to accessing low cost spaces). In other cases the commercial activities supporting the socio-cultural activities play a more important role, developing a model based on diversification: in

these cases, non-remunerative activities are coupled with more profitable ones (bar, concerts, space rental) in order to ensure an overall sustainability of the organization (marked as ‘functions integration’). Finally, the most numerous group (ranked as ‘market orientation’) is that of the organisations which, although developing cultural/artistic activities, address the market with commercial and leisure products, such as communication services, artwork sales and large events organization. There are in any case only few organisations which base their survival on both public or private ‘non-repayable’ funding (‘sponsorships and grants’): while the public sector seems to have withdrawn, it has certainly not been replaced by private patronage. Rather than seeking external funding, the organisations have chosen the path of entrepreneurship³.

In this context, the contribution of Urban Barriera (see column (I) table 1) looks particularly weak and partly disconnected from the local ferment, despite one of the main objectives of this urban policy was precisely that of strengthening the social and cultural associations. Few organisations have carried out their projects in cooperation with Urban, or declare to consider Urban a key interlocutor in the neighbourhood (marked as ‘yes’).

“Urban’s work has focused mainly on helping small businesses, with little focus on the cultural sector. The intervention remains clumsy, we did a “spot” project with them but there is no continuity over time. They have a vision of participatory planning, which in fact is a mere creation of consent, the accompaniment to pre-packaged projects [...] they help to swallow the indigestible.”

³ From an initial analysis it also emerged how the level of economic health of the various initiatives is not clearly correlated to their dependency on public funds; several independent organisations or some which have public funding only for specific projects, appear to be in very good economic health.

This is a decisive issue: if it is true that the actions of Urban in the neighbourhood have been somehow important for physical requalification of the area, it is also true that in the field of cultural practices a certain gap between the role of Urban and the most important local organizations clearly emerge: another proof of the limited weight of public interventions in affecting local cultural production.

“Urban has many employees but does not actually come into contact with the local people (operators only). It is unusual, for example, that the “tavolo delle arti” (arts round table) was organized only now and not four years ago. Urban is perceived as a tool for planting new flower beds and keeping the gardens tidy. [...] The community dimension exists, and is wary of experiences that are imposed from the top”.

“We think the intervention of Urban is imperfect, there is no possibility for long-term programming. And in any case, in urban planning terms, they have done two supermarkets and big blocks. There are no services (on the contrary, they have been reduced) and there are no commercial activities”.

5. Conclusions

According to Friedmann (2010), the power of the place is unfolding in its capability to make creative social practices possible and give new meanings to semi-abandoned spaces and ‘marginal’ communities. This entails that place must be thought and interpreted in a non-essentialised manner and that the place-making process is much richer than a simple set of physical modifications in urban spaces, because it enables local actors to implement meaningful practices that shape the perception and interpretation of the urban realm, also catalysing micro-economic and socio-cultural experiences.

The reconstruction of the experiences in the previous sections seems to confirm the vitality of *Barriera di Milano* as a socio-spatial context able to trigger original, autonomous and self-organising cultural practices, even during a lasting urban crisis and despite the demise of public sector intervention. The empirical evidence of our research on *Barriera* shows that the process of de-industrialisation and its vacant remains can offer ‘porosities’ for independent cultural productions to revitalise the urban spaces.

In order to understand the nature and characteristics of such place-making processes, firstly we analysed the modalities of embeddedness and the quality of the relationships conveyed by cultural practices in the neighbourhood. This scrutiny shows a strong capacity of the neighbourhood to attract cultural initiatives motivated both by the typological and price characteristics of the buildings and the presence of several cultural actors who share a sense of belonging and similarity: a sort of “cultural atmosphere” which easily recalls the “industrial atmosphere” concept mentioned by Gabher (19993). Despite the relationships actually activated among actors are not always significant, geographical proximity seems thus to have a determinant role in explaining localization choices. At the same time, such initiatives generate a growing affection in the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, who become increasingly aware of and involved in the related activities. The neighbourhood’s inhabitants are not mere consumers or recipients of the cultural offer, but become part of the production process. In this perspective, the relationship with the inhabitants contribute to reveal the embeddedness place-making processes activated through cultural practices.

The analysis of the relations among cultural actors also raises interesting issues related to embeddedness dynamics in culture-led place making processes. Differently from the industrial sectors, here co-operation linkages are established outside the logic of the supply chain or of competitive strategies. Ideas, spaces, and resources are shared in a cooperative perspective among very different actors in a creative way, sometime with the specific purpose to increase the level of their embeddedness in the neighbourhood. The core aim of any relationship is, in any case, to improve the living conditions of *Barriera* and have a positive impact on its inhabitants, far away from any opportunistic interest. Nevertheless, such initiative are not able to establish stable networks of collaboration. This may in part be explained by the relative novelty of the agglomeration process, still underway. However, it might also reflect a scarce willingness to form rigid and forced interdependences. Indeed, the relationships

activated are more the effect of trust and affinity (if not personal relationship, as hypotized by Oinas 1997) than of structured top down dynamics. As regards the role of the public sector, in the majority of cases the influence of the policies is weak, if not non-existent, both in terms of input to the initiatives and funding. Thanks to this autonomy from the public sector, these initiatives are able to create “a coherent cultural geography within a larger and often undistinguished urban context” (Campo and Ryan, (p. 293), a self-organising ecology where a variegated number of social actors work in order to give meaning to specific spaces (McCann, 2002). Thus, in such contexts, the role of public institutions in embeddedness dynamics seems lower than the one mentioned by Torre and Rallet in the industrial field (2010)

Between the lines, we can certainly interpret these phenomena as the effect of the reduction of public resources and, in some cases, the desire of the public sector to allow the spontaneous dynamism of the local society to come to the fore. From another viewpoint, we may however also underline the reduced ability of the public sector to jump on the current bandwagon of innovation, because many of the initiatives we have come across are often the result of individual commitment, or in any case commitment that is much more fragmented and fluid than in the past.

The analysis carried out in fact demonstrates the existence of individual claims developing a range of reactions from the urban context but which are never collective. And indeed paradoxically, the attempts at collective action (such as the Tavolo delle Arti Contemporanee project developed by MEF and Urban) have difficulty in taking off. We are therefore faced with a sort of urban activism which seems to have very different characteristics from those emerging in the 1970s and '80s (Pickvance, 2003), compared to which they are much more fragmented and heterogeneous. This commitment does not appear to be linked to the conventional categories of social and cultural work which marked previous decades and which, very probably, are the result of social and economic transformations led by the recent crisis: not differently from other urban situations, here too the neo-liberal cultural wave led to a disarticulation of urban societies, causing differentiated reactions according to social group (Mayer, 2013). In our case, the prevalence of associations compared to traditional cooperatives and the high number of entrepreneurs – understood as the propensity for individual and collective risk, contrasting the logic of public support – is on the other hand another clear signal emerging from the interpretation

of key organisational models, and which perhaps the relative importance has still to be understood by the public sector, which is used to other operating methods.

We have actually bumped into a number of experiences which underline the will to experiment forms of cultural business which are not based on direct public funding, thus falling within a sort of 'market' perspective, and which perhaps testify a new form of post-political citizenship that also forges a new way of acting in urban spaces characterizing the latest-generation place-making processes.

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