Queer cities. Designing inclusive public spaces through participative and social innovative actions and practices

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1 Introduction
Public spaces aren’t neutral: they’ve historically been created and designed to support and facilitate the traditional roles of the masculine gender and with the perspective of the masculine experience being universally identified as the “norm”. (Kern, 2021). In the absence of a different perspective considered when designing something, the outcome will be suited to men: “when planners fail to account for gender, public spaces become male spaces by default”. (Perez, 2019, p. 65). Urban space should be able to take charge of the plurality of life forms, facilitating social cohesion between its inhabitants, by being accessible, versatile, inclusive, safe. Instead, the street is one of the most dangerous places for the LGBTQ+ community (and for women too): Italy, according to the Rainbow Map & Index of 2023, is 34th out of 49 in Europe in terms of security level and rights for the queer community, with just 25% of LGBTIA+ human rights achieved. Moreover, 48% of hate-motivated attacks in Italy happen in streets, parks, squares, and parking lots (data of 2019 retrieved on LGBTI Survey Data Explorer).

The term queer, originally used in anglophone countries to indicate something odd, negatively weird, and then as a harmful slur for LGBTIA+ people, was then reclaimed by some activists in the USA at the beginning of the 90s. The term can also be used to indicate places, contexts, and, more generally “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin, 1995, p. 62).

But what can be defined as a queer space? In history, the queer space does not have much to do with the physicality of the space itself (or, at least, not only). In fact, some scholars argue that “there is no queer space, there are only spaces put to queer uses.” (Chauncey, 1996, p. 224).

This reflection is interesting to explicit the connection between queerness and the spatial dimension: “though queerness may not be a place, it is inescapably spatial. [...] Whether through a terrorist act or police intervention, the goal was to destroy a certain physical place in an attempt to destroy the communities who used them. Here space was inseparable from queerness itself” (Pavka 2020).

Hence, when designing and managing public spaces, the challenge is to exit from the realm of heteronormativity and binary gender system in which queer people feel invisible. But the main issue is that in the cases of top-down initiatives, like some recent public interventions, such as the rainbow
street crossings, happens a phenomenon called “usualising” (“Queering Public Space - Arup,” n.d., 2021), in which there is the intention to make the existence of the queer community common to the general public in order to reduce hate-crimes. But these kinds of surface gestures are not enough; moreover, it’s difficult to claim that increased visibility equals to less homophobia (Zarzycki, 2022).

2 Aim of the PhD research

A possible solution, that this research is willing to explore, would be to adopt a bottom-up approach, involving directly, with an intersectional\(^1\) approach, the local actors part of the queer communities that inhabit the public space, and, in collaboration with the public administration, develop and test some possible guidelines designed in a user-and-community-centered way through co-design sessions and workshops within participatory design approaches.

The research aims to investigate, with a Participatory Action Research methodology, what potential is still hidden and unexplored in the intersection between Queer and Design studies, in particular in the context of urban public spaces, exploring the creation of links between Queer studies and Participatory Design for social innovation, in order to make the process of designing urban public spaces more "queer" with public administrations and local stakeholders.

In this research, queerness is not only considered in relation to people identified as queer, their bodies and their sexuality, but is intended to explore queerness as a kind of epistemology that can guide the way we think, plan, participate, live a public space, govern, make decisions, etc.

What are the existing and potential positive relationships between public administrations, the concept of Queer, urban space, and Design, within Italy and other contexts? Which are the most suitable participatory tools to foster dialogue and participation between PAs and local queer communities in processes of designing urban public spaces? Which experimentation and actions could be activated with Milan Municipality in order to queer the processes of Milan’s Municipality in designing and managing public spaces? These are the questions guiding the research, which will include an internship in Milan’s Municipality offices, making possible direct experimentation and prototyping of possible solutions or actions/policies.

References


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