

Graphic design and the regeneration process of European cities. Some case histories

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1 ABSTRACT

Graphic design draws the form of the interaction among different entities.

Citizens, administrators, institutions and local investors are specific categories of entities: all of them are users (sometimes also providers) of urban services.

Graphic design is a useful tool to coordinate the often contrasting interests of city users and stakeholders towards the use of public services and facilities.

The graphic design process includes:

- focus on specific local needs (what has to be improved)
- highlight on addressees of the design project (communication targets): i.e. inhabitants and/or foreign investors, tourists, etc.
- design output that, according to the previous steps, may include a range of products, from way finding system (integrating i.e. public transport, pedestrian walks, monuments' signage), to social and civic campaign encouraging some habits- like cultural integration (i.e. through posters and flyers)-, to place branding campaign (touristic promotion abroad), etc.

As result, graphic design can contribute to reinforce and rationalize the offer of local services. This affects the way people perceive opportunities and what use they make of public spaces.

Best achievements are reached when the graphic design process is integrated to urban design and urban planning strategies.

A selection of case studies and best practices will be shown.

Some Western European cities like Bristol, Amsterdam and Berlin have recently adopted a combination of urban- and communication design strategies.

Even if the cultural, economical and historical background of these cities is very different than that of Tirana, these case histories may offer interesting methodologies to the need of an increment of local services' offer and welfare.

2 INTRODUCTION

Graphic design shapes the relationship among entities. Citizens, administrators, institutions and investors are specific categories of entities: they are players in the urban context.

Graphic design (also called in a wider meaning *visual design* or *communication design*) can be a useful tool to coordinate the often contrasting interests of city users and stakeholders towards an increment of the use of public services and facilities. Public design and info-design are the two branches of graphic design whose task is to draw the form of communication among different types of players in a city or in a territory. On the one hand, the aim of public design is that of communicating which services are available and how to use them (i.e. when, where, etc.) to a large audience- possibly all city users. On the other one, info-design aims at giving the most suitable form to the content, according to the category of users (i.e. young or elderly people, natives or foreigners), their needs (how and when getting the information), etc.

Both of them are basically two top-down communication actions: from those who decide policies and provide services to the users.

The two mentioned design branches alone are not suitable in case of a design task, whose goal is investigating the future spatial, social and economical development of a community of people. In this case public design should also include the action of showing to the local people the analysis, in forms of maps and diagrams, conducted by the designers, thanks to interviews and various forms of interactions between designers, inhabitants, local stakeholders. Rather than a vertical action, public design becomes a circular communication process of listening to, showing analysis, encouraging discussions, adjusting the focus, drawing maps again and re-discussing the subject in public sessions.

At the same time, info-design is the design tool that allow precise descriptions in form of diagrams and maps. It is an accurate instrument of research action more than a pure formal out-put. Info-charts can accurately show the relationship among all players acting in the selected area, focusing i.e. on the relationships between service providers and users in case of the future development of an urban area.

Public- and info-design are both the scientific approach and the drawing tool to depict present opportunities and constraints. They make a "visioning" process possible, in which present features are the starting point for possible future development scenarios.

3 THE COMMUNICATION DESIGN PROCESS

The process consists of the following phases:

3.1 Focus on specific local needs

Communication design should be involved together with other discipline concerning the city (urban planning, architecture, urban design) at the beginning of any design process, whose goals is planning the development of a city or a territory. Thanks to their methodological analysis- based on interviews and other forms of investigation- graphic designers can draw diagrams and maps, shoot videos or other forms of visual communication highlighting the local features perceived as lacks and problems. Or, conversely, what can be considered as values and opportunities. This kind of intermediate design outputs can also help visualize citizens' expectations, hopes and claims.

For this reason communication design has to be considered as a methodological and strategic tool, not only as a "make-up" to be applied on final design out-puts;

3.2 Highlight on addressees of the design project: the targets

The communication process can consist of two phases. At first, inhabitants (their thoughts, attitudes, habits) are considered as one of the primary resources.

A "mirroring process" can be activated in which the local inhabitants can develop a first-hand understanding of what defines the area they live in. Slowly, a communication circle can be triggered between designers and local residents, by collecting information and testing hypothesis.

Designers are aware that any communication project is based on a necessity that has to be clearly interpreted: i.e. do local inhabitants and stakeholders prefer to improve tourism, grow with the industrial sector or something entirely else?

In a second phase, according to the aims of the design task, other addressees may be prod into acting, like foreign investors, tourists, etc.;

3.3 Design outputs

What possible solutions are there to unlock the system providing new opportunities for initiatives that allow for one development model or another? Often such questions have no single answer. Depending on the factors previously mentioned, design out-puts may include a wide range of elements. For example social and civic campaigns, in forms of posters and flyers, encouraging some specific habits, like how to manage with garbage and municipal waste. Or place branding actions, in form of web marketing or traditional media, promoting a city to foreign tourists or investors. Or way-finding systems, integrating the information on a variety of mobility and transport opportunities, monuments' signage, etc.; and many others more.

The aim of the communication design process is pointing out a synthesis of the main features of the territory and its uniqueness. Expectations, conflicts, cultural heritage, monuments, buildings, landmarks and present activities contribute characterizing the identity of the place.

It is important not to forget that identity is not determined once for all. It is an on-going, multidimensional, silent, pervasive process, made by minute every-day activities as well as by macro- changes. In a design term, it is the base for the development of possible future scenarios. Thanks to this process local users and stakeholders should be able to take decisions towards an increment of the local welfare in an easier way.

4 COMMUNICATION MODELS AND FORMS

It is up to local administrators and institutions to decide whether/ how to include citizens and civic associations in the process or not. Or, conversely, it is up to citizens to demand an open and public discussion. As previously shown, the process of giving form to the communication of a city can be a vertical and hierarchical process or a participated one.

Why should the city opt for designing its own communication? There are basically two reasons: to influence the public's and its own perception of itself, and to control its local community's way of life.

The traditional relationship between local public institutions and their users mostly took place in the city itself, as was clearly expressed in the communication strategies of the London Underground railway system introduced at the end of the 19th century. City institutions used this kind of communication to address and control citizens before the 'Internet era'. These were largely composed of people residing in the city who in the majority of cases were accustomed to spending almost their entire life in the same stable social and hierarchical configuration. Explicit persuasive communication strategies played limited roles in public design as strict rituals, traditions and attitudes regulated social behavior. The preferable domain of persuasive communication lay in private and commercial fields such as advertising.

Design projects of European cities in the 20th century were mapped showing their communication model according to the logic of the design coordination by Henrion and Parkin (1967), and that of the information systems by Crosby, Forbes and Fletcher (1970), subsequently tailored to the theoretical discourse of communication on cities (Anceschi 2010).

In time European cities have lost the geographical unity which characterized them (De Michelis et al 2005). Today, tension can be felt between the various centrifuge forces which tend to fragment, to break down the urban fabric into its features and ingredients, finding new ways to form clusters (Sassen 2011). A strong fragmentation becomes more apparent as information sources, communication media, message content and user types multiply.

For these reasons it is hard to believe that the hierarchical, communicational model mentioned above, which is ideally meant to produce a unitary image of the city, still corresponds to the city today.

4.1 Bristol Legible City

At present there are urban environments in which information design applied to traditional public design strategies can still coherently mirror society. In *Bristol Legible City* graphic design is used both as a tool for developing and visualizing the urban design process itself and at the same time for the output, consisting of a wayfinding system.

The urban design process itself was very long: for many years communication designers together with urban planners and other experts of various disciplines hold a lot of meetings with citizens and stakeholders, in order to assure a participated action in all design phases. Graphic design was a crucial factor, making each intermediate step concerning future scenarios understandable to all participants. Only the last few years were spent to design the wayfinding system, meant to allow foreigners an easier insight into Bristol's most important points of interest.

This kind of design strategy was then adopted in many other cities of Great Britain- like Sheffield, Southampton and Newcastle and others- which needed a meaningful regeneration process, replacing heavy industry with new opportunities to cultural tourism and leisure.



Fig. 1: Bristol Legible City 1. One of the elements of the urban wayfinding system designed by CityID

4.2 I amsterdam, BeBerlin

In cities such as Amsterdam and Berlin we can observe two different kinds of communication typologies: next to a communication based on the traditional public design model, another persuasive, seductive communication strategy linked to advertising logics is emerging. These cities have started using communication strategies that are similar to those of commercial brands and products. They try to absorb within the city those who are physically excluded yet longing to become a part of it as well as those who live inside its borders but are actually 'external' or rather foreigners (for example multi-ethnic groups who face complicated integration processes). This gave birth to 'I Amsterdam' and 'Be Berlin' campaigns. The city is



Fig. 2: I amsterdam 1. Campaign by Kesselkramer, Photos may vary, the logo is printed out always in the same position



Die Stadt lebt von Menschen wie Fadi Saad.
 Als Quartiersmanager in Neukölln verändert er Berlin.
 Lies seine Geschichte - Erzähle Deine Geschichte! www.sei.berlin.de

be  **Berlin**

Fig. 3: BeBerlin 1. One of the images of the communication campaign designed by Fuenferken, Berlin. All depicted persons carry a frame, that represents a sort of balloon in comic strips.

appealing to everyone and everyone is supposed to feel included in the city's administrative policies. Graphic design reinforces values like multiculturalism and open-mind-attitudes that are at the base of together living in those cities, it does support any radical economic change.

The direction of such strategies is based on personal emotions and therefore seems to welcome and include feelings in the communication of the city to a greater extent than what traditional design models could perform or allow. Yet it still preserves a hierarchical attitude toward citizens. Within the bureaucratic machine the opportunities for citizens to express their identity, to draw and design their aspirations or frustrations are very rare.

4.3 WikiCity

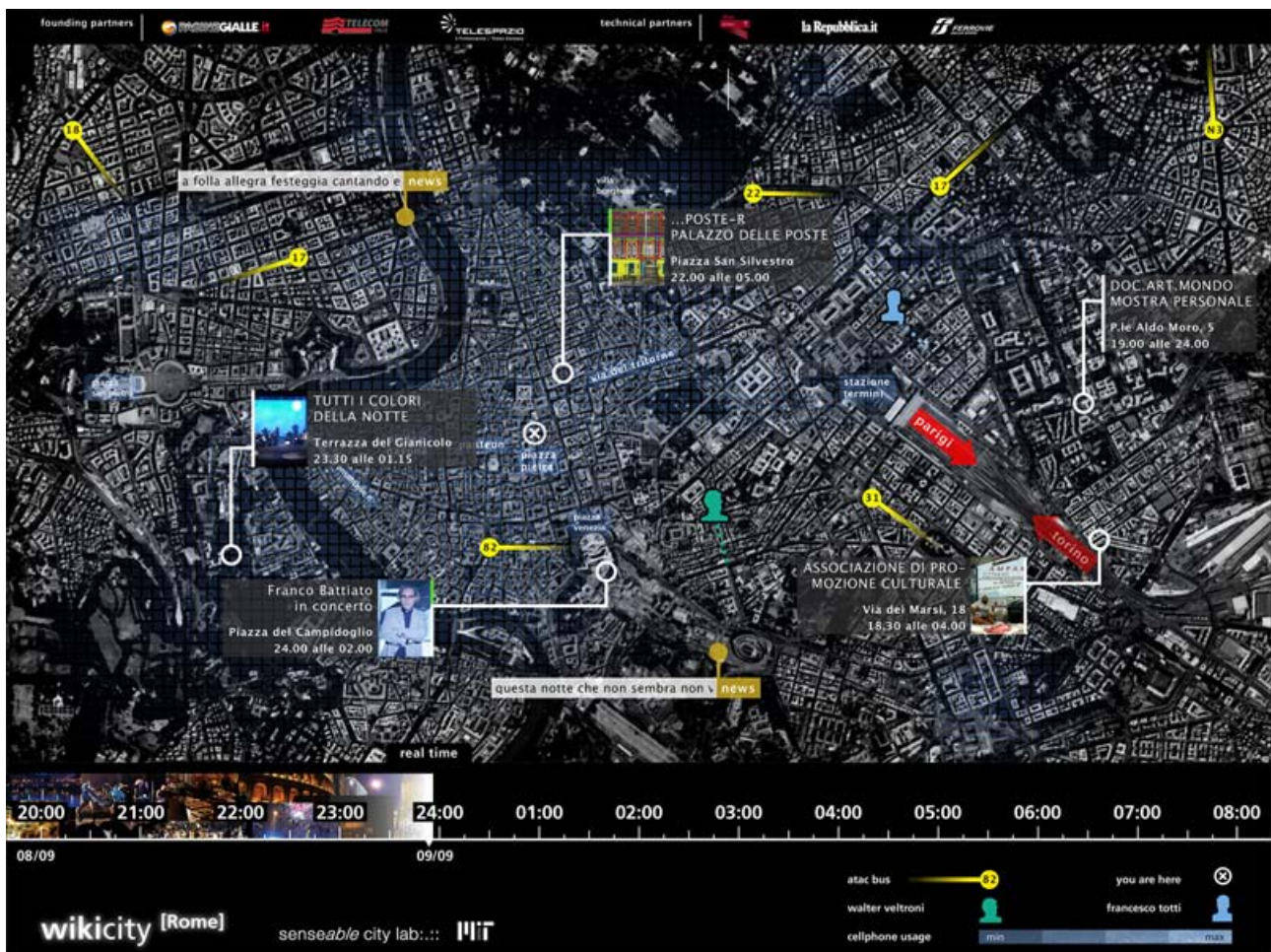


Fig. 4: WikiCity. An interactive interface of WikiCity- Rome, 2008 by Senseable citylab, MIT

In recent years a number of experiences based on interactive design concepts have begun a new phase by introducing a gradually more participative and horizontal relationship among all stakeholders in city communication processes. This is precisely what MIT's WikiCity lab is currently researching: 'How can a

city perform as an open source real time system?' The final representation of the city would no longer be controlled by the city administration or be a creative matter left to the designer. Most likely it would be a continuous stream of time-based stratified representations of information traces drawn by the users in relation to their subjective attitudes and choices. Today interactive design applications within the field of city communication are quite precisely circumscribed by time and space and generally relate to specific performances or temporary exhibitions- most of them took place in some European cities like Rome and Copenhagen.

A bottom-up communication approach seems facilitate giving voice to the different individuals and groups of citizens more democratically. It could also provide just-in-time reactions to the specific needs of any group of people. The question is, if and how they can be turned into communication infrastructure and provider for an entire city and its citizens.

5 CONCLUSION

Traditional approaches to design the image of the city will possibly disappear or will be transformed in their aims, tools and actors in next years?

The selected case studies show that public bodies and agencies are hardly ever the prime movers of the process: more temporary consortia between public and private partners are established, as an expression of local powers linked to global interests. In the framework of redistribution of expertise and skills, citizens or residents can play different roles, although rarely they were among the promoters of urban regeneration programmes with their local authorities. Scholars have shown cities to be a voracious locus where signs and images are consumed in this day and age: now more than ever cities need to manage their symbols with great care. Marketing has stolen space traditionally taken up by public use and social communication acting alongside the progressive privatization of society in in many European countries (Olins 2002, Wolf 1999).

Tension can be felt between the various centrifuge forces which tend to fragment, to break down the urban fabric into its features and ingredients, finding new ways to form clusters. Visual communication can thus easily feed on the repertoire of classical principles of information design, reconsidering the aims of public design and not disdaining an advertising register.

Furthermore, as Amendola, Indovina and Latour have observed from different points of view, contemporary metropolises tend to escape a comprehensive view. Traditional communication models finds it difficult to incorporate the point of view of those who experience urban living 'from below', unlike digital and interactive technologies which seem to make it possible. Neither truths nor stable representations in time seem necessary with them. In this sense, WikiCity projects investigate their limits and at the limit of data presentation modes in a relentless transfiguration, shifting forward the threshold of information and public design.

In this context, the body of graphic design emerges fragmented by the changes of this century. Broken, but like the city itself, in the fragments it represents, it is ready to reorganize in original and occasional forms.

Will public administrations understand the necessity of reshaping current decision- making processes and welcome authentic participative practices? Will it be possible to face the task of urban communication as a playful, changeable mosaic, network or bundle of multiple opportunities?

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