

USER PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS OF PRESERVATION

A Case Study of Bologna Historical Core Preservation Project

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ABSTRACT

Historic city centres all over the world have suffered from neglect as well as harmful developments. Many historic districts have been ripped off their traditional fabric and cultural essence due to insensitive decisions of the governing bodies. Many renewal/ preservation projects have failed to retain the socio-cultural essence of space/ area. The main reason for all these is the fact that planners/ architects completely disregard the communities or inhabitants living in such old historic areas, and refrain from indulging into an interactive participation with the communities for whom they are working. This paper looks into the importance of community participation in projects of historic preservation, and the impact it has on the success of such projects. The case of Bologna Preservation Project is discussed, where community participation has been the key to success.

INTRODUCTION

The process of globalisation, effectual in the entire world; might have started off in the 1980's as the "integration of national markets", yet today its implications are evident in every aspect of life.

This rapid change and transformation has also changed the concept of space and attributed new meanings to urban environment. Sky-scrapers, giant concrete blocks, big shopping centres, fair areas and prestigious buildings, besides being a product of design, are considered as symbols of power or indicators of cultural change. In other words, city image turning into a "trade good", caused a new vision of spectacular architecture to become a new dimension in architectural design process [1].

How has the individual been affected and changed during this new process in the context of the formation of the environment? The answer to this question can be found by searching how the individual participates in the process of global urbanization, both in theory and in practice. Participation by definition, means the inclusion/ intervention of an individual to an event or activity by sharing the views and ideas with others who join the same event or activity. However, in a more confined view - relevant in this article - 'participation' should be conceived as all possible professional groups encouraging and enabling the public or users to partake (in any way; ideas or activity) in the process (regardless of the kind of production). Hence, an individual who participates in the decision-making, i.e. in constituting his/ her own environment, will undoubtedly enter a process of change and development for him/ herself. Otherwise, if the individual in question is left out in the course of the process, he/ she will inevitably be alienated from his/ her environment. Alienation refers to a situation where people detach from others or environment, leading to a sort of isolation.

New problematic forms in environment-human relations can be shown as the consequence of such a globalisation phenomenon in the metropolitan areas. The problem is the alienation of the individual to his/ her own world (living milieu) who, basically, has integrated with the world in a "globalised" manner. This particular "feeling" that is extensively and deeply experienced in our contemporary urban spaces, obliges designers to develop alternative production processes and approaches investigating the social reality with its different dimensions. It is obvious that, in the new models to be developed, the urban individual, has to defend his/ her own rights and freedoms, hence his/ her identity, while re-creating the environment.

Architects' Council of Europe (ACE) has brought forward the discussion on socially responsive architecture and the social responsibilities of architects, who are primarily responsible for the man-made environment. The objective of such a discussion is the adoption of environmental ethics, including parameters like humane, sustainable, livable and culturally consistent.

With such an understanding the primary aim in this article is to investigate the important role of the architect in providing the users a new form of living; by participating to the process as well as in organising the whole process.

Bologna Historical Core Preservation Project is presented hereby within the confined scope of the article, because it exemplifies the above mentioned view-point and understanding in the field of preservation in the 1970's. But it should also be underlined that the sustainability and validity of the approach is of greatest importance to today's societies.

The main idea behind the choice of this project for this particular paper, is to emphasize the advantages of user's participation in creation of the environment and the contribution of the society in forming the new life style. In other words, participation of individuals in the creation of the environment, should not only be perceived as an alternative design process, but should rather be considered and studied as the power for changing the society.

1 - INTEGRATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In 1968 with the introduction of the participation concept and its reflections in ideological and political platforms, numerous experimental projects were inspired by the idea of user's participation in the processes of architectural/ urban design in the entire world.

With the incorporation of this concept into architecture - or design in general - it has been observed that in different countries, approaches emphasizing the participation have been developed

on the basis of each country's specific conditions.

Architectural design, when not integrated with social reality, is condemned to be an incomplete professional exercise. A space which is designed independently from socio-cultural and psychological specification of the users can never be integrated with them and can never serve the purpose of creating a sustainable life style that will contribute in the enhancement of the qualities of the environment.

2 - THE PROCESS OF PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

Bologna, an important center of trade and commerce throughout history is situated on the fertile Po Valley, in Emilia-Romagna, Northern Italy.

Its historical center has gone through a preservation implementation in 1969 which constitutes an original example of its kind in Europe. This implementation process in Bologna Preservation Project illustrates holistic approach in design process and therefore remains valid and up-dated especially for developing countries. This is the



Map - 1 : Geographic location of Italy.

reason why this specific case study has been taken up for this article.

The old city of Bologna possesses very rich samples of Medieval and Renaissance buildings. The first regulatory plans concerning city development and preservation, that were in force already in 1889, had given priorities to growth, construction of new roads and upgrading the physical conditions. The mentality of the bourgeoisie looking upon the traditional/ historical urban pattern, particularly the city walls, as obstacles for the development, caused the demolishing of city walls in order to open the avenue of Mercato di Mezzo [2].

It was only after the plan of 1955, that new approaches were introduced, and an awareness for the historical city center and the need of its preservation increased. In 1966, the first open session for public was held, and Professor Benevolo's¹ proposal for Preservation of the Historic Core of Bologna was presented. This was the time when people started becoming more and more conscious about the issues of Historic Preservation[3]. However, it was only after the approval of the "Plan for Historical Centre-General Regulatory/ Master Plan", that the treatment of the historical zone/ district with its economic and socio-cultural parameters could be taken into the agenda. The objective of this particular project, besides the preservation of a historical environment, was to develop a new life style. The approach, presumes that preserving old buildings as uninhabited spaces is a misconception, and replaces it with an understanding that takes social and cultural variables into account. The principles in the Master Plan prepared by the planner L. Cervallati represent the same approach.

Cervallati, conceiving the city as the symbol of collective memory of the individuals, invites the volunteering citizens to participate in the process of implementation². Hence, this preservation work, while being an experience of participatory democracy on one hand, also respects the protection

principle of original social life of the city, on the other. In other words, historical district of the city, should be preserved with the integration of human and space parameters (Figure 1).

In this special (original) preservation work, the first thing that the planners envisaged was, the improvement in awareness of users by instigating in them a certain possessive attitude towards their environment. First stages of the implementation were completely devoted to such efforts. As a result, Bologna residents comprehended that historical center was not only a space constituted by old buildings, but was also a cultural heritage which was shaped by their own life styles and traditions. Undoubtedly such a process of consciousness could not be realized in a short



Figure 1: The Arcades Shelter a Rich Social Life, also Retained as Prominent Feature in the New Infill Housing.

Source: Pierluigi Cervellati.

¹ Professor Benevolo was a renowned Architecture Historian. His proposal was later on referred to as **Benevolo Project**.

² In Bologna the total population approaches 480,000, of whom about 70,000 live in the **historic core**.



Figure 2: Deteriorated Conditions in the Historic Core Prior to the Beginning of Preservation Programme.
Source: Pier-Luigi Cervellati.

period of time. In the beginning phases, work was done on developing awareness of people regarding preservation and the realization that history was not limited with Maggiore and Nettuno Squares or the sculptures. People were also made to appreciate housing patterns as important elements of cultural value (Figure 2).

The quality of preservation improves in direct proportion to the correct perception and appreciation of users, as well as its achievements in the field of social enlightenment. In this regard the first thing declared to the users was that, such a work requires serious research and analysis. It was also explained that an old city should be conceived as a living organism which has gone through evolutionary stages parallel to different policies and strategies.

During the improvement of awareness and education process, the message conveyed to the people was that the Master Plan under consideration is not a work which has nothing to do with the lives of the users. It was made clear that the objective of the work is not the preservation of

buildings but more so the preservation of the culture of the city.

In Italy, Bologna Historical Core Preservation has been referred to, as a special implementation example due its democratic approach. Instead of having all administrative controls concentrated in the hands of Municipal Council, the participation of the citizens in planning and preservation matters was ensured. This achievement can be conceived as a continuation of the sensitivity in urban culture that was originated in Italy the 1950's. Establishment of the Neighborhood Council symbolizes the organization of people with ever increasing power against central authority vision[4].

Efforts on this city quarter system started in the 1960's. By means of re-activation of a passive city law, sections within city walls were sub-divided into fourteen quarters. The decentralization of services and public offices was thus initiated. With the approval of the respective area residents, organizations were elected for each quarter in 1963. First council members of the quarter and

their chairman were elected in 1964. In the Bologna Project, the design team also proposed several regulations for legal effects. These proposals dealt with aspects concerning contracts between owners and local authorities. For instance, provision of support in building restoration for individual property owners was made conditional to return of the property to the existing tenants.

The local authority provided financial assistance and technical advice. The contractual arrangements made in this respect controlled speculation and exploitation of the project for political purposes. The project, thus, ensured to keep the area inhabitants intact in their living milieu (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Views of Typical Arcades after the Restoration.
Source: Dr. D. Binan Archives

This understanding of Bologna Master Plan, which happens to be its important specialty, was accepted in 1974 as a valid principle, by the European Council, as an approach of holistic preservation.

The individuals who experienced the Bologna Project have realized that, what counts in the environment is the qualitative values and not the quantitative ones, and those values are directly connected to their lives. This conclusion indicates the interaction situations between the enlightenment process and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Experiencing a design process is not only a creation of environment but also a re-creation of the society. The citizen who participates in the process, becomes aware of the past of the city and feels responsible for its future. As already mentioned above, besides being a successful renewal and preservation work, this project has proved to be an achievement in the improvement of social consciousness and enlightenment (Figure 4).

CONCLUSION

The presented project emphasizes the fact that the art and the science of architecture is a human-centered phenomenon, hence has to resume its social responsibilities. This approach aims at creating a new and consistent culture of architecture by contributing to consciousness raising and democratization in the society.

The shapes that our cities will take in the future as well as preservation of their natural and historical values, would primarily depend upon the policies to be developed on those issues. The attitudes in this regard, aiming at establishing democratic methods, are becoming research issues for contemporary designers.

This particular vision is of paramount importance for developing nations, because development of the environment will gain a different dimension by the shared understanding of conscious and ethics of individuals. In other words, perceiving the environment as a common possession of mankind – regardless of the segment of history, is the prerequisite of universalization process.



Figure 4: Typical Buildings after the Restoration. Source: Dr. D. Binan Archives.

Therefore it is the concern of all societies' future that our target should be a humane, livable, and sustainable environment.

Today, consequences of lack of "partnership" and "consciousness", as well as harms to the environment due to individualistic approaches, are well known by everyone; and they cause frightening ecological disasters. At this point, where it would seem inevitable that with the conscious individuals' participation, valuing the priorities of public benefit, a new era of planning has to be introduced.

The new culture that is to be created, is not a matter of design methods, but more importantly it is an endeavor for changing the society. In such a quest, while searching for solutions to enhance relations between society and architecture or producing the built environment, an adoption of a common policy is required, that obliges all concerned parties to join hands in creating a humanist, sustainable, livable and consistent city culture. Within such an organizational framework, the profession of architecture has to revise its social responsibilities and develop an attitude based on today's realities, on an international scale.

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