



# Negotiating Scale. Experiencing, Claiming, and Walking public space. Three examples in Milano.

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## **Abstract:**

From the very origins of the city, human scale forged physical environment and imaginaries about built urban form. From the sinuous streets of medieval towns ingeniously adapted to human walking, to Haussmannian boulevards in industrialized Europe, human movement and practices, structure the matrices of public space infrastructure. The question of human scale was however underlined -in a more conscious way- among urban studies and humanities mostly after the second world war in a context of international criticism towards Modern Movement's rigidity and remoteness from the scale of senses and perceptions of the individual. The quest to *return to the city center* and revisit values of walking in historical nuclei, marked a turn that will ultimately transform objectives and priorities in urban planning in the following years. Social sciences will nourish the debate by highlighting the imminent role of human walking and experience while studying the city. As a result, new methods of observation, mapping, analysis of daily practices within collective spaces have emerged and sow the ground for the development of new disciplinary approaches, focusing on emotions or atmospheres. The paper is structured as follows. In the first part, we retrace the evolution of the concept of 'human scale' within planning and design principles emerged after World War II. In a second part, we aim to examine – drawing on three case studies- the imminent role that walking has in actual debate on public space's adaptability towards future crisis and investigate its unique characteristic as an urban practice weaving together human body experience, physical space and social interaction. Through direct observations and in situ interviews in three public spaces in Milano, the paper proposes to re-approach 'human scale' not as prerequisite in design process but rather as a robust tool (both for planners and citizens) of negotiating plural forms of urbanity in a global context of transition

## IN QUEST OF HUMAN SCALE

The subject of human scale has historically preoccupied planners', architects and decision makers debating on questions of city planning, public space design or housing issues. Architecture, as art of constructing was since its origins linked to the concept of human scale, approaching human body as a measure unit and recipient of space characteristics. In the troglodyte architectures of deserted Asian regions or Cycladic villages, the ingenuity with which volume and form (of built architecture) evolve according to topography and climatic conditions, highlights the will of builders and inhabitants to find touchable solutions responding efficiently to the needs of body's movement in space. The tiny volumes welcoming domestic life in the rock, persistent sinuous pavements ascending smoothly slopes, address all, the question of intrinsic dialogue between built environment and human body. By the dawn of industrial city, and expansion of transport infrastructure, this tight relationship between fabric and capacity and habits of human movement was eroded. The city was no more walkable and perception of landscape known a revolution through means of transportation and explosion of speed. Automatization, industrial production shift discussions from a human-centered approach to a machine-oriented vision promoting performance of networks, standardization of solutions (especially in housing). The individuality of the human body, gives place to homogeneity of mass living and working in new urban metropolises. The city itself expands to a no scale diffuse *plateau* of sprawl, infrastructure called periphery. By the time where Camillo Sitte presents his critic on the lost charm and functionality of 19<sup>th</sup> century public squares, Europe has already greedily invaded space over ground and underground. When Le Corbusier presents his *Modulor* principles, five centuries after Leonardo Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* the question was how to invent a new architecture capable of quick efficient response to shelter an exploding population. Walking became soon not only a sign of class inferiority (Mumford, 1968) but also a neglected means of transportation while moving in space. On the other hand, architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century took a careful sight on human body's interaction with urban built environment (see for example the works of Aldo Van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger). When in the 1930s Ernst and Peter Neufert publish the *Architect's Data* book (in German), the scale of every designed element becomes a requirement of quality of product. In 1920s, Clarence Perry introduces the concept of *neighborhood unit* trying to find a solution about human scale habitat, that means walkable neighborhoods and accessible services. In the Quito 2016, Habitat III for the new urban agenda several researchers link the question of human scale to the livability urbanity and health addressing in a bold way the emergency of rethink the production of space in a human oriented approach.

## WALKING, EXPERIENCING URBAN SPACE

After the war and the massive construction of out of scale collective housing complexes in the periphery of many European cities, and shopping centers, social sciences advocate already by the 60s for a spatial turn in geography informing each operation with qualitative inputs from practices, perception. Local authorities realize the loss of soul of city center and a huge movement of return the center coincides with projects about vast pedestrianization programs. According to the pioneer work of Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte, the key of solution exists in the observation of human body and practices in public space. For researchers and professionals, understanding practices of humans depend on the scale and form of public space (Owens, 1993) but also on the way in which *space* is felt as a result of a complex combination of right of access, materiality, sociability etc. The way in which city is perceived by people while walking becomes central for the years to come mostly in the 80s and 90s. After 2000, researchers underline the link between design and walking activity in the promotion of health and wellbeing (Jackson, 2003). The work of Jan Gehl team, Project for Public Spaces (PPS), or Walk21 organization address all by different entries the question of link between fabricated environments, emotions, citizenship place making. Talking about human scale interests us here as for the link that walking scale has with public space. We argue that even if *scale* is often defined by measurable and physical aspects it is in fact a more complex concept depending also by an overall sense of place. A small piazza can be seen vast by the eyes of a toddler, on the same way that a tiny building entrance can be felt as welcoming by a homeless. We are interested beyond finding elements to measure or define human scale, in enlarge debate about public space and human presence. Searching for human scale, brings us to search about livable practices within places invested by humans. Practices in public space and particularly walking have been explored generously in human sciences from phenomenological entry, sociological or engineer (Mehta, 2014; Zacharias, 2001; Salingaros, 2021). In terms of atmospheres, the works of research team Cresson in France test methods and procedures of revealing how space s felt while practiced. These research's on public space are not separated from a general debate about future of public space in a globalized world. Recurrent crisis, have brought on the foreground challenges about spatial justice of public spaces, multiculturalism, tolerance, privatization (Mitchel, 1995) etc. It is therefore interesting to search the link between walking scale and success of popular public spaces. In his work Christopher Alexander reveals how walking presence in a street, reinforces social interaction (Alexander, 1986) . Michel de Certeau (Certeau, 1984) underlines the capacity of hazardous encounters to reveal narratives of the city. Linking walking with certain physical attributes of environments enhance health (Hansen, 2014) and allows the exploration of new methods of apprehending users' relation to the environment (Evans, 2011; Koohsari, 2012).

## THREE SQUARES IN MILAN. A MOVING PUBLIC SPACE

Milan is in the epicenter of debates about metropolitan transformation in the last 60 years. From a city dominated by industry and working class, Milan knew a progressive deindustrialization, with a shift of its economy towards design industry and tertiary domain (Armondi, 2018). This structural change in production left its traces on city's fabric. Vast areas of abandoned factories are staying still today with reconverted buildings and redevelopment projects. Staggering real estate investments underline the will of decision makers to *narrate* Milan as a palpitate shiny city (Moretti, 2011). The municipality of Milan approves a new urban plan in 2012 tagging the change of an era and announcing big-scale renovation projects Trono & Zerbi, 2003). Several new public spaces see the day and shift the image of historical public space of Milan's nuclei. The new character of public spaces is visible not only in terms of investment but also in terms of scale. An iconic architecture and high rise buildings mark the landscape punctuated by leisure and shopping activities. Parallel to these projects, the weight of tourism activity within the historic city center, colors the use of middle scale public spaces in the dense historic fabric. This paper is the result of a fieldwork research that I had the opportunity to conduct while teaching at Politecnico di Milano during a visiting professor stay (January 2022 - July 2022). Strolling with students but also alone within unknown for me public spaces arouse my curiosity about facets of public life in certain squares subjected to various forces of change or being the result of imposing redevelopment projects. More particularly I was interested in looking by close three 'representative' examples of Milanese public space, that reveal each one of them a particular atmosphere and function of Milanese public life: a) the piazza Gae Aulenti and Parco Biblioteca degli Alberi, b) the piazza Antonio Gramsci near the pedestrian street via Paolo Sarpi (in Chinese district) and finally c) the parco di piazza Astromonte near the Piola subway station. During a period of seven months, I conducted direct observations and *sidewalk discussions* from which only nine could be considered as useful in terms of semi-directed interviews. Observing public life has historically connected to studies about public space (Owens, 1993; Francis, 1984). Discussing with people in public space is a way of experiencing directly and capture perceptions and feelings. Researchers have already exploit possibilities of interviews on the fieldwork (Evans, 2011). In our case, interviews accompanied direct observations in diverse time slots.

### **The piazza Gae Aulenti. Layering verticality**

Opened in 2012, the piazza is described as the most modern in Milan. The project was the result of a private investment<sup>1</sup>. The shiny public space sits at the heart of

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<sup>1</sup> architect César Pelli and Italian landscape designers Land. The project was wined by AECOM a London based firm with international practice.

Porta Nuova Garibaldi development and becomes an animated passage for thousand visitors and users of subway and train above ground. The area makes part of multiple regeneration projects taken place after 2000 accompanied Milan's economic transition from production goods to advanced services (Bergaglio, 2019). By the first glance, the scale of the piazza captivates the look by the huge towers surrounding a perfect shape of circle in the middle where franchises of cafes and restaurants deploy their terraces outside. A generous sitting area is offered by the sculpturing of an artificial soil of the piazza which is accessible by elevators, mechanical staircases and pedestrian bridges. Entering the piazza by the south, unveils a mix of uses, always linked to leisure and shopping activities. During the day, the parco di Biblioteca hosts dog's owners chatting, student's groups, jogging individuals, families sitting on grass, skaters... The two scales of the two adjacent areas enhance the feeling of a vibrant place which is on the same time has something 'strange'. *'I don't know what was here before, there was nothing, an empty are'* (interview no. 1). During the night, the area changes dramatically: *'well in the middle becomes a little bit awkward by on the park there are groups of young people enjoying this night atmosphere, you know there is the sense that we are not in Milan'* (interview no. 2).



Figure.1: the parco di Biblioteca

### **The piazza Antonio Gramsci. Passing through.**

Arriving from via Giulio Cesare Procaccini on foot, the piazza Antonio Gramsci seems having nothing specifically attractive for public life. And indeed, by a closer observation, the relatively restrained surface of the piazza is fragmented in plural ways but succeeds in giving some interstitial space for daily use. Firstly, vertically. In the very heart of the piazza a 'hole' plays the role of an entrance for the underground level

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parking of four levels owned by the Municipality and private condominiums. Severe degradation has caused the closing of several parts by fences compartmenting space in the middle. The degradation and construction failures of the parking become the subject of long date disputes between owners and cooperative concession of the building. The awning shading the entrance to the piazza and underlining its north limit is today a parking area for municipal bicycle system and private motorcycles. But the piazza is also fragmented on its surface by the two 'zones' of use; the two peripheral passages and the central basin. Observations have highlighted a dynamic use of the west side serving as passage for the intense flux between Corso Sempine and Porta Garibaldi. The existence of several sitting areas under trees allow passengers to make a stop watching this spontaneous *passagiata*. "We walked two hours today and just discovered this small square, but we're not staying, there is a restaurant that we search to find near Moscovia (interview no. 3). However, the piazza is not always felt like a vibrant space: ' I mean there is quite cozy in terms of dimensions but there is nothing to do, only to walk through..or watch some children activities in the middle but this is temporary' (interview no. 4).



Figure.2: piazza Antonio Gramchi looking towards via Giulio Cesar procaccini

### **Parco di piazza Astrononte. Rhythms of coexistence.**

The parco Astromonte between Loreto and Casa Studi neighbourhoods thrives as a proximity park hosting a rich mix of ages and profiles of users (young, sports, old people, families with children playing at the area). This conviviality at a first look hides strict ways of co-presence and avoidance between the users. The parco changes completely during evening hours with increasing prostitution and drug dealing. However, during week and week-ends, the co-existence of activities intrigues. 'It tis close to home, we come here just to talk, and look the basketball [laughs]' (interview

no. 5). The subtle balance between user's trajectories and practices is achieved thanks to a generous space and tacit delimitation of zones of specific use. Presence of vegetation allows piazza been both 'watched' by passers-by look. In afternoon hours, benches surrounding the central zone of basketball create a perimeter of a scene. The presence of abundant vegetation and various possibilities of crossing enhance the sense of marge of appropriation of the space; *"We come here almost every afternoon, now with the hot weather, it's were we take our beer and chat a little bit [...] but I never come late in night, the parks image is clearly not the same'* (interview no. 6).



Figure.3: parco di piazza Astromonte

## CONCLUSION

All three cases highlight distinct atmospheres in Milanese public space and invite for a further discussion on the link between form, dimensions, location, link to city's memory and ground floor uses enveloping open space. The question of diversity in uses depends on the openness of the area, a subtitle equilibrium in terms of surface dimensions, and scale of surrounding buildings but also the sense of a human scale is directly related to the tolerance of practices and freedom of appropriation or even deviation of a uniformed use. On the same time, new development areas invite for a reflexion on arising modes of investing open collective space highlighting the question of property, risk of thematization and control of public life.

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