

EDITORIAL

Public Urban Happiness, that is the making of our own world

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The ideal city stands as one of the most fascinating enigmas of the Italian Renaissance. A famous painting by the same name, consisting of a space nearly empty of human activity, which displays a mastery of perspective, is the result of research and speculation in many fields, from architecture and engineering to philosophy and mathematics. The concept dates at least from the period of Plato: in *The Republic*, the ideal city, or *polis*, is based on justice and human virtue, it is a form of social and political organization that allow individuals to maximize their potentialities, living in accordance with universal laws and truths. In this model, public spaces perform as places for collective coexistence, standing as a physical stage for social justice, democracy and citizenship, a sort of mirror of the living society and its values and virtues.

For centuries the urban environment has been painted, designed, shaped and built in order to answer to specific needs and desires. Visions and drawings of ideal and perfect places still today behave as appealing images, offered to the public domain. During the last century, well-known icons, made of visionary and seducing scenarios, designed by *avant-garde* architects, acted as a vehicle able to symbolize the pursuit of public happiness: working on an urban imaginary, as a body of knowledge, efforts of architects and town planners were oriented to create a new world, based on ideals of progress and prosperity, with streets, squares, architectural complexes and housing estates for our everyday lives, for a wide satisfaction and consumption of urban users. In these visions, the city is not merely a geographical episode, it is actually a model of morality, it is a collective entity pictured as a real holistic subject, an organism endowed with an identity and will of its own, with a superior order in comparison to every single member. Especially in the European culture, the beauty of the city reflects the primary social purpose which is the making of *urbs*, intended as the appropriate habitat for the *civitas*, open, dynamic, democratic and egalitarian (Romano, 1993).

Far from utopias, the real world hasn't developed the ability to grant all wishes, often revealing itself unable to find a way to connect innermost emotions of collective expectations to the outward manifestation in the urban realm. Even in their imperfections, cities expanded beyond what anyone could have imagined, sprawling along territories, scattering over the known borders (Bravo, 2010).

In our contemporary times, the image of the ideal city is undefinable: the economic and financial crisis, new forms of urban and religious conflicts, problems of social cohesion, conditions of discrimination and insecurity, the massive immigration, the rise of poverty in the middle class and the large protests in many public spaces around the world have produced urban scenarios based on contradictory, unpredictable and uncertain circumstances. Today the city is mostly a place of conflicts and contradictions where bold activists are standing up against the consolidated power, spreading awareness and shaping new ideals and values: they defend political issues, human and democratic rights, struggle to preserve the uniqueness of specific places, push governments on urgent questions. Their aspirations, as open-minded citizens, can be seen as a right for freedom of expression and search for self-empowerment. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a common right to change ourselves by changing the city.

«The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights»

David Harvey, 2008: 23

Likewise, artists are more and more exploring the public domain, searching for stories of people and places, shaping a new human-centred knowledge: they play with the individual urban imaginary, searching for interaction, exchange and emotional engagement, so that from a single statement they can shape a collective belief. Therefore, public happiness is no longer a static concept related to the built environment, it is more a dynamic, vibrant and ephemeral condition that permeates urban daily life.

Daniel Kahneman, the Noble Prize for Economics (2002) has established an interesting and emerging field of research called 'science of happiness'. Working on evolving concepts, such as 'subjective well-being', 'life satisfaction' and 'quality of life', learning by the pioneering political experience (started in 1971) of the small State of Bhutan - based on equitable social development, cultural preservation, conservation of the environment and promotion of good governance - and adopting the goal of Gross National Happiness over Gross National Product, the science of happiness, mainly related to sociology, psychology and anthropology, is starting to influence researchers involved in the urban field of study¹. By applying it to urban daily life and then retrofitting our cities to happiness, we can tackle the urban challenges of our age (Montgomery, 2013).

The first World Happiness Report, published in 2012, was commissioned for a United Nations Conference on Happiness, under the auspices of the UN General Assembly, with the imprimatur of Columbia University's Earth Institute and the editing of the institute's

¹ As a part of a research activity, in 2012 I myself promoted a survey intended to understand how people live in the urban context, in terms of housing, working and leisure, how they experience, every day, space and distance in the city where they live, how they create relationships with other people living in the same neighbourhood or in the same city. Also, the survey is intended as a tool, able to show if issues expected from urban and town planning design were succeeded, through evaluation and comments derived by common people. Well-designed neighbourhoods and efficient cities, in terms of walkability, public transportation, long-distance connections, urban spaces, public facilities, mixed-use density, should make people happy. The assumption is that happiness of urban communities, together with best-planned settlements for urban daily life, should be the main goal of the urban planner and designer (www.bravodesign.it/urban_survey.html).

director, Jeffrey Sachs, with two happiness experts, Richard Layard of the London School of Economics and John Helliwell of the University of British Columbia. The General Assembly of the United Nations in its resolution 66/281 (2012) has recognized the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in the lives of human beings around the world and the importance of their recognition in public policy objectives. Speaking at the High Level Meeting on “Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm”, during the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly (2011) the Secretary Ban Ki-moon stated that the world “needs a new economic paradigm that recognizes the parity between the three pillars of sustainable development. Social, economic and environmental well-being are indivisible. Together they define gross global happiness.”²

In this issue ‘Art and Activism in Public Space’, Vol. 3, n. 2, of *The Journal of Public Space* we are starting a dialogue with artists and activists that are changing the way we understand and experience the built environment, through creative and inspiring works. This issue is intended to be the first of a series, aimed at opening to a different urban dimension, addressing dreams and public happiness, exploring the invisible, the intangible and the ephemeral in the public domain, that comes after an art performance or a collaborative DIY urbanism and that is able to build a new urban consciousness.

I invited several artists and art collectives, Boa Mistura from Spain, Plastique Fantastique from Germany, inCOMMONS from Kenya and limeSHIFT from USA, Angélica Dass from Brazil, Richard Briggs and Fiona Hillary from Australia. I then invited Maggie McCormick, former Head of the Master of Arts (Art in Public Space) at RMIT University in Australia, to co-curate this issue. By reviewing artists’ work, by reading their approaches and statements, I was able to expand my understanding and to open to a world made of passionate devotion and powerful commitment, while the theoretical exchange with Maggie McCormick set the research context.

This issue marks also a new direction of *The Journal of Public Space: City Space Architecture* is the new publisher since the journal has recently moved from Australia to Italy. As we conclude our collaboration with the Queensland University of Technology, that supported the establishment of the journal in 2015, we are opening to new contents: we are interested to enrich the discussion around public space, engaging multiple voices and expertise, searching for transdisciplinary innovation. The journal will continue to publish peer reviewed articles and academic research, but will also open to different opportunities to understand and redefine theories and concepts, with practitioners, artists, activists and open-minded citizens, especially from the global South, as this is our mission and one of the pillars at the basis of our collaboration with UN-Habitat, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

With this issue I’m officially taking the role of Editor in Chief of *The Journal of Public Space*, I feel proud and honoured to lead this ambitious endeavour and grateful for the interest and the attention that the journal is attracting. The journey has just begun.

² The General Assembly of the United Nations in its [resolution 66/281](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/international-days/international-day-of-happiness.html) of 12 July 2012 proclaimed 20 March the International Day of Happiness. More info at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/international-days/international-day-of-happiness.html>. Accessed August 15, 2018.

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