
Urban Regeneration: Understanding and Evaluating Bottom-up Projects¹

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Popular participation in defining the urban environment has been an important topic since the 1960s. The evolution of planning theory shows the growing importance of citizens as urban actors, with practitioners and citizens playing almost equal roles in modern practices (co-design). Nowadays citizens' initiative in urban projects is not only welcome but frequently required by public authorities and governments. This trend is especially important in urban regeneration, which involves, by definition, social aspects and a variety of actors and skills. Recent urban regeneration projects define innovative relations between private social entrepreneurs, professionals and other citizens. This article presents the preliminary results of an ongoing study of small-scale, privately-led, non-speculative urban regeneration projects, which aims to identify the various actors and skills involved and their contribution to the design process. The discussion considers the concepts of 'diffuse design' and 'expert design' developed by Ezio Manzini. This theoretical framework focuses on the design process in terms of actors and activities and on the fundamental contribution of non-experts. Three preliminary findings are presented. The first is an application of Manzini's framework to a case of urban regeneration. The second draws on a documentary analysis to assesses the Farm Cultural Park in Favara (Italy) as a case of urban regeneration. Then, I illustrate the involvement of 'expert' and 'diffuse design' in the 'bottom-up' approach looking at the relationship between a professional architect and the promoters of this project.

Key words: Urban regeneration, citizens' action, urban design, Italy.

Introduction

The paper discusses an ongoing doctoral research that focuses on the role of private citizens in the modification of the urban environment; more precisely, in the regeneration of urban areas. The research attempts to demonstrate that the initiatives developed by private citizens cannot only achieve the goals of more structured interventions but can succeed in overcoming the issues that are typically faced by participative practices. The research will use a case study methodology. Two or more case studies of urban regeneration (UR) in Europe will be chosen, according to criteria that will be specified in the second section. For several reasons, the time frame chosen is the period after the 2000s. First, the project belongs to the period identified by Roberts (2017:7) as 'regeneration in recession', where it is possible to identify a predominance of local initiatives, a smaller scale and a greater emphasis on private-sector funding and voluntary efforts. Second, a twenty-year period appears to be appropriate because it allows us to understand both how UR projects have developed in the early years and their goals, long-term social impact and sustainability over a relatively long period.

After this introductory section, the discussion develops through six more sections. The second offers a contextualisation of bottom-up UR. The third introduces discourses on citizens' participation in urban design. The fourth argues a theoretical framework for understanding UR projects. The fifth presents some preliminary studies conducted in the Farm Cultural Park of Favara (Italy). The sixth section looks at the relationship between the architect, the promoters and the project.

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Bottom-up Urban Regeneration?

The topic of urban regeneration seems to be one of the most current and relevant in urban studies. In fact, European Institutions (the Urbact Programme), National governments (the French ‘Urban Renewal Programme’, the Italian ‘Bando Periferie’) and agencies (the Brussels Planning Agency and the Homes and Communities Agency in the United Kingdom), are dealing with this topic, making efforts to encourage processes of urban regeneration. First developed in the UK as a ‘response to market failures contributing to economic and social problems within inner city areas’ (Wilson 2012), urban regeneration found a base to grow and develop amidst the economic difficulties of the years following the 2008 Great Recession: the period that Jamie Peck (2012) defined as ‘austerity urbanism’.

Some changes in UR practice have been observed by Roberts (2017), who traced its development and modification in its means and goals, from the 1950s, marked by ‘reconstruction’, to the 2000s, typified by ‘regeneration in recession’.

As different interpretations of the terms still exist, due to a more or less extensible meaning, here it is useful to recall some definitions. UR distinguishes between urban renewal, considered as the substitution of physical elements (Attoe and Logan 1989: xii; Couch 1990) and revitalisation, seen as a less powerful instrument (Attoe and Logan 1989: xii) without a precise method of approach (Roberts 2017).

Even though, recently, the term UR has taken a wide meaning, including ‘a lot of various interventions in the city related to urban design and planning, social and economic renewal or cultural planning’ (Acierno 2017: 7), the present discussion will take as reference the widely accepted definition given by Roberts (2017: 18), of ‘comprehensive and integrated vision and action which seeks to resolve urban problems and bring out a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change or offers opportunities for improvement’.

Because of its characteristics of comprehensiveness and integration, UR has often taken the form of a large-scale intervention, policy or programme; or of huge urban projects developed by public administrations, possibly in partnership with private actors (Porter and Shaw 2009). This could naturally result from the fact that the government is the traditional agent involved in improving the conditions of the citizens, as a democratic evolution of the role of the Lord, who was supposed to ensure the general wellbeing of citizens (Bentley 1995: 155).

As I have mentioned, Roberts (2017) identified some peculiar characteristics in the post-2000s UR projects, including the rising importance of private initiative. Furthermore, Tonkiss (2014) has noted that some projects that have been implemented in recent years are innovative because they not only deal with physical improvements, but are also based on innovative forms of social relations, ownership models and resource funding strategies. These urban practices, developed spontaneously by private citizens, have attracted the attention of academics, who define the phenomenon in different ways but identify the same tendency; the enhancement, that is, of the urban environment through private-led projects with a non-speculative purpose. These projects recall the concept of regeneration ‘from the bottom up’, defined as ‘heterogeneous initiatives based on the principles of progressive redistribution, ecological sustainability and

social responsibility’ (Rabbiosi 2016: 832). However, this definition is not exhaustive of the complexity of the phenomenon. With reference to the existing literature, this article attempts to address the diffusion of projects that:

- deal not only with physical improvements, but also with social relations, models of ownership and resource funding strategies (Tonkiss 2014);
- use low-budget strategies (Bialski et al. 2015, Müller et al. 2008, Venturini and Riva 2017);
- include the active participation of the community in the design process (Venturini and Riva 2017);
- face the changing role of the professional (Manzini 2015);
- involve urban activists and social entrepreneurs that catalyse social forces (Mitrašinović 2016), also defined as ‘social heroes’ (Manzini 2015);
- involve citizens as real actors in the process of self-organisation of the city (Portugali 1999);
- bring benefits to the local community (Rabbiosi 2016);
- consider the urban ‘space’ as a ‘place’, with a specific meaning for the residents’ identity (Prato and Pardo 2012, Project for Public Spaces 2018).

Projects of this kind are particularly relevant because they also respond to some of the instances of planning theory and urban regeneration literature. Namely, they involve the real participation of people beyond the traditional model ‘that sets the framework for the activities and that works through a decision hierarchy and structures of formal influence’ (Boonstra and Boelens 2011: 106), and are tailored to the local needs of the communities (Roberts, Sykes, and Granger 2017).

However, interventions in the urban environment thus defined fail to have a direct impact on a wider urban area. In other words, we need to ask whether they can be defined as UR projects. These practices are often linked to the urban dimension by academics and promoters. Regarding, for instance, the NDSM wharf project, developed in Amsterdam by a group of activists, Eva de Klerk, one of the promoters, is convinced that it has had direct consequences in regenerating the urban environment. In particular, this project is supposed to have contributed to transforming ‘a deserted and decrepit industrial area into a tough part of the city with high cultural value’ (Klerk, Feldbrugge and Zonneveld 2017: 177).

Also, in the case of Farm Cultural Park in Favara (Italy), more extensively described in later sections, Della Lucia and Trunfio (2018: 40), two academics, state that the ‘project has created spill-over effects, inspiring other members of the community, individually or in new associations, to create their own businesses ... to start other urban regeneration projects’.

However, despite the conviction among the stakeholders and academics, the effect of bottom-up practices on urban regeneration is still not evident. In this light, the present research evaluates these bottom-up projects, and their urban dimension and impact, from a physical, economic and social points of view. Specifically, it evaluates their capacity to affect an urban area whose borders are larger than those of the physical renewal. I refer to this effect as ‘catalytic’, defined as the possibility offered by ‘the introduction of a new element (the catalyst)’ to cause ‘a reaction that modifies existing elements in the area’, and where the goal

is ‘a product better than the sum of ingredients’ (Attoe and Logan 1989:46-47). The area influenced by the catalyst could be a neighbourhood or the entire town, depending on their dimensions. The guidelines provided by European Commission (2018: 15) are a relevant. Referring to the choice of the area of influence for an evaluation of CLLD programmes, they state that the bottom-up approach should be based on the needs of the local actors in deciding ‘the most appropriate boundaries for achieving their goals’.

In the framework outlined above, citizens’ engagement appears to have assumed other meanings, and UR appears to be a favourite practice to analyse the newly established importance of citizens’ participation. This derives from the fact that UR involves, by definition, social aspects and, traditionally, collaboration (Healey 1997). Furthermore, the urban environment is in itself an interesting field, if considered as a ‘highly spatial density of social interaction’ and not only a place with specific demographic or physical characteristics (Prato and Pardo 2013: 87; Southall’s 1983).

Towards Self-initiated Urban Projects

The role of citizens in urban design is a complex and widely debated topic. Far from giving a complete analytical framework of the evolution of the role of citizens in urban planning, here I contextualise citizens’ mobilisation in regeneration projects, and more generally in urban planning, and its increasing importance in case studies across Europe.

The idea of collaboration in city-making first appeared in the early 1950s, developed by TEAM X as an interest in the social experiences, daily routines and existing urban patterns (Kaliski 1999). Later, since the 1960s, different authors (Davidoff 1965, Friedmann 1992, Innes 1995, Healey 1997) contributed to enrich the literature on participative practices in urban regeneration processes (Hurtado 2015), making the evolution from an analytical approach of rational, comprehensive planning to a more deliberative and collaborative model (Coaffee and Healey 2003).

The literature on urban processes often refers to the concept of the ladder to demonstrate the levels of citizens’ participation that are possible. In the famous Arnstein’s ladder (1969), the author describes the different levels of experimentation in citizens’ participation in urban renovation programmes in the US. The ladder goes from the upper step of citizens’ control, where residents can govern a programme, to the lower, more extreme form of non-participation, marked by manipulation by powerholders. Comparing this ladder with the later one developed by Pretty (1995), it is relevant to note that the two upper steps of Pretty’s ladder are defined as ‘interactive participation’ and ‘self-mobilisation’. Both these steps represent an increase in the importance of citizens’ initiative compared with Arnstein’s ‘citizens’ control’, which focused more on people’s decision-making role than on a truly proactive activity in the design process. Pretty (1995: 1252) describes self-mobilisation as the possibility to ‘participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions to change systems’ and to ‘develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice’, but retaining ‘control over how resources are used’

Self-mobilisation can develop in a more or less spontaneous and organised way, in what Mitrašinović (2016: 182) would define as the ‘insurgent’ or ‘emergent’ domains. The first

characterises projects where most of the activities are defined by local conditions; the second, 'where modalities of self-organisation begin to emerge as patterns of fairly regular tactical activity'.

The importance of self-mobilisation has hugely increased in recent years. As Margit Mayer (2013: 12) observed, citizens' self-organisation 'has become not only easily feasible, but a generative force in today's neo-liberalizing cities'. This tendency is also backed by more general theories on the development of cities, that are based on the inability to understand the city's dynamics and on the recognition of the importance of practices that are spontaneous and non-regulated (Portugali 1999, Tan 2014). As suggested by Portugali (1999), the city could be understood as an open and complex system. He describes comprehensively today's cities as 'chaotic and unpredictable and they self-organise themselves independently of our scientific predictions and planning rules' (Portugali 1999: 46). As a direct consequence of his theory, it is suggested that urban practitioners' role is 'to sit and watch, or at best become participants in this huge self-organizing process' (Portugali 1999: 46). Even if this position is seen as radical, the success of the model lies in giving an equal role to all the actors in designing the urban environment.

Case studies in Europe show that there have been several experiences of self-managed projects, where citizens have organised in order to change the space where they live or pass through. It is the case, for instance, of 'Ésta es una plaza', a project for the Fourquet square in Madrid, developed by a group of citizens called 'Operarios del espacio público'. The project developed an orchard, a sports area, a market and an open-air theatre in an abandoned and inaccessible area of Madrid. Another case is given by the 'Manifatture Knos' in Lecce, Italy. 'Manifatture' was an abandoned school for technicians, covering 4,000 square metres. In 2007, a group of 40 people decided to regenerate the building using basic equipment, such as paint, brooms and a crane. Today, 'Manifatture Knos' is one of the most active cultural centres in Italy and is a member of Trans Europe Halles (TEH), a network of European cultural centres. The TEH network testifies to the importance given to the bottom-up project in the current debate. It brings together cultural projects across Europe that are 'independent and not-for-profit' and arise 'from a citizen's initiative' 'based in a repurposed building' and involve 'an autonomous, multidisciplinary social, artistic & cultural program' (Trans Europe Halles n.d.).

How to Understand and Evaluate Self-initiated Urban Regeneration Projects

In the framework that I have described, the traditional role of the professional is questioned. In these complex bottom-up projects, citizens charge professionals with solving technical problems but not with the general conception of the plan, which remains instead the purview of the private promoters. The design, hence, embraces more actors, involving not only professionals but also ordinary citizens, radicalising the questions posed by Friedmann (1998) on who are the professionals in charge of the urban design. This multi-actor and interdisciplinary design process should be understood considering all its components, taking into account the 'urban' both as a 'cultural phenomenon' and 'way of life' and 'in terms of its physical structure, architecture, infrastructure' (Channa 2013: 123).

A relevant contribution on the theory of the design practice is Manzini's *Design, When*

Everybody Designs: An introduction to Design for Social Innovation (2015), where he explains ‘the directions of change in the culture of design and of the project at the present time and in the near future’ (Angelucci 2017: 360). Manzini’s work is particularly enlightening in relation to UR projects. In fact, even if Manzini intends design as an autonomous discipline, some of his concepts particularly fit UR. The first of such concepts includes the definitions of design ‘initiative’ and ‘process’, distinguishing between ‘the overall design process (which is an open-ended process) and the multiplicity of design initiatives that enable the overall process to proceed’ (Manzini 2015: 91). In urban projects with special reference to regeneration, it is clear that the complexity of the activities, involving different actors and skills, could easily be seen as a plurality of design initiatives, part of a more comprehensive design process, the project itself, that has its own overall goals.

The second concept that could be borrowed from Manzini is the distinction between ‘expert’ and ‘diffuse’ design. ‘Diffuse design’, in his definition ‘is put into play by ‘nonexperts,’ with their natural designing capacity, while design experts are people trained to operate professionally as designers, and who put themselves forward as design professionals’ (Manzini 2015: 37). From this framework comes the possibility of both actors having design capacity, a quality that, at first sight, could be seen as exclusive to the professionals. This is particularly relevant, also, regarding recent ‘co-design’ experiences, that suggest that the categories of actors, practitioners and citizens, are on the same level, and their roles could be exchanged (Rosa and Weiland 2017).

The application of Manzini’s framework helps us to understand and describe the process and the actors involved, and is particularly useful regarding self-initiated projects in which the borders between competencies and professions are not rigid and the design expertise is de-professionalised and distributed (Tonkiss 2014). Continuing to follow Manzini, a further distinction could be made, separating actors whose activities concern ‘sense-making’ from those that refer to ‘problem solving’. This distinction includes four categories (Manzini 2015):

- design and technology agencies (expert design, problem-solving);
- design and communication agencies (expert design, sense-making);
- grassroots organisation (diffuse design, problem-solving);
- cultural activists (diffuse design, sense-making).

Using this framework in a preliminary recognition of the activities completed by actors in order to develop the FARM project over the years, it becomes clear that this categorisation offers a complete explanation of the various design initiatives that are implemented. The classification (Table 1) shows the relevant role played by private citizens in the overall project, in accordance with the importance of ‘diffuse design’ in contemporary urban regeneration projects.

Expert Design	Design and Technology agencies	Renewal of 18000 m ² (Di Carlentini and Liotta 2016)
Expert Design	Design and Communication Agencies	Website and communication materials
Diffuse Design	Grassroots Organisation and Cultural Activists	Purchase of ‘Palazzo Miccichè’ Purchase of ‘Sette Cortili’ Setup of Sicily Foundation Setup of Farm Cultural Park association Activities for managing ‘FARM XL’ (art gallery) Activities for managing ‘SOU’ (school of architecture for children) Setup of ‘Farmidabile’ (social cooperative) Activities for managing the Sunday Market Participation and/or organisation and/or promotion of 560 events and happenings (Farm Cultural Park 2010a)

Table 1. Activities and design categories regarding the regeneration of Favara. Created by the author.

Manzini’s framework has been used in the initial analysis of the Farm Cultural Park as a method of categorisation and analysis of the initiatives and the actors. I have then prepared interviews for the ‘diffuse design’ figures and the ‘expert design’ ones. This theoretical framework will also support the analytical part and hypothetically will lead to a complete description of how these initiatives develop, stressing the contribution of each actor.

Farm Cultural Park: A Project of Urban Regeneration?

The first case study selected for the research is the project Farm Cultural Park, developed in Favara, a town of around 33,000 inhabitants in the south of Sicily, Italy. In 2010, Andrea Bartoli, a notary, and his wife Florinda Saieva, a lawyer, started to think about a project to change the situation of the historic centre of Favara, that was semi-abandoned. The whole town had an enormous rate of unemployment and thousands of buildings had been built without permits (Faraci 2017). Moreover, the town did not have touristic or industrial settlements. In 2010, Favara experienced the tragic death of two young girls, the sisters Bellavia, due to the collapse of a historic building in the town centre (*Corriere della Sera* Redazione Online 2010). Consequently, the municipality decided to demolish several buildings in the inner centre (Consiglio and Riitano 2015).

In this context, Andrea Bartoli and Florinda Saieva took the opportunity to buy two buildings, Palazzo Giglia and Palazzo Micchiché, at a very low price. After this first purchase, the Bartolis also bought a group of buildings organised around courtyards in the centre of Favara. Called ‘Sette Cortili’ (Seven Courtyards), they would become the core of the FARM XL, the art gallery of the FARM project (Di Carlentini and Liotta 2016).

The Bartolis charged some professionals with developing a project that would lead to the opening of new spaces linked to each other and achieve the refurbishment and renewal of about 10 buildings and 18,000 square metres of urban fabric (Di Carlentini and Liotta 2016). The project aimed at revaluing the buildings that, for their urban structures, courtyards and positioning, embedded strong social values.

FARM has become a symbol of having a long-term view, investing in future generations in a place where, in the best case, also public funds have been used for instrumental and short-term goals and assistance (Pardo 2012). It meets outstanding critiques of the stereotype that Southern Italy lacks civil society (Pardo 2012); to stay in Sicily, one thinks, for example, of the astute argument developed by Jones with specific reference on Danilo Dolci's action in Partinico (Jones 2016). Today, thanks to the activities of the Farm Cultural Park, the economy of the city appears rejuvenated, attracting tourists and stimulating the opening of structures to welcome them, such as B&Bs, hotels, restaurants and cafes (Consiglio and Riitano 2015, Della Lucia and Trunfio 2018), but also encouraging youngsters to remain.

In order to understand if there is a basis for an evaluation of the project from the perspective of urban regeneration, a content analysis of discourses on the Farm Cultural Park project has been developed, based on the existing literature and documents (Duriiau et al. 2007). This method has been chosen for its capacity to identify the prevailing topics in the discourses of different categories of actors (Namenwirth and Weber 1987). The documents have been divided into several categories, including scientific works (Camasso and Suraci 2017, Della Lucia and Trunfio 2018, Faraci 2017, Woldarsky Meneses 2013), Italian online magazines of the architecture and art fields (Palumbo 2016, Pierro and Scarpinato 2012, Puglisi 2018), generic web blogs (Anon 2013, Anon 2018b, Anon 2018a, Anon n.d.; Watson n.d.) and FARM official communication (Anon n.d., Daniele Inzinna n.d., FARM Cultural Park 23:30:10 UTC, FARM Cultural Park 2010a, TEDx Talks 2017).

ACADEMIC DOCUMENTS		ARCHITECTURE AND ART MAGAZINES		ONLINE GENERIC BLOGS		FARM OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION	
Word	%	Word	%	Word	%	Word	%
Urban	1.31	Bartoli	1.15	Favara	1.65	Favara	0.66
City	1.15	Favara	1.04	art	1.26	progetto (project)	0.43
cultural	1.05	Sicilia	0.86	town	1.26	mondo (world)	0.35
Favara	0.87	Progetto (project)	0.69	world	0.78	anni (years)	0.32
regeneration	0.73	Andrea	0.63	cultural	0.68	persone (people)	0.31
Creative	0.70	centro (centre)	0.52	square	0.68	città (city)	0.29
Social	0.59	architetti (architects)	0.46	Bartoli	0.58	luogo (place)	0.29
Centre	0.40	architettura (architecture)	0.46	future	0.58	centro (centre)	0.26
development	0.37	bambini (children)	0.46	project	0.58	cultura (culture)	0.25
People	0.37	culturale (cultural)	0.35	Agrigento	0.49	culturale (cultural)	0.25

Table 2. Farm Cultural Park: List of the ten most cited words. Created by the author.

The documents that have been considered are both in English (the academic documents and the online blogs) and in Italian (the online magazines and the FARM's official communications). Most of the documents are written, with the exception of two videos registered as FARM official communications. A word frequency analysis was conducted in order to compare the list of the ten most cited words in the four categories of documents. In order to provide meaningful results, two different 'stop lists' were used, one for the English and one for the Italian documents. The list of the ten most cited words thus obtained (Table 2) shows that:

- the academic papers recognise the project as an urban one, capable of a relationship with the city of Favara and its overall presumed regeneration ('urban' is the most cited word, followed by 'city');
- the online articles and the official communication recognise the relationship with the city of Favara but also a worldwide openness ('world');
- the promoters, the 'Bartoli' family, are in the list regarding the online magazines and blog posts, testifying to the relevance of the concept of the 'social hero', as a promoter that acts in the community interest (Manzini 2015);
- the professional figures, the 'architects', are cited only by the magazines;
- the word regeneration is used mostly by academics, though it is present four times in the official Farm presentation document (FARM Cultural Park 23:30:10 UTC) and is cited in an oral presentation by Andrea Bartoli (TEDx Talks 2017).

Based on the results of this preliminary activity, the analysis will take into account Farm Cultural Park as a case study, due to the evident conviction among academics that the Farm Cultural Park is an UR project.

'Diffuse' and 'Expert Design' in a Farm Cultural Park

In this section, I argue through literature research and interviews that the design process of the Farm has been deeply affected by its 'bottom-up' dimension based on the principles of 'progressive redistribution' and 'social responsibility' (Rabbiosi 2016). I shall analyse the initiatives of physical renewal, developed by Salvator-John A. Liotta as an architect in charge of the design, as well as the contribution of Andrea Bartoli and Florinda Saieva to the final design.

It is useful to recall briefly the terms of Liotta's involvement in the project as an 'expert designer'. In 2011, Liotta was engaged by Andrea Bartoli for work to be done on the Chiamonte castle, in the framework of the F.U.N. (Favara Urban Network), specifically the ticket office and some exhibition spaces. After this experience, Liotta started a collaboration on the Farm Cultural Park project. As analysed in Table 1, the project was based on a lot of initiatives of different nature. The architect was engaged sometimes in collaboration with colleagues like Vincenzo Castelli and Vidà group, as a 'design and technology agency'. In chronological order, Liotta was responsible for the design of (Liotta 2019a):

- the art gallery Farm XL;
- some external spaces;
- the 'SOU', school of architecture for children;

- the children's museum.

Liotta closely collaborated with the two promoters of the FARM, Andrea Bartoli and Florinda Saieva, who made the initial financial investment. They are private citizens who could be defined as 'social heroes', using the definition given by Manzini (2015). They are people with strong personalities, who invested much energy in the project, with a strategic vision that reconnects the local and global scale of the project and succeeded in encouraging people to join the project (Savatteri 2017). This aspect is underlined by Salvator-John A. Liotta, who considered the personal commitment of the promoters fundamental not only for financial support but also for the energy and passion they put into the project, which he regarded as a 'non-replicable' driving element of the project (Liotta 2019b).

Furthermore, the Bartolis played a relevant role also as 'diffuse designer', through their active participation in the design process. As Liotta states, 'it never happened to me, like in this case, that there were two people that already have their own vision' and 'an idea of where they want to arrive' (Liotta 2019b). This is due also to the cultural background of the Bartolis, underlined by Liotta (2019b) but also evident when they present their project making references to the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the Moroccan Place Jemaa el-Fnaa and Camden Town in London (Farm Cultural Park 2010b). As Liotta (2019b) pointed out, the promoters of this project seem 'architect in nuce' (nascent architects), with a high impact on the final design. Liotta, in fact, asserts that the Bartolis had an 'impact of four or five', on a scale from one to five, on the final design (2019b).

Also, the literature review acknowledges the Bartolis' fundamental role in the design of the FARM: Andrea Bartoli is described by Puglisi as a 'notary-architect' (2018). If the role of the client/promoter in this initiative is peculiar, also the 'expert designer' has found himself in a context that demanded a change in its approach. In Liotta's view, participating in the FARM project required exercising his profession in a totally different way, less focused on the technical aspects and more on an emotional involvement, and a consequent desire to use his expertise as a service to the community (2019b). In his words, 'competences and intelligence have been made available to realise a project that has a zero degree of architectural ego' (Liotta 2019b).

As a witness to this specificity, Liotta also points out the evident difference in aesthetic between Farm's project and other projects managed by his Parisian office, Laps architecture: 'at the beginning of conferences, I show what Laps does, then I show our participation in Farm Cultural Park. Ours has been a contribution to a collective work that puts aside the subjective personality' in order to 'permit most people to find themselves in this language' (Liotta 2019b). This statement brings out the specificity of the approach of the architect, which recognises his activity as a contribution in designing a 'place' with a special meaning for the inhabitants and with influence on their identity (Pardo and Prato 2012).

The architect personal commitment is another element that helps us to understand the different role that he played in the FARM project. Liotta describes the evolution of his relationship with the Bartolis and with the project, from an initially limited involvement to a complete adherence to its 'bottom-up' principles and its social regeneration instances. This emerges from (Liotta 2019b):

- the evolving relationship with the Bartolis, from a professional to a more friendly and intimate one;
- the collaboration in the communication of the project in the first person, with activities like the production of articles and papers and the organisation of international exhibitions, with the intention of permitting the FARM project to reach a vast public (Di Carlentini and Liotta 2016, Liotta 2018 n.d.);
- the organisation of international workshops in the field of architecture (Liotta is also an associate professor of architecture at the Université Libre de Bruxelles), animating the FARM with students the universities of Palermo, Milano, Tokyo and Brussels;
- participating in some meetings of ‘Farmidabile’, the first community cooperative of Sicily and one of the social projects linked to the Farm (Consiglio and Riitano 2015);
- the contribution to building an international network of contacts to involve people in the Farm project.

From this commitment and emotional involvement arises a different way to deal with the project itself that differs from standard projects in the real estate field for different reasons (Liotta 2019b):

- the lack of purely economic considerations in the project in favour of the acknowledgement of a ‘spiritual enrichment’, rather than a ‘material enrichment’;
- the absence of a managerial organisation in favour of a more flexible time schedule and more informal ways of communicating the project.

The project’s non-speculative dimension is one more aspect that influenced the design and people’s involvement. As we know, at first the project was financed only by the Bartolis and was free for the public (Savatteri 2017). Later, the promoters attempted to reach financial sustainability by introducing an entry fee to the exhibition (Liotta 2019b). This financial setup — including relying only on private finances and not being speculative — has become a distinguishing element also of the design.

Theoretically meeting other experiences in Europe (Lerner et al. 2014, Müller et al. 2008), Liotta states that using strategies that could be defined as respectful of pre-existence, if not even low-cost, has been a theoretical approach more than a need. As he put it, ‘there are two ways of producing beautiful things: using a lot of resources or using a lot of intelligence’ (Liotta 2019b). The design philosophy has become ‘to do very much with very little’ (Liotta 2019b). Liotta’s involvement was on a volunteer basis for some activities, based on the ‘refund of expenses’ for others, while only for the more important initiatives there was a standard invoice (Liotta 2019b). This stresses the specificity of the project and the general tendency of ‘bottom-up’ projects to involve volunteer efforts (Tonkiss 2014). Considering the abovementioned aspects, it is difficult to categorise Liotta as an architect only, because sometimes he acted as a true activist. Also, the Bartolis transcend the category of the private client or promoter, for they are also truly involved in design decisions.

From this analysis of some aspects of the activities of Liotta and the Bartolis, based on the framework of ‘expert’ and ‘diffuse design’, it is possible to conclude that:

- the Bartolis have an extraordinary capacity for building networks and joining people together, are the motor of all the initiatives and could be considered as ‘social heroes’;

- the promoters had a strong involvement in all the design solutions, including those completed by professionals, thus behaving like people with a proper design role, which justifies defining them as ‘diffuse design’ figures;
- the professional, that is the architect, was involved in a context of collaboration and he used his expertise as a service to the community and to the project, acting as an ‘expert designer’;
- Liotta committed himself to the project for the sake of its success, becoming himself an activist;
- experts and non-experts collaborated to achieve the success of the initiative in a spirit of collaboration often based on volunteer efforts.

Conclusion

This article has presented the first insights into the design process of a bottom-up project based on the application of Manzini’s theoretical framework. An evaluation of the results of this process are the subject of continuing research, which I will discuss in further works.

The methodology used is the case study for its potential to investigate ‘a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (Yin 1994). I will proceed to investigate Farm Cultural Park and select other bottom-up urban regeneration projects developed in Europe since the 2000s that are supposed to have had a significant influence in regenerating urban areas and that meet the characteristics listed in section 2.

An interesting insight into urban complexity could come from ‘urban anthropology’, as defined by Prato and Pardo, that considers as central topics city planning and the legitimacy of grassroots organisations (Prato and Pardo 2013). Finally, I plan to carry out an evaluation of the aforementioned projects in order to clarify if such bottom-up approach can achieve regeneration, and through which strategies.

This research will inform public authorities, academics and citizens on the importance of private-led projects in the regeneration of cities. Being far from the unconditional romantic exaltation of private initiative, it will provide a complete framework and evaluation method. An informed understanding of how these projects develop could shed light on issues faced by promoters, generating debate on the methods through which public authorities could sustain these initiatives.

Bottom-up practices, for their spontaneous and self-sustained character, are not commonly subjected to evaluation. The evaluation and assessment phase is, in fact, mainly linked to the need for public actors to understand the efficiency of the initial investment (Wilson 2012).

An attempt to focus on bottom-up practices can be found in the Community Led Local Development instrument proposed by the European Commission (European Commission 2017). This is a policy instrument that focuses on financing and supporting bottom-up initiatives in the EU countries. However, the legislative framework in which these initiatives have to be developed in order to obtain funds — namely the mandatory formation of a partnership with local authorities, the submission of a proposal in order to participate in a call

by the Local Action Group and other mandatory implementations (Servillo 2017) — questions whether the development of such initiatives follows the same path as those that are self-initiated.

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