
Making Public Spaces Public: An Ethnographic Study of Three Piazzas in Bolzano, Italy¹

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It is generally accepted that public spaces such as Italian squares (piazzas) are there to serve the public, but who exactly makes up this public and to what extent are their voice heard when the transformation of public spaces is being planned? These are some of the questions this paper attempts to answer with presentation of the results of anthropological research in three piazzas in the city of Bolzano in northern Italy. All three piazzas were built during the Italian fascist period and although the echoes of history live on in the buildings, in the years following their construction the squares have been transformed by both those who manage these spaces and those who use them. Using interviews with the various stakeholders (residents, shop-owners, urban planners, architects, politicians, administrators, activists and users of the spaces), combined with photography of the piazzas to reveal how they are occupied throughout the year, the research attempts to reveal the multiple narratives that make up how the spaces are perceived and inhabited. The research follows the various voices, including pressure groups lobbying for a more transparent and participatory approach to planning the future of the piazzas. The results of the research reveal a conflict between citizen stakeholders who wish for a transformation of these public spaces in order to serve residents and respond to the urgent demand for more sustainable cities, and an institutional planning system that uses its power to maintain control of the planning process.

Keywords: Public space, urban planning, urban ethnography.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the results of anthropological research undertaken in the city of Bolzano, Italy, from January to December 2019. Bolzano is located in Northern Italy, close to the Austrian border (Map1). It is a small city with a population of 100,000, and capital of the Autonomous Province of South Tyrol. Its history is that of a frontier city. In 1919, following the Austro-Hungarian Empire's defeat in the First World War, it came under Italian control and from 1920 under Mussolini's rule. During this period (1920 to 1943) urbanization and 'italianisation' went hand in hand, with the fascist regime bringing large numbers of Italian speakers into a predominantly German (dialect) speaking population and undertaking major architectural and urban development projects. In 1943 the city came under Nazi Germany's military control and at the end of the second world war it became once more part of Italy.

The research was undertaken as part of an interdisciplinary project at the University of Bolzano titled GreenCITIES. This project combined ecological, economical and anthropological research to improve understanding of the impact, use and perception, as well as costs and benefits of urban green space.² The anthropological research included a study of three piazzas in Bolzano, focusing on the perceptions and use of urban public space within the

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² GreenCITIES was a three-year project (April 2017 to April 2020), involving a collaboration between the Faculty of Science and Technology, the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Economics and Management. The project was funded by the University of Bozen-Bolzano. I would like to thank the GreenCITIES team for their support and advice on the writing of this article.

context of the city's urban development history. The piazzas were chosen for their historical and current significance as public spaces.



Map 1. Bolzano is in Northern Italy, close to the Austrian border.

This article considers to what extent ethnographic research in an urban environment can make a valid contribution to urban planning by gaining an insight into past, present and potential future uses of public urban space. The ability of anthropology to contribute to urban policy and planning through its use of ethnographic methodology is a key issue that I wish to look at in this article. The urgency and importance of the ethnographic study of life in urban settings argued by Pardo and Prato (2012 and 2018, Prato and Pardo 2013), particularly when considering the Sustainable Development Goal of ‘Sustainable Cities and Communities’ set by the United Nations in 2015 and to be achieved by 2030, adds weight to the results of this study (Pardo et al. eds 2020). Assisted by Foucault’s theory of power and resistance (Foucault 1982b, 1985, 1991), particularly in its application to urban planning (Mashhadi et al. 2019), I attempt to confirm the current domination of a top-down urban planning process in the city of Bolzano and provide a signal of hope for a more participatory and inclusive bottom-up approach. The aim of the article is to demonstrate that the holistic and multi-layered ethnographic approach, analysed through the lens of power dynamics, provides insight of value to a humanistic urban planning process (Gehl 1987/2011, 2010; Dalgaard 2014).

The article presents the city’s historical context, followed by multiple narratives of how the three piazzas are perceived and inhabited, as well as desires for their future. Particular attention is then given to one of the three piazzas, Piazza della Vittoria, due to its controversial historical setting and planned renovation, as well as to reveal the strengths and limits of a citizen-focused participatory approach.

Methods

The mixed methodological approach combined archival research, stakeholder interviews, photography, participatory observation and participatory research. This variety of ethnographic research methodologies was used to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of, use of, and future desires for public space in the city, placed within the context of the city’s past, present

and future urban planning approaches. The commitment to bringing a holistic ethnographic approach to the methodology is based on the conviction that it helps to reflect the complexity of research in urban settings, where political economy, city planning, grass roots action, governance and globalisation all have a role to play (Pardo and Prato 2012, 2018; Low 2014).

For the stakeholder interviews, I defined two broad groups:

1. ‘Managers’; that is, those responsible, who have a professional view or take an active position concerning the past, present and future management of the piazzas. A total of 15 interviews were undertaken with architects, urban planners, technicians, administrators, politicians and citizen-focused activists.
2. ‘Users’; that is, those living in or close to the piazzas, including adults, children and business establishments. These interviews were conducted with individuals or groups or took place as informal conversations with people who were using the piazzas when I visited. Thirty-seven interviews were recorded, whilst the number of spontaneous informal conversations that took place whilst visiting the piazzas were not registered.

The structure of the interviews was informal, following a loosely chronological line and focusing on discussion around perceptions of the past, present and possible future use of these public spaces.

Participatory research involved a variety of approaches. Work was undertaken with two classes in two secondary schools where the students, aged between 14 and 17 years, undertook different mapping exercises. One school was located on Piazza Domenicani and the other close to Piazza Mazzini and Piazza della Vittoria. The students first visited the piazzas and then developed and presented their design ideas for what they felt their chosen piazza should look like in the future. Later in the year, I worked again with the school on Piazza Domenicani, this time developing a participatory street-based action aimed at collecting citizen’s proposals for the positive changes that they felt should be made. As Piazza Domenicani is predominantly a place of transit, it was difficult to find people willing to be interviewed. However, the students managed to undertake 20 mini-questionnaire interviews and 6 mapping games. The mini-questionnaire contained the double, connected question: ‘The pros and cons of Piazza Domenicani, What would you add? What would you remove?’ The game involved a giant image of the piazza and a choice of icons: tables, chairs, parking places, buses, trees, flowers, grass, fountains and food kiosks. The game player could place up to 9 icons wherever they wanted on the image.

Here, I present the results of the first mapping exercise for Piazza Mazzini and Piazza della Vittoria and the street-based participatory project for Piazza Domenicani.

I also attended meetings and events linked to the citizen-focused activist group, *lab:bz*, concerned with the planned redevelopment of Piazza della Vittoria. *Lab:bz* is made up of a group of mainly architects, planners and designers, who advocate more transparency in the planning process and the need for a citizen-based, participative approach to the regeneration of public spaces in the city. The *lab:bz* campaign for Piazza della Vittoria was motivated by the council’s plan to liberate the piazza from its current carpark status with the construction of an underground carpark, and the redevelopment of the piazza, planned for 2021. I participated

actively in the internal group meetings and in the events and meetings organized by *lab:bz*, including meetings with politicians, an Open Space³ event for citizens and a press conference.

Photographs of the three piazzas were taken throughout the year at different times of the day and evening, and on different days of the week. In total, 81 visits to each of the three piazzas were made and 2857 photographs taken. During these visits, participant observation also took place; as well as observing the way the space was being used, I took the opportunity to talk with the people present in order to understand why they came to the piazza and what they thought of it, good and bad.

Results

The results of the research are presented in a timeline of past, present and future. The past covers the urban planning approaches from the colonial period up to the present and includes archival research and stakeholder interviews. The present focuses on the role of the piazzas revealed by the photography, participatory observation and stakeholder interviews. The future of the piazzas focuses on the participatory research activities and stakeholder interviews.

Foucault's theories of power, conformity and resistance (Foucault 1977, 1982b, 1982a, 1985, 1991) are used to try and add coherence to the results and move towards an understanding of the various power relations taking place in and around the piazzas and across the various individuals, groups and institutions.

The Past: The Historical Context of the City's Planning and Development Approaches

All three piazzas that were the focus of my research were constructed during the Italian fascist period, when the government brought this former Austrian territory under its control. The planning approach was linked to fascist ideology and domination, using the rationalist architecture that was then popular throughout Italy. The development concept for the city was that of expansion and growth through 'italianisation', which included the destruction of the city's Austrian-influenced buildings and replacement with rationalist architecture. Obermair's (2020) evocative portrayal of Corso Libertà that runs from Piazza della Vittoria to Piazza Mazzini and beyond, describes how the architecture with its gigantesque and linear form was intended to discipline and subordinate the South Tyrolian.

Piazza Domenicani was to be the Italian piazza of the historical centre; in 1933, the original piazza, Kaiser Joseph Platz, was restructured to form Piazza Domenicani. Piazza della Vittoria and Piazza Mazzini were constructed as part of the 'new city' of Bolzano. These two piazzas, combined with the laying of a huge road axis over fields and vineyards, created a forced architectural unification of the old city with the new.

³ Open Space Technology is a method for organizing and running a meeting, where participants are invited in order to focus on a specific, important task or purpose. Unlike pre-planned conferences with scheduled speakers, Open Space events are participant-driven and 'self-organized'. A document of discussions, decisions and conclusions is produced and sent to all participants as a follow-up to the event.

Following the Second World War and the collapse of fascism, came the renovation of war damaged buildings and the growth and densification of the city that continues to this day. In 1998/99, Piazza Domenicani was restructured once more: the central island containing lamps, grass and trees was removed and the pavement area enlarged. Until the 1980s, cars had free access to the old city and Piazza Domenicani was used for parking. After the access to the old city was closed to cars, the piazza became a place of transit for the huge number of buses transporting people in and out of the city centre.

In architectural terms, Piazza della Vittoria should be considered a component of a single structure containing three parts: the monument (Monumento della Vittoria), the park (Parco della Piazza della Vittoria) and the Piazza itself. The construction of the Monumento della Vittoria was undertaken at the behest of Mussolini and was built over a two-year period from 1927 to 1928. Significantly, it was built on a park containing the unfinished Tyrolian Kaiserjäger monument.⁴ As an ‘architectural symbol of the Fascist soul’ (Sabrini ed. 2016),⁵ it remains a controversial structure and in the late 1970s various attempts were made by South Tyrolean separatist groups to destroy it, leading to the monument being encircled by a fence, and access limited.

Behind the monument lies the park, which at its creation in the early 1930s contained a combination of mature trees and newly planted saplings. The park remains largely unchanged, with trees only being removed and replaced as they become old or unstable.



Photo 1. A postcard of Piazza della Vittoria in 1955, before the increase in car ownership turned the piazza into a carpark (Copyright Bolzano city archives).

⁴ This monument was begun in 1917 and was intended to be dedicated to the fallen soldiers of the *Kaiserjäger* regiment during the First World War.

⁵ The architectonic structure comprising the monument, the park and the piazza was created as symbol of the domination and victory of the fascist regime over the Austro-Hungarian Empire and rule over South Tyrolian citizens.

The park faces onto the piazza, also constructed in the 1930s, which was to be the new city's main piazza, surrounded by administrative buildings. Originally, the piazza was paved with stone slabs (Photo 1), but these were later replaced with asphalt. Piazza della Vittoria has always been used as a carpark, and with increased car ownership the presence of vehicles parked in the piazza has grown significantly. Only on Saturdays is car-parking forbidden, when the piazza and surrounding side streets are transformed into a large and lively market.



Photo 2. Piazza Mazzini, initially a blank open space (Copyright Bolzano city archives).

Piazza Mazzini, constructed in 1936, is less monumental than Piazza della Vittoria, but is nonetheless a significant public space. Initially, the piazza was a blank open space, with large rationalist buildings being constructed around it in the late 1930s (Photo 2). By 1962, Piazza Mazzini had become 'more welcoming with a small garden containing several species of trees and flowers' (UPAD, 2002). From the 1960s, this park side of the piazza has seen a variety of changing combinations of trees and flowers, as well as the addition of benches. Over the years, as car ownership grew and traffic increased, the central road running through the piazza further divided the two spaces, and the paved section of the piazza was increasingly used as a carpark. However, in the late 1990s the piazza was restructured and became car free, with the installation of a fountain and a line of trees in raised beds. Every Tuesday there is a farmers' market that attracts many local residents.

Local Urban Development Within a National Perspective

The City's Mobility Policy and the Automobile

It is important to note that all three piazzas have been influenced by Bolzano's mobility plan. In 1948, the decision was made to remove the trams that ran through the city and dedicate public transport to buses. The three piazzas were used to address the subsequent demand for carparking space consequent to increased car ownership. Traffic levels are of undeniable significance when considering the city's development and the effect it has had on the three piazzas. However, an

urban planning policy that has allowed itself to be dominated by the automobile is common to mobility policies throughout Italy and beyond, from both an historical and current perspective. The policy's success (locally and globally) lies in the fact that it has been matched by the population's willingness to embrace individual car ownership and its daily use in the urban environment, despite increasing evidence and unease about the environmental damage caused.⁶

The City's Neoliberalist Policy Approach

The city council's adoption of a neoliberalist approach for the city's urban development reveals how the promotion of the interests of capital above all else has penetrated both political and social institutions (David 2007). In theory, neoliberalism aspires to create a utopia of free markets liberated from the intervention of the state. In reality, it entails 'a dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention' where market rule is imposed on all aspects of social life (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 352). In Bolzano, a previous form of state protectionism, where the interests of local independent shops were taken into consideration and the establishment of chain stores in the city was discouraged, has now been abandoned. A variety of chain stores currently have key positions in the city centre and the council has permitted the construction of shopping centres both in the heart of the city and on its outskirts. The impact on the three piazzas has been a slow but steady economic decline. All three piazzas are surrounded by a number of independent shops and bars, many of which are steadily closing without being replaced. The old-fashioned style of these businesses — in stark contrast to the commercial chains in the new shopping centres and on-line shopping options — means that these shops are fighting an ever-losing battle to remain commercially viable, as they increasingly rely on the loyalty of their steadily ageing clientele.

The Present: Embodied Space or Non-place — The Uses and Abuses of Public Space in Bolzano

The Italian piazza has an enviable reputation, as it is often described as the '*salotto urbano all'aperto*' (outdoor living room) and an essential component of all Italian cities. A piazza is defined physically as a large open space surrounded by (public, residential and commercial) buildings, and socially as a meeting place for people, providing them with a sense of community, identity and a set of resources for everyday life. Pitkin (1993) describes the deep impression that piazzas in Rome made on him when he came to do ethnographic fieldwork in the city. He describes the excitement that he felt when he saw how the piazzas came alive at night, and his experiencing *la passeggiata* (the cultural art of strolling), where public space is all about visibility — to see and be seen. Garau, in his article celebrating the piazza, describes its magic, as he suggests that it is the 'total randomness and unpredictability of use that makes a true public space' (Garau 2016: 22).

Two of the three piazzas that are the focus of my research do not match these descriptions. Piazza Domenicani is used as a thoroughfare for buses and Piazza della Vittoria is a car park. (Photos 3 and 4). The space of these two piazzas is inhospitable and uncondusive to social

⁶ <https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/consumption/transport-and-tourism/cars-impact-on-the-environment/story> , accessed 26 January 2021.

interaction. Ironically, despite their historical and architectural significance, they are effectively ‘non-places’ in the sense that they are soulless spaces of transience, holding little or no significance as communal public space (Augè 1995).

The third, Piazza Mazzini, is different. It is a daily lived space, although on a far more modest scale than that described by Pitkin (1993) and Garau (2016). In spite of being divided by a main road, it contains ‘embodied’ space (Low 2011), with both sides of the piazza being used on a daily basis by a variety of people.



Photo 3. Piazza della Vittoria, car park and Non-Place (Source: author).



Photo 4. Piazza Domenicani, thoroughfare for buses and Non-Place (Source: author).

The photographs and observations made in Piazza Mazzini reveal the ebb and flow of a wide range of people using the space at different times of the day, week and season (Photo 5). Each part of the piazza has a different role: The paved area is used in the cooler spring and

autumn periods to catch the sun and for children to ride their bikes, roller-skate, or even play cricket. In the summer, when the paved area is too hot to be used during the day, it becomes inhabited during the late afternoon and evening. The park area is used for rest, relaxation and for socialising by those in search of companionship. The park is used more intensively during the summer months, to obtain relief from the heat. This is particularly the case for the elderly, who go to the park specifically to enjoy coolness and shade, despite there being only one bench that remains in the shade throughout the day. There, I often saw East European caregivers (*badanti*), who would meet alone or with their elderly charges, as well as parents, grandparents and children from a variety of cultures and backgrounds (Photo 6).



Photo 5. Piazza Mazzini liveable, lived and vital space for the people living close to the piazza (Source: author).



Photo 6. A group of women who work as *badanti* (carers) taking a break from work (Source: author).

Both sides of the piazza are used by a culturally mixed group of Italians and migrants. Both the park and paved area of Piazza Mazzini, particularly during the summer months,

become the *salotto urbano all'aperto*, though not as a place to see and be seen. For those who live close to the piazza, it is a vital space where they can go; an alternative to being confined to homes without balconies or gardens.

***Degrado...* — The Language of Abandonment**

Whilst in Piazza Mazzini I found it quite easy to strike up conversations with people, in Piazza Domenicani, it was far more difficult. Here, the majority of people were waiting for buses and had neither the time nor the inclination to talk with me. Piazza della Vittoria, as a carpark revealed little or no human activity. For this reason, I turned to the Parco della Piazza della Vittoria for photography and interviews, but again there were very few people there, apart from a group of homeless people.

During the interviews with residents and shop owners in Piazza Domenicani and Piazza della Vittoria, many used the word *degrado* (decline and neglect) to describe the way the space in both piazzas is 'misused' and express their sense that the place is being abandoned by the city council. In their narratives, this *degrado* included historic buildings not being maintained, homeless people's (mis)use of the space, the lack of public facilities and furniture (public toilets, benches, green areas with trees and flowers), as well as the inappropriate location of public facilities (such as recycling bins placed close to bars and restaurants). All these factors were seen as contributing to and being evidence of this state of *degrado*.

The issue of the homeless people using the Parco and Piazza della Vittoria came up in almost every interview, with residents and shopkeepers criticising and complaining about its appropriation by homeless people (Boucher 2017). This issue also received much coverage in the local media and was widely debated among politicians and in the city council. The negative media coverage generally focused on alcohol abuse and issues of hygiene (the use of the park as a sleeping place and toilet). However, some people had a different attitude towards the homeless; a group of volunteers supported them in various ways. In an interview, one of the volunteers who lives in Piazza della Vittoria described how when she first moved there she noticed that virtually no-one used the park; she said, 'a few people would take their dogs there, two or three men would meet to chat, that's all... School kids would go across the park to the bus stop'. She described the park as 'transit space'. She stated that the city council and many other people would like the homeless people using the park to simply disappear: 'People are uncomfortable to see them [...] I sometimes also have difficulty looking at them, but we should be looking at them *more* [...] The city council, not all of them, but a minority would like them to disappear'. She went on to explain that the city council had forbidden the volunteers from giving the homeless meals in the park and is now making use of the new Italian legislation, which empowers them to sanction and remove these people from public spaces (Flusty 2011).

The Future: Different Voices, Imagined Futures

The school mapping project in Piazza Mazzini and Piazza della Vittoria gave students an opportunity for re-imagining these public spaces. The predominating ideas included the creation of social spaces such as bars, restaurants, libraries, playgrounds and furniture (benches

and tables); greening of the areas with more grass, flowers and trees; and the diversion or reduction of traffic and the removal of car parking. The mini-questionnaire participatory mapping game undertaken by students in Piazza Domenicani produced very similar results: add more ‘green’ (trees and flowers), more benches, tables and chairs, and remove the traffic.

There was a sense of frustration and anger amongst the shopkeepers of Piazza Domenicani. Many of them told me that they have been saying for years what is needed to improve the piazza and feel that they are consistently ignored by the city council. Several said that there was a citizen-based group called *Quasi Zentrum* that aimed to give voice to the needs and desires of the residents and shop owners in and around Piazza Domenicani. I interviewed one of the core members of the group, who explained that in 2014 the group organized an Open Space event to which residents and local businesses were invited. The event was very well attended, and the moderator was provided and paid for by the city council. However, the group’s actions came to nothing ‘We went to the mayor and to the vice mayor [...] We had lots of meetings (with the key people) [...] and they made a map [...] where we wanted one tree here and one tree there [...] They signed it but then nothing happened [...] With the elections everything changed [...] I know that they [the council] are not allowed to guide this kind of (participatory) process anymore [...] they have been stopped’.

Case Study Piazza della Vittoria: Participatory Vision or Retreat into History?

With the planned construction of an underground car park and the consequent freeing of Piazza della Vittoria from cars, the question is raised as to who decides how this public space should be re-designed and used. Research in this case focused on interviews with residents, politicians, technicians working for the city council, architects directly and indirectly interested in the future of the piazza and, in particular, the citizen-focused group *lab:bz*. In this section I present the results of my research, focusing on the above question.

The Playful Architect for a Monumental Shake-up

My interview with an architect discussing Piazza della Vittoria revealed that he saw the entire architectural structure of monument/park/piazza as problematic in terms of physical structure and as historical symbol, both of which in his opinion needed shaking up.⁷ He said, ‘The whole town (old and new) doesn’t work as a centre [...] and then we have this monument here, which is closed up and where nothing happens and then you have the flat piazza, which is only symbolic’.

In 1979, this architect entered an architectural competition aimed at transforming the area from the bridge that crosses the river in the old city centre, to Piazza della Vittoria. He made a controversial and playful proposal, which naturally did not win. However, his explanation of the motive for his choice of design are interesting. He proposed closing the gap between the old and new city by constructing a ship-like bridge where there were also ‘bars, restaurants and

⁷ See Wells (2007) who refers to the difficulty governments have in disposing of historical monuments, due not only to the underlying political and historical context but also to the fact that they were built to be physically permanent.

dancing’. His solution for the monument was to ‘transform it in an artificial way [...] a ruin [...] I made time go faster so it falls down like a ruin with some plants and green growing over it’.

I asked this architect how he felt now (in 2019, rather than 1979) about the monument/park/piazza combination and whether he felt as an architect it needed to remain pure, in the sense of unchanged in its architectural form. His answer was an emphatic ‘No’. He added, ‘There should be trees to make shade (in the piazza) [...] in the park behind (the piazza), that’s now something holy and prohibited [...] and then there is the fence around the monument [...] you should open it and make the monument a place where they sell *würstel* (sausages) [...] underneath (the monument) you sell papers or make a bar [...] full of life [...] that would also stir the whole area piazza/monument — one should make something interesting for the town, for people, for children’.

The Shop Owner for a Clean Break

This architect is not alone in his desire to make dramatic changes to the monument/park/piazza design. The owner of the piazza’s bookshop had similar ideas. He said, ‘In my opinion, architects often lose sight of functionality. Maybe there is a middle ground that is aesthetically appealing and comfortable? Because in the end we live here [...] Maybe they could put in cypress trees or make a complete break and create a forest’.

These ideas of stirring up the architectural and symbolic character of the monument and its piazza seem also to be a desire to free it from the historical and political weight that binds it to the past. However, there are those who remain convinced that the architectural design should remain (or return) to its original state. And it appears that it is these people who currently hold the decision-making power.

Lab:bz, the Ufficio dei Tempi and the Failure of the Participatory Process

Lab:bz is involved in a number of campaigns in the city, one of which is titled ‘The future of Piazza della Vittoria’, encouraged by the information that after many years of deliberation the city council has finally confirmed the redevelopment of the piazza. In April 2019, the group organized a ‘lab:café’ (very similar to an Open Space event) with a number of thematic tables of discussion. The event was attended by around 30 people, including residents, bar owners and businesses located in or close to the piazza. The outcome of the event was a mini report containing a series of ideas and proposals linked to the various themes and in response to the question ‘What do we want for the piazza?’ The message of the report was clear. People wanted to create a public space incorporating a physical and social infrastructure that would transform the piazza into a lived space. However, *lab:bz* were not alone in making such proposals following a participatory action. In 2012, the city council (the *Ufficio dei Tempi*, which had also worked with *Quasi Zentrum* on Piazza Domenicani) launched a process of redevelopment of the area around Piazza della Vittoria using a participatory approach that involved working with citizens, shop owners, associations and public and private institutions. The results led to another section of the city council (the Public Works Office) presenting a proposal for the redesign of Piazza della Vittoria. In an interview with the director of the office, I learned how from the participatory work undertaken together with the

Ufficio dei Tempi he had understood that Piazza della Vittoria needed to become a more lived space, meaning more attractive to people. The group of shop owners felt that if more people visited the piazza then they would also be more likely to visit the surrounding shops and bars. The office prepared a design for the refurbishment of the piazza, including a line of trees to close the space on three sides, an area with seating and an area for recreation. The director told me that the design had been rejected outright by the Buildings Commission (also part of the city council). He stated, ‘the Buildings Commission said no. They said that they wanted the piazza as it was in the 1930s — a rationalist (architecture) argument [...] Our proposal was brutally rejected [...] We are angry because we spent years listening to the shopkeepers to understand what they want and we arrived at this solution but our councillors didn’t listen to us’. The neglect and indifference of local politicians towards citizens and their (mis)governance of the urban planning process is also described by Pardo in his research in Naples (2012).

Following this interview, I tried to make an appointment with a key member of the Buildings Commission but was only permitted a brief telephone interview. When I referred to the Buildings Commission’s rejection of the proposal made by the Public Works Office and mentioned that I understood that the proposal had included trees lining the sides of the piazza, his response was ‘I would never support this’. He explained that the sense of the piazza is that of an ‘empty space’ that can then be used for a variety of events. He said that the mistake had been to use it as a carpark, and that the piazza should be retained according to its ‘original logic’.

So, the participatory process encouraged and actively used by one part of the city council was halted by another section of the council, and it appears that the opinion of the Buildings Commission overrode the wishes of the citizens of Bolzano.

Discussion and Conclusion

Foucault acknowledges that governments constantly try to exert their power over populations, and that their ability to do this is particularly efficient in cities. Control can be maintained through a combination of architecture, surveillance and the discourse of authority (Foucault 1972 and 1977). This has been seen in Bolzano from the fascist period, through its architecture and subjugation of the German speaking population, to the current surveillance and control of homeless ‘delinquents’ in the Parco and Piazza della Vittoria, as well as in the control exerted by the Buildings Commission over decisions for the future of Piazza della Vittoria. The power dynamic between the city council and citizens in the management of the Bolzano piazzas reveals how discourse transmits and produces power but can also render it fragile and thwart its purpose. Interviewees and those taking part in the participatory actions consistently expressed their desire for more social space (including ‘green’ space) and less traffic, and many were against the closure of shops in the piazzas. The combined efforts of *Quasi Zentrum* and the city council’s *Ufficio dei Tempi* produced clearly defined and realistic proposals for improvement using the participatory Open Space Technology. In the case study of Piazza della Vittoria we saw clear proposals for the future of the piazza developed by a collaboration between the city council (*Ufficio dei Tempi*) and citizens. More problematic was the conversion of these ideas and proposals into practical action by the decision makers in the city council.

Repeatedly, individuals and citizen-based groups created to give voice to public opinion were encouraged and then ignored by a system that, ultimately, appears to be indifferent to this voice. Citizens suffer from their hopes for change being constantly raised and then dashed, which is also exemplified by the frustration of the shop owners in Piazza Domenicani and Piazza della Vittoria. This wearing down of resistance risks leading to apathy,⁸ and to the subsequent acceptance of policies that are predominantly in the interest of the market rather than that of the citizen. This, in turn, raises the question of how neoliberalism undermines democracy (Pinson and Morel Jounel 2016) by turning the concept of freedom into mere freedom of enterprise, where the place of planning (when it does not incorporate the interests of stakeholders) is reduced to the denial of freedom (David 2007).

Ethnographic research, particularly the use of participatory tools that raise public opinion to the level of expert (Wortham-Galvin 2013), should be an obligatory part of the urban planning approach, with the results considered as part of a collaborative planning process. However, its contribution is clearly limited if this is not the case (See also Shore et al. eds 2011).

By definition, a piazza should be a social space that serves citizens. Piazza Domenicani and the Parco and Piazza della Vittoria, fail miserably in fulfilling this service. They are described as empty and abandoned, suffering from neglect and decline. This state is literally personified by the presence of the group of homeless people in the Parco and Piazza della Vittoria. The volunteers who care for this homeless group have argued for their right to use this space and not to be further marginalized. This position is supported by Mitchell (2003), who expresses his unease when the homeless are denied access to public space and argues for a democracy that tolerates difference. However, for many shop owners and residents, the homeless occupying the park have no such legitimacy (Boucher 2019). They contribute to the degradation of the piazza and the park and prevent ‘legitimate users’ from occupying the space. Nevertheless, it appears that these ‘legitimate users’ have largely chosen not to occupy the Piazza and Parco della Vittoria and the homeless are only there because of the absence of others filling this space. Clearly the piazza remains a ‘non-place’ because of its use as a car park, but why does the park remain empty? It has trees and grass and benches where people can sit. Maybe it is empty because it is constantly described as abandoned and in a state of degradation, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rotenberg and McDonogh 1993). Or it could be because — as expressed by the architect and the shop keeper quoted earlier — it needs to be ruptured and detached from its ‘architectural mummifications’ (Mumford 1938). Maybe it needs to undergo a physical transformation that will allow it to take on a new, more hospitable form? Is it this kind of transformation that the Buildings Commission’s architect I spoke with was resisting? His comment that the piazza should retain its ‘original logic’ is odd when we consider that the piazza’s construction took place during a period when public space was used for military parades and the ‘making of totalitarian urban space’ (Atkinson 1998: 13). It is a shame that he was unwilling to elaborate on his statement.

⁸ Citizen apathy is also counterproductive for the work of the anthropologist whose research relies on the cooperation and collaboration of their focus of study, in this case the local population (Hayward et al. 2004, Clark 2008).

The hypothesis that public space needs to break with its past in order to provide for present needs is supported by the situation in Piazza Mazzini. The piazza has succeeded in reinventing itself to become an embodied space. In fact, so many different cultures and age groups share this space that the question is raised of whether the socio-spatial contact between different groups succeeds in creating the healthy development of urban citizens described by Sennett as the spatial ideal of public space (Sennett 2002.) Although there was little sign of contact between the various groups, the very fact that they manage to share this space with little or no indication of tension would suggest evidence of healthy urban citizenship. Change and adaptation has been rewarded with social, lived space.

Returning to the key question of this article: To what extent can ethnographic research in an urban environment make a valid contribution to urban planning? With its mixed methodological approach, it can provide powerful insight into an understanding of the state of public urban space (Pardo and Prato 2012). The stakeholder analysis allows for relevant voices to be heard (Ervin 1996, Pardo and Prato 2018). Photography and participant observation give an idea of spatial use and meaning at a given time and over a period of time. The historical context is understood through archival research on the distant past, and selected interviews allow an understanding of more recent events. Participatory tools allow a targeted approach that has the capacity to obtain feedback from larger numbers. Combined with an understanding of the political and economic context through an analytical tool such as Foucault's theory of power, the result is not so much thick description (Geertz 1973), as a broad and layered spread of narratives that can be confirmed, challenged or deepened through further research.

Having said this, the power of the research is dramatically reduced if the methods and results are not incorporated into the urban planning process (Price and Arteaga 2002). In cases where ethnographic research is not being used as part of such process, the anthropologist's only option is for his/her research to be used to support the advocacy work of citizen-focused groups such as *Quasi Zentrum* and *lab:bz*.

However, by recognising the fluidity of power and the subsequent potential for change on the part of all those involved in the power network, Foucault indicates an optimistic outlook (Foucault 1985). The flexible nature of this position provides recognition of the reality of power relations, whilst acknowledging the potential for a rebalancing of this power (Foucault 1980). This statement of potential, and therefore optimism for the possibility of change, means that citizen-focused advocacy work can remain an important option even in cases where the institutional power behind urban planning repeatedly ignores efforts to involve citizens in the decision-making process and/or actively surveys, controls and prohibits citizens' behaviour (Pinson and Morel Journal 2016, Fusty 2004.).

The results of this research clearly bring out three main demands by citizens for public space. They are: less traffic, more green space and more social interaction. The irony is that the city council should be welcoming these demands as they run parallel to the requirements for more sustainable cities, which all urban conglomerations will be required to adhere to in the future (Colantonio and Dixon 2011, Kelbaugh 2019, Colau 2016). Anthropological research in

the city should continue to be used to reinforce stakeholder opinions in whatever way it can and by doing so contribute to a readjustment of power relations in the urban planning process.

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