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Public Space of Proximity

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The Centro Sociale Leoncavallo was created in 1975 in Milan following the illegal occupation of a factory that had been shut down and abandoned years before, which was located in the middle of a quarter with social housing. The first squatters, who formed an informal and non-organized group, belonged to the radical leftist movements of Milan that emerged after 1968. The group adhered to the principle of self-organization/self-administration, which was based on the decision-making power of the assembly of all members and the absence of internal hierarchies, but also on valuing the individual autonomy and freedom of each person. The center was initiated as a "grassroots" response to the significant need for autonomous spaces for communal action, culture and the organization of social services in its surroundings. For this reason, from the start there was room in this building for a women's counseling office, a kindergarten, a space for concerts and exhibitions, in addition to the various rooms for communal use and informal meetings. The declared goal was to create a public space for the quarter and the city, that was to be located outside the control of the state and the capitalist logic of the market. In this respect, the services offered at the center and the cultural activities carried out there assume a clearly political value: they are the expression of a universalist engagement that aims to concretely

expand social rights, especially the individual's right to self-determination with respect to satisfying one's own needs.

During the eighties, though, the center ended up in a crisis, which represents a consequence of the colorful collaboration and confusion of processes that ended the experience of the movement in the seventies. An encroaching self-referentiality of the collective subjects, the emergence of armed resistance, the dissemination of drugs like heroin, the increase in phenomena of de-industrialization accompanied by processes of disintegration within the working class, are only a few of the elements that increasingly pushed the Centro Leoncavallo into a position of social marginality. While the social composition of society was subject to rapid changes, the Centro found itself partly isolated in an increasingly hostile territory. The privatization of public space goes hand in hand with police repression with respect to illegal occupations and to social movements in general. The opinion, widespread among sections of public opinion, especially among local politicians, that the self-administered social centers were now a closed development and thus a leftover from the past, began to predominate. The activists tended to withdraw into a space separate from society: on the one hand, this phenomenon repeatedly generated new internal "thrusts" in the direction of innovations in the area of counterculture and art (for example through encounters with the punk movement); on the other hand, though, the marginality and the lack of effectivity in relation to social concerns intensified, which would probably have led to abandoning the center sooner or later.
Yet it was precisely the fact that the police forcefully cleared the building that indicates a reversal of these tendencies: resistance came not only from the activists themselves, but a broad movement of public support across all classes emerged in the shortest period

of time, taking to the street to retain the center. Thus it was possible for the occupants to rebuild the building that was partially destroyed after the police attack and resume cultural activities there.

The nineties thus began with a renewed mobilization on behalf of the Centri Sociali, especially the Centro Leoncavallo, which was regarded as a clear example of resistance against the privatization of territory and neoliberal notions of culture. This support developed primarily at the heart of the new students and pupils movements against the privatization of the public education system, but was also carried by progressive intellectuals, who stood up for the defense of the public role of culture – and for providing it with these free and autonomous spaces in the city.
Culture and sociality are increasingly perceived as essential needs of collectivity: for this reason, although it was not intended, the Centri Sociali find themselves at the center of public interest. Social groups, whose composition is more transversal now in comparison with the seventies and early eighties, are turning to places like the Centro Leoncavallo, because these are the only free – in the sense of both independent and free of charge – meeting places and spaces of artistic expression in the big cities. Parallel to the ongoing demolition of the social state, the demand is simultaneously growing for social services on the part of various sectors of the urban population: migrants, people with low income and the unemployed are beginning to seek out the self-administered centers, as these are freely accessible places, where one can find a warm meal and advice for seeking employment and dealing with authorities to obtain a residence permit.
Following the "retreat into the private sphere" in the eighties, in the nineties there was a demand again for public spaces characterized by a low level of ideology and a high degree of

competency, taking up ongoing social transformations and setting themselves in a positive relation to them. Parallel to this, though, the privatization of urban territory progressed with the increasing transformation of abandoned industrial areas into commercial and office centers: in 1994 the Centro Leoncavallo was finally driven from its historical seat and in its place a – symbolically charged – bank was built. This time the occupants did not respond with active resistance, because negotiations with the city government were already under way for a possible new location for the center. This is a sign that Leoncavallo had meanwhile become a relevant factor, on which the press and public opinion took a stance. In other words, it had been possible to raise public acceptance through the moment of conflict by constructing an image with a high symbolic value in the public sphere, which is an essential resource in times of crisis.

Since the difficult relationship with institutions does not allow for quick solutions, however, following several months of urban nomadism (during which the collective appropriated public gardens, squares and finally an abandoned building), a former printing plant in a quarter at the edge of the city was occupied. Once again, a conflict situation created a wave of public approval: a major demonstration of support convinced the politicians and police not to clear the building by force. The occupants thus remained in the building, also because the main stockholder of the owners' association became involved and agreed to seek a legal solution for the center. During the relatively peaceful situation after 1994, it was possible for the occupants to address restructuring their own activities in light of a huge space to be newly arranged (400 square meters roofed, courtyards, green areas and cellars in addition). The restructuring was an issue in terms of the social composition of the groups that they had begun to interact with. In this sense, the process of defining the space

coincided with the new orientation of identity and organization: the new groups that had approached Leoncavallo and the various social and cultural activities that had developed in recent years required an adequate spatial organization.

The tendentially closed communal space of the eighties is again becoming the open and public space of the seventies, but in a much broader way. The dividing walls are removed, progress is made on organizing decentralization, and all of this becomes visible in the structuring of the building. The wide street-side entrance that opens directly into the courtyard is left open during the day to allow free access to everyone, especially the homeless and migrants. At the same time, the inner courtyard is intended to be a meeting place for the city quarter. On the one hand, it represents a protected space, where groups that are endangered from a legal perspective (especially migrants) can meet without fear of the police, yet it is also designed as an outwardly oriented public space, where there are bars and open air events for the quarter and the city. The common areas outdoors are not subject to any formal control, they are freely accessible and are intended to serve the free development of social relationships and direct interaction among people, not only the occupants, but also the visitors and users. All the spaces are self-administered by the most diverse groups that organize cultural and social activities in them.
The network-like structure is held together by the plenum, which meets once a week and decides, not without internal controversies, on the overall strategy of Leoncavallo. The essential spaces of the center with the concomitant activities serving communal use are:

- the two bars, where artistic and cultural events take place (exhibitions, discussions, ...), and where a position is taken against prohibitionism in relation to soft drugs. It is also possible for external groups to carry out events like jam sessions and

exhibitions
there.

- the self-service kitchen, which is available to the public at low prices, but where meals are also distributed free of charge to homeless people and migrants, and where the activists eat in the evenings.

- the headquarters of four NGOs that belong to the center (these work in the socio-cultural sector and in development cooperation), which face the courtyard.

- the hall for concerts and theater productions, where well attended, low-priced events take place.

- the bookshop, which also functions as documentation center and archive and consultation office for self-produced material.

- the "communication area", where the center's administration and information and communication services are located (maintenance of the web site, migrant counseling, information about the movement, ...)

Public services in the real sense are carried out in these spaces, which follow a clearly universalistic approach: at the same time, as a result of the special attention to social relationships and the concern for direct contact with the users, these services are carried out in the charged field between dynamics of a societal nature (in conjunction with universal fundamental rights) and communitarian being (based on reciprocity and face-to-face relationships). Contrary to the logic of the market (based on the monetary relationship between service providers and customers) and the logic

of the state (rooted in the bureaucratic relationship between welfare providers and welfare recipients), the logic of the services provided at Leoncavallo is oriented to fundamental rights: through the services the citizens become active in terms of political and cultural contents, in terms of their rights and satisfying basic needs. In this sense, the relationships are public and oriented to raising the value of the individual, specifically by recognizing their individual autonomy and their "empowerment".

The provision of these services with a universal character that have concrete, local impacts additionally activates the dynamics of business and employment, which make Leoncavallo a kind of non-profit enterprise. In fact, the activities of the center make it possible to pay salaries to about forty activists (many of which are migrants) thanks to the income generated by an annual number of visitors amounting to roughly 100,000.
On the whole, the Centro Sociale presents itself as a network of subjects, individuals and groups that interact in a physical multidimensional space, from which they place themselves in various relationships to the world "outside": the means for establishing these relationships consist of the services offered, the diverse forms of communication, the political and cultural events, and personal relationships. The spatial and relational organization of Leoncavallo is based in this way on a permanent tension between flow and informality, which are typical of the social movement, and the necessity of structuring and institutionalization, which is linked to the dimensions and the complexity of a meanwhile highly developed social actor.
The typical modalities of self-organization, in other words horizontality, the absence of formal hierarchies and the lack of specified roles within the organization, thus often end up in conflict with the need for a better structure that results from the

growth of the center. This impulse in the direction of institutionalization is illustrated by recent events relating to Leoncavallo. Since no agreement with the owners has been reached after ten years of illegal occupation, the center is again threatened with eviction. It is therefore necessary to develop a strategy to harmonize the founding idea of Leoncavallo with an adaptation to the external conditions represented by the political and economic power of the city. Naturally this adaptation must not constrain the activities inherent to the center, nor may it lead to a subjugation to the logics of the market and bureaucracy. In this sense, a public campaign has been launched to come up with the financial means for establishing a foundation, which would take over rent and also the operating costs of the building, since the center has never received either public or private subsidies. The public dimension of this campaign is also emphasized in that the support committee consists of intellectuals, artists and politicians that are not directly connected with Leoncavallo, but have an interest in defending this public space that is threatened with closure.

Based on the history and development of a concrete reality, we can maintain that the path of Leoncavallo so far highlights several key elements of the discourse on public space. Briefly summarized, this relates to the following points:

- *physical space*, which represents an extremely important condition for the development of collective identities and social agency,

  based on the mutual recognition of the subjects inside it. It is a symbolic and concrete framework for internal communities, but also

  for "external" society, and it represents the real possibility for the territory to become public.

- *proximity*, in other words the physical neighborhood that enables the development of communities, face-to-face relationships and
  intersubjective trust. This proximity serves as a channel allowing the public sphere to flow into the system of relationships to
  transform principle universalism into reciprocity and acknowledgment within a shared horizon.

- *participation through self-organization*, which means opening the organization and the space for individual and collective subjects
  "from outside". In fact, self-administration represents the means for including all those potentially interested by creating a
  tendentially egalitarian and informal mechanism of organization.

- *universalism*, which means using the space and the services offered in it, which are directed to the whole of society, in keeping with
  a logic of guaranteed universal rights and not according to a logic of aid and sales.

- *autonomy*, which means the independence of the space and the organization from other political and economic organisms.

Regardless of what eventually comes from the process of the partial institutionalization of Leoncavallo, its development shows that the assertion and defense of public space in a metropolis requires recourse to moments of conflict, through which a broader social acceptance can be achieved. Real public space thus seems to be distinguished by being territory that is fought for, which is always in danger of being subjugated to privatized or bureaucratic control. A symbolic, identitary and complex territory, where the social

sphere overlaps with the political, cultural and the economic sphere. A space in which these elements are newly composed again and again within diverse and fragile communities in permanent dialectic with an increasingly global society. A public space of proximity, in other words, where the discourse on the collective good is rooted in everyday social practices in a common material space with its multifaceted meanings.