IN FAVOUR OF SPONTANEOUS URBAN GROWTH
A regeneration strategy for a sustainable urban transformation in Turin (Italy)

1. RESEARCH EVALUATION

The starting point of this research project was the fascination of exploring irregular (unplanned) urban forms, understanding their principles and try to apply them within the contemporary context. This inspiration combined with the contextual overview of the current urban (re)development, outlining urgency for new modes of urban regeneration, resulted in a formation of more structured design assumption and respectively formulation of major (explorative) research question of this graduation projects:

“How an urban regeneration approach can be developed on the basis of spontaneous growth and temporal utilisation of urban space while being practically applicable in the case of Turin, Italy?”

From the executed research and design experiment it was noted that the key for a successful establishment of urban regeneration approach on the basis of spontaneous growth and temporary urbanism is in the balance between individual development freedom and the common objectives values. The design proposition translated this notion in an approach which distinguishes urban tissues and urban structures. The latter provides a rigid framework for (re)development while the former promotes a vision of spontaneously growing urban form within the pre-determined framework. The employment of temporary urbanism concept as an expression of the spontaneous urban order seems to be relevant since both notions share a vision to take the existing urban qualities as a starting point of design process characterised by minimalistic approach resulting in short-term interventions.

From the study analysis it can be stated that the context of Turin needs an urgent innovation in the field of urban regeneration. Nevertheless, the practices of public participation within the city is not deeply embedded in the typical planning approaches despite that there are quite some examples of co-investment prior to the Olympics 2006. In order to practically approach the design proposition an extra effort to mobilise the local
communities is needed in reality. This can be achieved by extra development freedom in the initial stage of the process of area’s revitalisation.

Raise new questions

Looking back at the elaborated research and the outcomes a general direction for further investigations that refers to the balance of the “Framework-Freedom” relationship can be drafted. It seems to be defined by an operational complexity which demands a constant monitoring. During the design process simulation a general trend has been noted that if starting and maintaining the same frame rules they have been gradually neglected by the “developers”. On the other hand, in a real situation the investment scarcity can results in lack of entrepreneurs which suggests a hypothetical loosening of the framework in order to attract developers. Based on these assumptions further examination of the fluctuating balance between framework and development freedom seems to be crucial for providing a better understanding in regards to the effective utilisation of the proposed design approach.

2. DESIGN REFLECTION

Based on the executed design experiment some major lines of reflection thoughts can be classified and summarised.

Reflection on the context

The proposed approach originates partly from the current condition of Turin. The existing untapped potentials have been used as a starting point of the elaborated design interventions. Considering this focus the proposed design really can become a prominent example of how interim activities can be utilised as a tool for urban regeneration. Innovative low-cost methods to revitalise Turin are from great usefulness due to the substantial amount of the abandoned location in the city. Thus, a successful regeneration project located somewhere around Turin can have a high degree of applicability around the city. What is more, the promoted resilience to change and the small scale of interventions suggests that proposed design approach on the basis of spontaneous urban growth and temporary urbanism can be effectively translated to other cities mainly within the context of Europe and North America.

Reflection on the concept and principles

As it was outlined multiple times in this report the elaborated project suggests an alternative perspective towards the (re)production of the urban environment. The major emphasis is put on the design process in comparison with the spatial result as such. The executed design experiment proposes a more user-orientated, balanced, resilient to change approach. Nevertheless, all of these notions can be interpreted in numerous ways. We can assume that in a realistic situation the different stakeholders can speculate with the provided framework and possible developments. Therefore, at least a modest top-down impact on the (re)development is required to prevent the situations. In fact, this argument addresses some of the reviewed scholars who deny the involvement of the top-down actors (Helié, 2009; Urbahn Urban Design, 2010). In any case, the topic of balancing the dynamic relationship “Framework-Freedom” seems to be relevant for further research as noted already.
Reflection on the proposed urban redevelopment models

The presented design project is developed as an alternative approach towards regeneration. As such it proposes a switch in the urban (re)development models in Turin (section 4.2.1). Due to the research theme of interest during the design project the most attention is paid on the switch in the planning / design model. In particular, the major issue that can be seen in regards to the proposed guidance of the urban form generation is the approach’s limitation of defining clear spatial arrangement in longer perspective. The spatial rules and proposals are extremely dependent on the “current” state of the area. Thus, the approach demands a constant engagement of the design professionals to control the quality of the spatial environment.

The shift of the stakeholder model is only briefly discussed during the design proposal. It demonstrates the major aim of the new model of fluctuating powers and responsibilities during the (re)development process. The problem of elaborating further the model is related to the abstract limitation of this project. In reality, it is necessary to observe in detail the actual engagement and relationship between the different stakeholders. The switch in the financial model also has the potential to be further developed in a real situation. Nevertheless, the design approach demonstrates how the (re)development model can based on content-based scheme and local resources.

Reflection on the spatial design

The produced spatial environment through the proposed strategy and site design aims to optimise the potential of the study area by working with the abandoned and underutilised places. As it was already mentioned this thesis aims to develop a design approach rather than outline explicit spatial interventions. Therefore, the main goal of the design itself is to establish a strong link between the spatial form, local community and economy. This objective is pursued by providing opportunities for local involvement and promoting functions which tend to be more engaged with the spatial surroundings.

There are two major notions which can be outlined as potential threats for the spatial qualities that can be developed by this approach. The first one is conflict between the establishment of the urban hardware (e.g. roads, paths, service infrastructure including electricity, gas, water etc.) and the urban software – freedom of shaping the urban tissue. The second issue relates to the examination made during the executed design workshop which occasionally revealed lack of respect to the spatial solutions of the nearby settled developers. Both of these issues require a higher interrelation between the involved actors and the formal authorities. Aiming to resolve these problems an urban designer need to act as a negotiator and content manager.

Another worth-evaluating theme regarding the proposed interventions is the aspect of scale. In order to be an effective tool of urban regeneration the diverse location of temporary interventions should be interrelated within a strategic framework which concerns the large-scale network of the (re)development process. Then the spontaneous growth of the targeted locations can be stimulated. Interestingly enough, looking at the urban form of Turin the vacant spaces are defined by distinctive spatial characteristics, either in terms of spatial scale of form. As such with the employment of spontaneous growth concept the design approach allows experimental possibilities for the special adjustments of these space within the urban morphology.
3. CONCLUSION

Based on the considerations discussed in the previous two sections eight main conclusions of this thesis project are outlined. They are derived from the theoretical discourse and the proposed spatial approach and its hypothetical implementation within the context of Turin (Italy).

(1) Urban regeneration approaches need to address the urgent demands and issues of the urban population along with the large-scale, long-terms planning vision for Turin.

The system of urban regeneration in Turin needs to change. In the era of “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000 & 2007) a (re)development approach which relies on drawing structural improvements and financial revenues only in a long-term perspective seems to fated to failure. The increasing urban dynamics makes long-term prospects institutionally and financially insecure. This results into the “to be redeveloped” syndrome, where urban lands remain vacant for decades without being utilised since they expect actual interventions to be grounded. In order to deal with this issue, urban regeneration approaches can also develop concept where the urgent needs and actual state of urban area is the starting point of the process. Meanwhile, a preliminary long-term vision can still be respected and stressed through step-by-step spatial interventions as demonstrated by the presented design experiment.

(2) Spontaneous interventions on local scale can be used to support a pre-structured urban (re)development framework.

On the other hand, as the practice illustrates various spatial interventions are simply developed on the basis of spontaneous activities. They essentially have an informal and temporary character, being undertaken regardless the existing urban strategies. Nevertheless, these initiatives can support the development of large-scale strategic interventions and thus any possibilities to be incorporated as catalysers can have decisive, positive impact.

(3) Providing freedom can require more rules.

In order to incorporate interim utilisation of urban land, spontaneous urban growth and long-term structural vision the balance between individual freedom and common values seems to be crucial. During the executed design experiment which aimed to simulate a (re)development based on spontaneous urban growth an interesting notion was outlined. In order to facilitate efficiently the regeneration process a higher consideration of the development framework and spatial rules. If this issue is neglected the violation of the development framework can be expected.

(4) The promotion of (re)development, based on spontaneous growth, increases the number of potential developers and respectively the possibilities for urban revitalisation.

An essential part of spontaneous growth concept is the fact that it considers all of the actors within the urban environment, either professionals or not as potential developers. By giving an active role in the (re)development process to any kind of actors such as residents, associations, private entrepreneurs the chances for undertaking urban renewal initiatives progressively increase. On the other hand, this brings the complexity of negotiating among all involved interests but also it brings additional responsibility. The produced designs should be much more custom-made and tailored to various users. In any case, the
empowerment of as many potential developers as possible, even those with limited resources, can be expected to result in increased number of implemented spatial interventions.

(5) Permanent spatial elements, developed by design professionals, can efficiently work as a backbone that frames spontaneous, interim activities.

The promotion of spontaneous generation of urban form does not mean that design professionals are not engaged with providing spatial solutions. On the contrary, they have to thoughtfully re-evaluate the proposed functions and the sizes as well as the potentials of the vacant lots. Urbanists are responsible for recognising the spatial qualities and translate them as a part of the spontaneous growth. This can result in (re)development plans where permanent spatial elements in relation with the urban strategies are created in order to frame the zones for temporary activities where the urban tissues can spontaneously evolve.

(6) When intervening in the urban fabric to catalyse the existing potential, it is important to retain these characteristics.

The encouragement of temporal activities and functions is proven to bring a positive impact on the catalyst of the urban fabric it is important to explore further possibilities to retain at least partly the established characteristics within the area. This can be achieved either by preserving the spatial form for permanent period, retain the functions or the users of the area. Anyhow, a translation of the interim environment into the formal structures can preserve the local identity and value of the place.

(7) Through a spontaneous urban growth concept can lead to a new balance between the stakeholders ensuring more resiliency.

By its nature the spontaneous urban growth does not priorities any particular explicit line of development. This can lead to the formation of design approaches which promote the shifting powers in the different stages of the (re)development process. This excludes the possibility of having an over-dominant actor within the stakeholder model. Thus, the power mechanism behind a certain regeneration framework through spontaneous growth is more flexible and resilient to change in respect to actual conditions.

(8) When improving deprived areas and the situation of the urban population, it is more effective to focus on the empowerment of the internal (local) than external stakeholders.

Short-term revitalisation approaches should be used as a boost to demonstrate what is possible and empowerment local stakeholders, either residents or private entrepreneurs. In a positive scenario this can lead towards the establishment of strong local entities which will be vocal enough in potential large scale redevelopments. The role of the urbanist in this empowerment is limited, but not insignificant. This is because urban designers can only facilitate spaces where this empowerment will happen or shape the urban fabric in such a way so that it will stimulate the empowerment and not affect this empowerment directly. Therefore, the collaboration with other disciplines is important to ensure that the interventions done by the urbanist have the aimed effect.
Limitations & Further directions

This thesis proposes an alternative urban regeneration approach based on spontaneous urban growth and temporary urbanism. In principle, the proposed method aims to combine urban strategy and local site designs into a development plan with functional and spatial flexibility. However, looking back to the interventions that this thesis proposes for Turin, there are a few limitations that have to be mentioned. First of all, the nature of the proposed approach limits to certain extends the demonstration of its full capabilities. Based on the design concept every stage in the (re)development process strongly depends on the outcomes from the previous one. Thus, the probability of projecting precise spatial results couple of stages in advance is fairly hard.

Other limitation related to the abstract character of the graduation project as such is the extent to which the stakeholder and business models can be tested in the form of assumptions. The elaboration of these two models together with generating further considerations regarding the detailing design (e.g. materials palettes and architectural guidelines for the proposed interventions) all urge for the execution of research in these directions. In respect to the stakeholder and business models observations and experiments with actual participants are recommended.

In addition, the dichotomy between individual development freedom and structural common values is an intriguing one in respect to the developed approach and further investigation on this issue seems to be necessary. A better understanding and identification of practical instruments to control the balance of this relationship it is essential if one aims to apply the method in real situation. The elaborated method itself reveals some potential but it is too ambitious to state that

Role of the planning Professionals

To conclude, a lost word can be said about the role of the planning professionals in respect to the presented graduation work. Along the main line of discourse during this study the topic is incorporated as a vital subject of interest. The presented notions question to certain degree the urbanists’ efficiency in the process of urban (re)development. However, this refers to their actual contribution to the enhancement of urban life rather than the potential impact that they can deliver. In fact, today, when the problems of social segregation, financial insecurity and spatial inequality seems to endanger the prosperity of urban areas all around the world planning professionals are needed more than ever.

Nevertheless, the research and design outcomes support the belief that their role and relation with the process of the urban environment (re)production needs to be reinvented. It is our responsibility as designers to adapt to the conditions of “liquid modernity”, defined by Bauman (2000 & 2007), and establish new approaches to the deal with urban transformations. Accepting the role of “heroic form giver” seems to pre-determine to deliver design results which are not appropriate in 21st century. Urbanists have to accept the additional roles of negotiator, manager, initiator and draughtsman next to their traditional responsibilities. Thus, it can be stated that within the modern context the major object of interest for the planning professionals is shifting from spatial forms to the design processes of (re)producing them. This challenges the urbanists to deal with the uncomfortable position of delivering “lasting” solutions and “sustainable” regeneration in a century when “uncertainty” is a “permanent” state.