



Vacant Property and The City
Triggering Urban Potentials

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Abstract

Urban commons represent a unique opportunity for public authorities to proactively tackle the dismantling, abandonment and obsolescence of the built heritage generated in cities by social and economic transition processes (affecting both private and public heritage). In a moment when resources and opportunities are lacking, and deep changes are taking place in the real estate market dynamics, strengthening a UC-oriented perspective could help public authorities blend their direction, coordination, intervention and direct territorial investment action as they strive to gain more accountability. As a start, such an approach could focus on publicly owned properties, calling for a change in their valorisation and mobilization strategies: the attention no longer turns to (often failing) economic tools, but mostly to define new local development pathways where social, generative and usage values come into play. It is hence necessary to establish new definitions, categories and descriptions for public property, focusing on its potential as a trigger for new urban regeneration processes and urban commons generation. Based on an exercise of mapping the city of Turin's public properties, this contribution discusses how information on these assets is currently collected and systematized, exploring the limits and opportunities of assessing vacant properties at city scale through data analysis and mapping.

Résumé

Les communs urbains constituent une occasion unique pour les autorités publiques de s'attaquer d'une manière proactive au démantèlement, à l'abandon et à l'obsolescence du patrimoine bâti générés dans les villes grâce à des processus de transition sociaux et économiques (qui exercent une influence à la fois sur le patrimoine public et sur le privé). Avec le manque de ressources et de possibilités de cette époque, le renforcement d'une perspective orientée vers les communs urbains pourrait contribuer à faire changer la direction, la coordination, l'intervention et l'investissement territorial directs des autorités publiques et les forcer à prendre plus de responsabilités. Au début, une telle approche pourrait se concentrer sur les propriétés publiques et demander un changement de la stratégie de valorisation et de mobilisation : on accorde plus d'importance (parfois en se trompant) aux outils économiques, plutôt que de définir des nouveaux moyens de développement où les valeurs sociales, génératives et d'usage entrent en

jeu. De là, il est nécessaire d'établir des nouvelles définitions, catégories et descriptions pour la propriété publique, en se concentrant sur son potentiel en tant que déclencheur de nouveaux processus de régénération urbaine et de génération de communs urbains. En se basant sur un exercice de cartographie des propriétés publiques de la ville de Turin, cet article explique comment l'information de ces biens est recueillie et systématisée, en explorant les limites et les opportunités d'évaluer des propriétés inoccupées à l'échelle de la ville, à travers des analyses de données et de la modélisation.

Keywords: Cultural history, Vacancy, Data, Italy, Dwelling, Public space, Commons, Urban space, Community, Private/public, Citizenship

Mot-clés : Biens communs, Espace public, Espace urbain, Communauté, Italie, Histoire culturelle, Inoccupation, Habiter, Privé/public, Citoyenneté, Données

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Managing City Assets: The Need for New Mechanisms

Urban policies are largely understood as tools to enhance a more direct involvement of communities in the political process. Assuming that the public discourse on space (i.e., the use, government, transformation, and management of lands and buildings in the city) can work in the crossfield between different instances, issues, interests, languages, concepts and concerns, participatory tools in urban planning could be reframed and interpreted as key elements to outline more robust, valuable, proactive, integrated urban regeneration processes, that build on inclusion, empowerment, and involvement of communities. The emerging trends in EU urban contexts show that the public discourse on the city and its artifacts (buildings, infrastructures, public realm, cultural heritage) has a strong impact at local level, with rather conflictual relationships with growing space-related mobilization of local actors (i.e., *right to the city*, right to affordable housing, reaction against unwanted infrastructures, etc.). The call for new mechanisms for space production in cities, new cooperative development models, new rules, and new ways to manage city assets is often put in relationship with the visible implications of the processes of economic and financial crisis, the consequences of globalization, the spending reviews for public authorities, the weakening of the welfare state, the privatization of public services or the growing imbalances and inequalities emerging in our cities.

Despite the efforts delivered over the last decades, the post-industrial transition and the process of outlining new local economies for urban systems are still affecting many EU cities—that keep on suffering from the socioeconomic consequences of urban restructuring dynamics. Old and new problems intertwine (unemployment, job insecurity, social inequalities, etc.), while many

effects of the economic transition become visible in the physical dimension of cities (i.e., gentrification and vacancy cycles, obsolescence of buildings and new uses, market imbalances, etc.), producing high social costs. The current debate, as much as some emerging forefront practices, calls for new ways to design, manage and govern urban production processes. These new mechanisms will necessarily imply a radical rethinking of participatory issues (tools, models, aims), looking for new actors and resources to mobilize, and developing new competences to effectively challenge urban issues.

When it comes to innovative practices in EU cities, the record on the manifold ongoing experiences shows us that integrated urban regeneration initiatives have not only focused on citizens' capacity to take positions, articulate opinions, and to influence, shape and participate in the urban political process (i.e., SDGs/2030 Agenda and Pact of Amsterdam cross-cutting issues). Besides trying to deal with the "state of health" of our democracies, bringing about better and more effective inclusive urban regeneration initiatives has been a concrete opportunity to operationally work on integration, equality, civility, sense of belonging, generation of new resources, or social capital (see in this sense the efforts required of cities by the UIA-Urban Innovative Actions and URBACT programs). These practices have tried to establish a relationship between spatial issues (i.e., vacancy, spatial inequalities, urban commons, role of cultural heritage and urban culture, etc.), and new economic and development models, exploring solutions to reframe them.

As they test new balances and relationships between the local stakeholders' systems, question more usual development paradigms, or invent new forms of local governance, these experiments show that alternatives to the regular dynamism of urban processes are already ongoing. Introducing new provocative assumptions and concerns, they push on the debate about the reframing of the public sphere, the redefinition of the role of the public authorities in the provision of services and facilities, the role of citizens, communities and organizations in the local development process, the new assets that local systems can count on for their future development, and new organizational models¹ (Patti and Polyak, Levente 2017; D'Alena 2021).

To do so, a full set of new skills and competences has been gathered, reorganized, if not completely "created from scratch". It is not only a matter

¹See the experience of URBACT funded projects Boostinno, Refill, Second Chance, Tuttur, Co-City.

of “expert knowledge” (technical, relational, political, etc.) that is activated in order to make these initiatives possible, but also—and more consistently—a variety of new locally rooted skills and expertises, the generation of new knowledge resources (namely operational knowledge generated in “learning by doing” processes), the establishment of new formal and informal contexts for common action, the rise of new communities of practice, the enhancement of local human capitals, and the outlining of new typologies of job, that emerge as specific target groups and learn how to “take action” in the city. As we look at these experiences, though, a number of critical dimensions are to be highlighted. It is widely recognized that the redevelopment of the city should not be an “exclusive” core competence for the “super-skilled” practitioners (i.e., urban planners, city officers, city-makers, etc.), but that we should let different models and different actors emerge, bringing them to effectively contribute by delivering new ideas, visions, vocations, and outlining new business, management, and development models. Despite being a shared view, in the majority of cases, our current urban policy and decision-making frameworks (procedures, regulations, entitlements, etc.) seem to be rather unprepared to take on this perspective as the new mainstream paradigm, tracing back all strategies for sustainable development at local level.

Urban Commons and New Frameworks for Action

A critical and rather fruitful perspective in this framework is the debate on commoning and urban commons, that in its Italian application has led to the delivery and the spreading of the Urban Commons Regulations in a growing number of cities. Although nowadays the issue is occupying an important space in the debate on the future of cities, being framed (also) as an urban planning matter, the original debate on “urban commons” appears as detached from the most traditional approaches to participatory planning emerging in Italy since the early 1990s. The reflection upon urban commons lies in fact in a strong law and economics-oriented perspective, related to the very origin of the term “commons” and concerning significant chapters of the debate on resource management, the government/governance, public/private relationship, institutional action, common pool generation and public functions, and the regulatory role of the market and the state in managing goods and resources, just to name a few. Rooting back to the 1960s, the discussion on commons has involved prominent scholars (Hardin 1968; Ostrom 1990), calling into question the very basis of our socio-economic systems as much

as the paradigms of our development models, the way we design our institutions and the way we frame and structure our communities by dealing with our global resources. Generally speaking, the debate on commons could be attributed to two main fields of reflection, both coming from legal and economical fields. A first line of reasoning is more closely bound to the theory of property, exploring the issue of accessibility to goods and resources—may they be limited or unlimited, natural or artificially produced—in relationship with their availability and with rivalry in their use (Hardin 1968), outlining the concepts of overexploitation and degradation. A second one is centered on the environmental laws issue and, by exploring the way common pool resources can be managed (though not directly owned) by communities, local groups, or informal organizations, it suggests an enlargement of the public/private property dichotomy, introducing governance and collaborative management of resources (Ostrom 1990).

Over time, a growing debate on the urban dimension of commons has stabilized, underlining the importance of the city/urban system as a key factor for the production of commons (Hardt and Negri 2011) and innovation (Glaeser 2012), as much as for (and in potential conflict with) economic growth (Savitch and Kantor 2004). This multifaceted condition, and the critical relationship between its different dimensions, stands at the basis of the discussion on the accessibility of urban spaces and resources for all urban inhabitants: the reflection on urban commons crosses the fields of policy-making, planning, development and growth strategies, urban restructuring, regenerating, and revitalizing rules, questioning their capability to foster inclusive and equitable cities by transforming them (Harvey 2013). The issue presents different declensions, with a part of the debate developing a peculiar perspective on physical assets—identifying vacant urban lands, open spaces and infrastructures, abandoned or underutilized public and private structures, and buildings as commons (Foster and Iaione 2016).

Scholars from different traditions underline how interaction/conflict among stakeholders through using and transforming urban lands can generate rivalry, as much as it can offer opportunities to enhance the urban land's value to the community itself, fostering positive social outcomes (Form and Crosta 1990; Ferraro 1990; Foster and Iaione 2016). Openness, a great concentration of resources, and a redundancy of social, economical, physical, relational, and cognitive factors capable of generating new common (Donolo 1997) make the way for cities to become vulnerable to conflict and rivalry in the use of assets.

This is a crucial matter, especially as far as it calls into question the role of the public actor as a regulator of such processes, and the very nature of the urban planning tools as a means to mediate, manage and govern the access to city/urban commons. On the other hand, this opens up a further reflection on the role of space as a means to foster a better involvement of local actors through governance-oriented policies.

Regulating Urban Commons

As abovementioned, the Italian experience of the “Urban Commons Regulations” lies over this background: often presented as a set of rules addressed to recognize (and somewhat institutionalize) the role active citizenship could play in terms of maintenance and care of city spaces and services, the regulations represent a powerful—and rather unprecedented—tool to make space for a more active (and proactive) action of individuals, associations and non-profit entities in urban processes. Counting on a strong, enlarged, and well-structured reflection developed over time around the more general issue of commons at national level (i.e., the issue of public water), the debate underlines a strong democratic, participatory, relational, and interactive dimension, as it concerns all involved parties in the direct performance of their citizenship rights.

Nowadays, with more than 250 local applications in the whole country², these regulations represent an opportunity to practice a concrete shift from “property management” to “goods management” at city scale. On the one hand, this debate and the tangible outcomes of commoning have contributed to a more general acceptance and a better understanding of a growing number of bottom-up, informal, non-institutionalized actions over the city. On the other hand, though, probably apart from the Bologna case (D’Alena 2021) and a few others, the value of the ongoing experiments in Italy seems to go more in the direction of “suggesting” a change in the institutional action rather than in influencing its direct operational outcomes. In other words, in major planning and development activities, urban commons and/or com-

²Bologna was the first Italian city to adopt it in 2014, Turin had its regulation approved in 2019 (entered in official use in January 2020). For an updated list of municipalities and/or urban authorities adopting local Urban Commons Regulations, see <https://www.labsus.org/i-regolamenti-per-lamministrazione-condivisa-dei-beni-comuni/> (last visited July 2021).

moning the city are still far from being mainstream, with pilot interventions limited or bound to site-specific pilot actions, framed separately from the main long-term strategies.

Turin, A Study Case

During the last three decades, Turin has been undergoing a broad and massive reorganization process. This process of change was entrenched in the early 1980s when the “company town model” started to collapse and was first called into question. Accompanied by a long-term—a bit controversial—debate on the city’s development trajectories, this process involved local society on many different levels, implicating a variety of policy areas (urban, cultural, economical, financial, etc.) in the strive for the definition of new shared metaphors and ideas for the future Turin. It was a fortunate season (Belligni 2008; Belligni and Ravazzi 2012), in which the public sector played an important role in promoting the policy-making process, expressing its capability to generate urban innovation (Dente, Bobbio, and Spada 2005), acting as a financial promoter and as a coordinator of programs and projects, fostering new tools (i.e., The Strategic Plan) and new planning practices (*Progetti Speciali*), aggregating social, relational and cultural resources.

The work on the built environment and the physical renovation of the urban system played a key and multifaceted role (Lucchini 2014), affecting the big deindustrialized urban plots as much as the central districts, and giving birth to almost 10 million square meters of new gross floor area. Though raising many questions from architectural and urban design perspectives (Bianchetti 2008), the strategy of “urbanizing the urban” helped the city economically in a moment of uncertainty and need for growth. In some cases, it offered a stage for the development of integrated policies: urban changeover strategies, in particular during the first phases, represented a complex set of actions over the city, where big market-oriented programs were accompanied by urban regeneration programs. An important point to be stressed is the critical relationship between these two different approaches to the built environment, in which big urban restructuring strategies moved on separate tracks rather than integrated projects and interventions in the most disadvantaged areas of the city, showing a complex (and somewhat contradictory) concern for the discourse on the built environment (and rather squint-eyed, even conflictual, political perspectives).

Big formerly industrial areas counterpoise in this case site-specific interventions in the very fabric of the neighborhoods. It is just by talking about the latter that we can reasonably recognize an attitude towards subsidiarity and an interest in actively involving local actors in making sense of the changing urban conditions. Here, space and its transformation were instrumentally used as a means to generate new sociability and empowerment occasions, to connect with local society, to attract financial, relational and social resources, and finally to perform new ways of framing collective issues. Talking about urban change became in some cases a multilayered way to foster a dialogue between the local authority and the citizens, offering a new possible governance arena for the urban political process, and proving to be a field for common goods production (i.e., the experience of the *Case del Quartiere*). When it came to the big urban strategies and redevelopment plans (i.e., the strategic planning process), the inclusion issue shifted more towards communicative and informational actions devoted to explaining to the citizens what was happening in terms of urban change, providing interpretations and keywords by “storytelling city change”. Space and its transformation kept on being on focus, but the issue in this sense was much more bound to the enlargement and deepening of the public debate, showing all the positions in the arena and trying to give the citizens the tools to understand what was going on in the city. Though participatory initiatives in this sense were lacking, scholars tend to underline how soothed the expression of conflict and reaction towards this massive process of change were (Belligni and Ravazzi 2012), with a general acceptance of its outcomes by local stakeholders and citizens in general.

The critical turning point represented by the global financial crisis contributed to making the exhaustion of this season clearer: scarcity of resources and opportunities, weakness of the public authority losing its prominent innovative role, lacking its leadership, inclusion, and cooperation capability both on urban and metropolitan levels (Bagnasco, Berta, and Pichierri 2020; Barbera 2021). In the bargain, a critical legacy of this recent urban and political cycle is represented by the weakening of that actors-network that contributed to making the change possible. Once “accompanied”, involved and coordinated by the local authority, these actors are now suffering from weakness, proving incapable to take advantage of the social and relational capital assembled over the last 25 years, to foster innovation and to work cohesively in partnership “besides” (or “relating to”) the public sector.

Though they tend to ascribe the responsibility of unsuccessful policies and programs to the public authority, they keep on considering it the main political and economical interlocutor, the one player in the field capable of collecting shared interests, resources, values, visions, and metaphors.

In this sense, the discourse on space itself has been shrinking its previous range, shifting towards economic matters and increasing the competition between municipalities. These difficulties get more persuasive given the necessity for local authorities to cope with pressing “spending reviews”, diminishing financial resources at national level, and the critical condition of local welfare systems. On this perspective, the work on cityscape seems to be losing the capacity it used to have—almost for a period in some portions of the city—to connect different issues and policy areas, to act as some sort of “translating device” between public and private instances, and it seems to be reduced to a mere, opaque, business transaction. Turin’s more recent vicissitudes tell us about a local institutional system that tries to maintain its accountability and still attempts to actively fuel the political process and the urban economic system. Lacking every day more of an integrated perspective over emerging and unknown issues, the local authority appears more than ever overwhelmed by the necessity of making choices, building and prioritizing problems, and fostering a wide and open decision-making process. What also emerges is the need to assess the consequences and results of the big effort performed to carry on such a demanding urban restructuring process. Its price is still being paid nowadays (economically, politically, socially) and represents a key issue besides the need for a shift towards new paradigms, models, and strategies.

As this evaluation is being framed and developed, and the legacy of the past season questioned and investigated (Bagnasco, Berta, and Pichierri 2020; Barbera 2021), herein the attention is on the role the public actor(s) played and could be able to play in the next decades, and on the kind of framing it (they) would be conveying to urban policies and “physical matters” from a local and metropolitan perspective. At the moment, the outlined tactic highlights some key interventions in the city, but what seems to be missing is a clear strategic spatial frame, capable of organizing a new hierarchy and a new long-term vision. Big urban strategies (or what remains of them) struggle in including in their framework the dimension of social capital and local development, having great difficulties in changing the very scale of the discourse on space (which should be both metropolitan and local). While

old strategies are applied, new issues are rising, big complex changeovers are constrained by economic and financial difficulties, while the city's socioeconomic balances stagger. Besides the few abandoned industrial sites still to be recovered, there is a growing number of abandoned, underutilized spaces and buildings that are slowly getting out of the market (including a part of the housing assets, old and newly built). The general worsening of the financial availability of the city in the last decade has shown its evident consequences in spatial terms, with a general (and somewhat unprecedented) decrease in the capability to maintain, care for and manage the collective spaces (may they be cleaning problems in parks and squares, or maintenance issues in streets... especially when it comes to less central areas).

The transformed field of action, and the impossibility of playing a prominent role also from the economic point of view, could be favorable to a shift in the public's attitude. While maintaining Turin's leadership, and in order to reinforce it, the adoption of an "enabling" perspective and a growing interest in strengthening the local actors-network could foster a renovated form of the public-public and public-private relationship (partnership-oriented, but also interested in transferring the "public function" to a wider set of actors). In order to focus on intercepting the sphere of these actors, the development of programs and strategies focused on social and relational capital growth should be considered. The call for new "operational" planning practices should coincide with the pursuit of a higher, more distributed and equal capability of innovation. In this sense, the necessity to rethink tools and instruments of planning gets crucial, as much as an enlargement of the scope of spatial policies (Cottino and Zeppetella 2009), intended as an occasion to merge the physical dimension with local actors' mobilization.

Converging Perspectives: Cultural Heritage and Urban Commons

As framed in the previous chapters, outlining a thicker and more complex idea of what space as commons is, exploring it as a translational device and as a generative fact, putting it in relation to urban processes and local development strategies, can be a way to shape our cities on a more open, inclusive and democratic basis. Instead of simply stating the rules to transfer some public functions from one actor to another, the focus of the argument would become their capability to strengthen local governance systems, intervening

on the urban transformation process reforming/modifying/interacting with the existing planning tools. Besides the theoretical perspective and the criticism towards how the issue has been treated until now in Turin, this paper also intends to report some of the attempts to introduce this perspective in specific planning tools. Their objective is to test the preparedness of our system to mainstream urban-commons-related practices, understanding the opportunities, the gaps, and the possible trajectories in order to fully incorporate an urban commoning perspective in long-term strategies.

In the previous chapter of this paper, the reflection focused on space (its availability, use and transformation, its management), planning tools and urban policies. There is currently one more element to be added to the discussion about how Turin is coping with these issues. In recent times, the opportunity for Turin to concretely investigate these overlapping domains came from the field of Culture and Cultural Heritage protection, activation and valorization³. Much closer to the concept of urban commons than it would seem at a first glance, at EU level (more in general) and in Turin's perspective more in particular, Cultural Heritage (CH) has been described as a tool to activate urban regeneration policies, working as a key element of sustainable economic development, as a field for the interconnection of actors, skills, knowledge, and values, and as a way to define international competitiveness strategies for urban systems. Entrenched in the wider EU-scale debate on how to build better cities and territories, CH incorporates a set of common and identity elements that include tangible heritage⁴, intangi-

³The research herein reported frames into ROCK—"Regeneration and Optimization of Cultural Heritage in Creative and Knowledge cities" project. It is a European project led by the City of Bologna together with 31 international partners, supported by the Horizon 2020 research and innovation program of the European Union. ROCK involves ten European cities which have been activating or are interested in triggering urban policies aimed at urban regeneration through the promotion of cultural heritage (Athens, Bologna, Cluj-Napoca, Eindhoven, Lisbon, Liverpool, Lyon, Skopje, Turin, Vilnius). The ROCK partnership, including the City of Turin and Urban Lab as its linked third party, gathers different organizations (municipalities, universities, technology companies, international networks, etc.) and involves them in a number of activities such as workshops, mentoring, cooperation and discussion on policies, processes, actions and tools which have been favoring the regeneration of historic city centers along time, through the coexistence of different aspects, such as the preservation and regeneration of the built heritage, environmental policies, local economic development, social cohesion or innovation.

⁴Historic buildings, monuments, artifacts, works of art, clothing, books, cars, historic cities, archaeological sites, etc.

ble heritage⁵, natural resources⁶ and digital heritage⁷. Many voices support the generative power of CH as an engine for urban innovation, stressing the idea that it is not a static matter, but rather something evolving and capable of incorporating new ideas and values in time. These ongoing conversations are contributing to mainstream CH as a driving force for the regeneration of territories and communities, favoring (among others) the strengthening of a sense of place, supporting the empowerment of people, local development processes and more sustainable management of resources, often by renewing and redefining the very mechanisms that govern urban regeneration processes⁸. Cultural and natural significance are then seen under a completely new perspective, going beyond the mere act of preserving, maintaining, or protecting the physical heritage to embrace a more complex (potentially conflictual) relationship between tangible and intangible dimensions, value and revenue, power, government, and governance. Implications on how we frame time, history and contemporaneity are bold and wide, as much as the consequences of applying mindsets in which collectively built and shared values, culture, sense of ownership and belonging, horizontal governance and management models acquire a growing centrality in the urban arenas (and in the action on territories).

Within this framework, Turin has developed several activities trying to expand the reflection—enlarging the meaning of “tangible cultural heritage” to the entire urban built heritage, not only or not necessarily located in the city center, not only or not necessarily listed or monumental buildings, etc. The proposed angle also sees the built heritage in relation to the dismantling, abandonment and obsolescence generated on the urban fabric by social and economic transition processes. More generally, this interferes with the global economic framework, which has contributed to sharply marking (not only for Turin) the end of a period characterized by a large availability of resources and opportunities, the reduction in the ability of public authorities and “traditional” stakeholders to combine the roles of direction, coordina-

⁵Practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, competence and the related tools, objects and cultural spaces, to which people attribute value.

⁶Landscape, flora and fauna.

⁷Resources created in digital form (digital works of art, animation, etc.) or which have been digitized to ensure their preservation (texts, images, videos, recordings).

⁸See the theoretical and practical perspectives outlined in the last years by H2020-funded projects like ROCK and OPEN HERITAGE with a comprehensive production of documents, papers and policy briefs on the matter. (last visited July 2021)

tion, intervention and direct territorial investment, the change in the market dynamics, the emergence of new actors and schemes in the urban political process. This condition can be observed with different intensity and characteristics in several European and non-European urban contexts where, in the light of the weakness of the traditional development paradigms, it contributed to favor the creation of different interpretations of the functional transition processes, adaptive reuse (temporary or permanent) of large and small built heritage.

Whether it concerns entire urban areas (as in the case of large industrial sites in the transition phase), buildings or blocks (residential, commercial, offices), single vacant units (being the sign of demographic turnover processes, exit from the real estate market, or change in the housing needs of individuals and families), portions of open spaces and urban voids, it emerges, often earlier in the practices than in the planning process, that public and private actors, profit and non-profit, are able to consider the vacant urban heritage as an asset for the definition (and re-definition) of the strategic and development horizons of urban systems.

The possible implications of this change of perspective are manifold and relevant. From the redefinition of the role of the public authority to the mobilization of new actors in the (temporary and permanent) transformation processes of soil and buildings; from the creation of broader and more specific development strategies, able to embrace the topic of urban commons, to the reconsideration of the planning tools; from the development of initiatives aimed at increasing the relational and social capital, to the generation of new territorial skills and competences; from the co-design of shared goods and services to their co-management.

In order to favor the rise and strengthening of such practices, thus re-orienting urban policies, it is necessary to define frameworks of meaning and new operational approaches, analytical and knowledge tools able to effectively unlock the potential that vacant built heritage can represent.

Triggering Urban Potential: A Survey on Public Heritage

In Turin, as in other European places, the issue of vacant built heritage is at the same time an old and a new problem. The post-Fordist transition process

faced by the city in the last three decades was actually based on the huge heritage of dismissed industrial areas that emerged after the 1980s industrial crisis. With a part of the former industrial heritage still to be transformed, the issue of availability of space in the city is becoming more blurred, with a larger variety of areas in terms of size and shape, building types and uses, type of abandonment/emptying processes, building dates and duration of the dismissal (including, for example, a growing share of “new unsold”), or territorial distribution of the phenomenon. The topic of vacant heritage is debated at local level and different actors are currently dealing with it, facing it from different angles and scales. The public authority is primarily involved, nevertheless, many experimentations have called into action the private, non-profit, research, and third sectors.

The record of the initiatives that, for any reason, can be attributed to the chapter “property assessment, vacancy assessment, adaptive and temporary reuse of vacant assets” is wide and diverse, implicating a variety of different practices (mapping and data gathering, management tools, pilots and testing grounds, etc.), and focusing both on publicly and on privately-owned properties. The issue has been approached from different domains (urban restructuring, asset management, facility management, urban regeneration), providing different descriptions/interpretations, generating dedicated sets of rules, gathering dedicated data, mapping specific kinds of objects in space, investigating a specific kind of property, involving different promoters (public sector, private investors, associations and NGOs, etc.), imagining and/or putting in place different solutions and tools:

1. The urban restructuring approach: the assessment of vacant plots and buildings is mainly related to the promotion of urban restructuring and changeover processes. Methodologically rooted in the recent redevelopment process that accompanied the post-Fordist transition of the city (Lucchini 2014), this perspective mainly looks at big plots (i.e., brownfields, former industrial buildings, etc.), building knowledge and gathering information to be put in relation to real estate market, land management, government of the urban transformation. Data collection and ad hoc on the field mapping activities have been performed over

the years, with a body of documents more often offering a description of private underused/abandoned property in the city⁹.

2. The facility management approach: the management of publicly-owned properties has been outlined by the Municipality also from the perspective of facility management, with the activation of the Factotum Platform. This tool allows the management of movable assets and buildings, the management of spaces, the description of the plants, the maintenance interventions on request and the management of the documentation associated with the real estate. Launched in 2015, the project provides for the adoption of a single computerized platform, which after the registration of data concerning every single property, facilitates optimal management of the municipal real estate assets (approximately 23,000 assets, including buildings, and land) and a reduction in energy costs (electricity, gas, and district heating) and water through constant and accurate monitoring of consumption. The project also makes it possible to archive the data of buildings and land, and therefore to build the inventory of all Municipality's assets with the relative information and with the documents necessary to know the property situation of the institution, in addition to the real state of the properties. Among its numerous information services (single registry of assets, patrimonial aspects, operational governance and maintenance management, space management, or cataloging and assignment), Factotum offers support for the management of ordinary and extraordinary interventions of municipal buildings and, in particular, maintenance activities for 320 city schools.
3. The asset management approach: following the experience launched with Factotum, on February 2016, the City Council approved a document aimed at promoting and changing the way publicly-owned property is categorized and managed at city level. By mentioning the emerging issue of commons and urban commons, the document proposes to introduce greater flexibility and effectiveness in the management of city-

⁹See the comprehensive analytical work done by the Urban Planning Department of the City on the occasion of the updating of the City Masterplan. In this framework, a general assessment of the transformed and available surface in the whole municipality was brought about. The Agency for Investment, Export and Tourism of the Piedmont Region releases and constantly updates a database of location opportunities for companies and economic players interested in setting up their business in the Turin and Piedmontese area.

owned properties. Promoting a higher capacity of the public authority to relate needs and responses, the document proposes to expand and update the mechanisms governing how publicly-owned properties are given in use. Introducing a possible expansion of the traditional model of lease and/or concession agreement to favor a faster and more effective return in the use of empty buildings owned by the Municipality, the initiative outlines a new classification of properties and the commitment for the involved city departments to a biannual update of the information concerning the use and the users of each unit/building. Finally a “management code” is associated with every single property, to identify the kind of procedures to be undertaken in each case: for the first time the City officially recognizes the possibility of collaborative reuse for a specific category of property¹⁰. The property recording activity, based on the Factotum database is still currently ongoing: based on the hardcopy archive of the City, in which documents and files are managed following a chronological order, it requires the complete revision of files and the manual input of information into the digital application.

4. The urban regeneration approach: taking advantage of a robust experience in urban regeneration processes and participatory planning, the City’s Departments have been reflecting and experimenting a lot on these issues, introducing the topic of urban commons in the public discourse, and working for the delivery and application of the local “Urban Commons Regulation” (2019/2020). The perspective here is integrated, blending socioeconomic and cultural aspects with the adaptive reuse of specific plots, buildings, and spaces with the task of introducing new public services, protection, use management, and maintenance activities. This approach is the one that has worked the best at the crossroads between different kinds of actors. In the early stages of the commoning phenomena, it supported forefront pilot projects directly promoted by private actors and contributed to introducing some of the main ingredients of the current debate about urban vacancies, tempo-

¹⁰See in the document the category marked with letter E “*immobili assegnabili mediante procedure di informazione pubbliche ispirate a particolare celerità e attraverso regolamentazioni pattizie a carattere collaborativo, ispirate a principi di impiego condiviso dei beni*”.

rary uses, urban commons, and cultural heritage¹¹. The public actor, though, herein also designed and delivered its own pilots, promoting publicly-led experimentations involving specific buildings/spaces¹². In this case, involved properties have been directly spotted by the city's department.

These main trends and approaches (which represent here a first general scheme, with a larger number of initiatives in the making and many exchanges and cross-fertilizations between the different domains) show a peculiar and rich background of projects and initiatives (public, private and, non-profit) where territorial socio-economic vulnerabilities are addressed (also) through the use of the vacant built heritage¹³; new rules and administrative practices are being imagined to simplify the procedures and enable new sorts of processes, often based on specific tests sites and pilots; a fairly good level of knowledge on the municipal heritage appears to be on the way, while achieving the same availability of information on the privately-owned heritage is far more difficult—especially when it comes to medium and small sized properties, or when it comes to the single units. Besides this more operational practices explicitly focused on the issue, the presence of a number of local regulations (at municipal and district level) having an incidence on the way publicly-owned properties are managed is also to be underlined. Released both by the Municipal Authority and by the City Districts (*Circostrizioni*, a local administrative entity with an elected President and council), these are normally focused on specific functions (i.e., schools, sports facilities, etc.) or property assignment agreements (i.e., rental, public concession, etc.), disciplining the appropriate use and occupation of properties along time¹⁴. Besides repre-

¹¹I.e., the temporary reuse of the former Aspira Factory in via Foggia (last visited July 2021) and the Variante Bunker (last visited July 2021), were the early birds. More recent experiences are the “Bottom-up” initiative launched by Fondazione per l’Architettura (last visited July 2020), and the “Precollinear Park”.

¹²The UIA–Urban Innovative Actions–funded initiative promoted by the City of Turin (last visited July 2021) was the first concrete application of the Urban Commons Regulation of the city, with the subscription of more than 50 pacts of cooperation.

¹³See, for example, the Progetto Lo.Ca.Re., promoted by the City of Turin to address housing needs (last visited July 2021).

¹⁴Some of the main regulations (in chronological order) are: Regulation for municipal sports facilities (2005); Assignment of municipal property by City Districts (2007); Schoolyards (2012); Social management of sports facilities (2012); Urban Farms (2013); Use of dwelling and services in social housing complexes (2014); Gym and schools sports facilities (2016); Neglect counteraction and public-private partnership (2019); Public greenery

senting a criticality per se, the high level of separateness and autonomy of the above-described state of the art has a number of implications, gaps, and diseconomies that are worth being underlined as they were crucial to figuring out the boundary of the further reflection:

1. Fragmentation of the information, lack of synchronization and—at times—consistency in specific policies and initiatives (regulations might overlap, properties have a different treatment depending on how the process is set up, etc.).
2. Site specificity and development of circumscribed activity (i.e., the pilots) on “well-known” buildings or plots (difficulties in accessing a general overview of the physiognomy, distribution, and organization of property).
3. Scarce accessibility of the recorded information even for city officers.
4. Lack of an overall/strategic concern for public property use (every department pursues specific goals and objectives).
5. High level of bureaucratization and difficulties in mainstreaming a public property-related policy; lack of a “spatial” interpretation of the issue.

The work led by Torino Urban Lab in the framework of the ROCK project was based on this complex state-of-the-art. Following the reflection outlined in the previous chapters connecting vacancy and underoccupancy to cultural heritage, commons, and spatial development, the research on vacancy and underuse of publicly-owned properties in the city focused on a number of criteria and guiding principles. With the very objective in mind to unveil the hidden potential of vacant properties in local development (making liabilities opportunities), the research stated from the very beginning that Urban Lab’s perspective on the assessment of public properties/units was not intended as an economic one, but as the possibility of a tool to support the mobilization of new actors, to increase the relational and social capital, to foster the generation of new territorial skills and competences by means of spatial reactivation. A tender was launched¹⁵, with the intentional search

(2020) (last visit for all quoted sites July 2021). The list could be longer if City Districts specific regulations were included.

¹⁵“*Innescare potenziali. La valorizzazione del patrimonio culturale urbano come strategia per riattivare processi di rigenerazione della città*”. In June 2019, the FULL (Future Urban

for proposals concerning the systematization, expansion and, accessibility of the existing information concerning city-owned properties.

As a required outcome of the study, the gathered information had to be represented (also) on maps, providing multiple and in-depth descriptions of the physiognomy of the public heritage to assess and visualize in aggregate synthetic representations a number of characters (geographic distribution, functional typology, level of occupation/exploitation, vacancy, spatial characters, spatial correlation, etc.). This approach was guided by the need to generate new operational knowledge built upon data analysis and mapping (gathering existing data, generating new data, combining the two) to support future policies by describing property distribution in space, providing (multilayered) interpretations on our city's built heritage. The preliminary scoping activities brought about in cooperation with different City Departments showed that a satisfactory level of information could be achieved only by merging and relating to different data sources belonging to the City of Turin (cadastre, city plans, property management tools, etc.).

Along with the development of the research, a crisper focus on the kind of property to investigate emerged, with specific work done on ground floor units with former (or ongoing) commercial and institutional functions. The choice was guided by the importance of the ground floor as the transitional space connecting private and public life. This input brought the research group to opt for crossing the property analysis with external sources of information: in particular commercial activities registries were incorporated into the work, to provide more robust evidence about the state of use/occupation of the property and to provide measurement of vacancy duration in months. Last but not least, once the automatic analysis of data and associations of databases was perfected, the final phase of the research foresaw the on-site analysis in areas showing a significant presence of publicly-owned properties¹⁶.

Legacy Lab research center of Politecnico di Torino) was appointed as the winner of the tender.

¹⁶These were the Mirafiori Sud, the Aurora and the Barriera di Milano areas.

Evidence from The Survey

The mapping and analysis of the assets owned by the City of Turin, brought about by the FULL–Future Urban Legacy Lab–researchers¹⁷ was born with an ambitious and pragmatic goal. The work integrates the analysis of the processes of underuse and obsolescence of the built heritage, with the aim of reflecting on the intensity of use, the transformation dynamics and the transformation potential of public buildings. Many works have previously dealt with the topic in individual cases, with varying degrees of success. The innovative element of the proposed approach was to deal with the issue systematically, experimenting with the integrated query of currently existing databases and appropriately put into dialogue, instead of just collecting information through punctual inspections. The work highlighted operational opportunities and the potential, within the overall framework of the transformation of the existing city, to reconsider how information on the buildings owned by the city is acquired and established. For the City of Turin, a better understanding of how heritage is made in relation to today’s urban dynamics is instrumental in redefining the role of public buildings in the different parts of the city, even before a specific strategy of enhancement and regeneration.

Italian cities are familiar with this theme. Publicly-owned real estate is often intended as a vehicle for policies of general interest, from education to health, from the safety of citizens to the protection of culture and the environment. This huge and diversified patrimoine of objects is often managed by different decentralized administrative structures, which makes it very difficult to recognize specific types of objects with common characteristics. It is not just about functional diversities of the present time; the categorization of assets includes very heterogeneous situations, made up of histories, locations, and morphologies of the individual units which, when associated, define the “value” incorporated by the assets themselves. The criteria by which the same data relating to the city’s heritage are organized, however,

¹⁷“*Mappatura e analisi di proprietà e aree dismesse a Torino nell’ambito del progetto europeo ROCK–Regeneration and Optimization of Cultural Heritage in Creative and Knowledge cities–(GA 730280) finanziato dal programma Horizon 2020 – CIG: Z78280839F*”, delivered by FULL–The Future Urban Legacy Lab. Chairman: Matteo Robiglio; Scientific coordinators: Luigi Buzzacchi, Francesca Frassoldati, Antonia Spanò; Research team: Emilio Abbate, Lucia Baima, Caterina Barioglio, Daniele Campobenedetto, Elena Guidetti, Giulia Sammartano, Roberta Taramino, Giulio Zotteri.

are guided by the need to list each individual object rather than by the need to understand its role in the city.

According to the most complete data used in the elaboration of the report (the unified Facility Management system Factotum adopted by the City of Turin), the public authority owns 25,982 real estate units, distributed in 3,166 buildings and land, which identify 2,949 sites: as far as the units are concerned, the record confirms that 18,683 of them are located within the perimeter of the Municipality of Turin. The current cataloging of these units is not based on the purposes and conditions of access, nor on the state of maintenance or the conditions of the building and its surroundings. Some of this information can be obtained from the fields filled in for each item in the list, even if the data—and the fields themselves—are often the result of adaptations required by new emerging conditions rather than the result of a coherent design. The very fact that a management application is the most complete way of collecting information on assets, however, affects the possibilities of interpreting the data for purposes other than the economic management scheme. With fields filled in differently for quality and updating of data, the list incorporates: properties and land acquired from different legal systems; the land, equipped and not equipped, with state-owned and patrimonial nature; offices and technical rooms that allow the public administration to provide services to citizens; residential and commercial buildings whose public nature has, or has had, redistributive functions with respect to territorial and social imbalance; “exceptional” estates that would require tailored and site-specific reflection and much more. Each of these entities usually has multiple associations with distinct real estate units (even when not functionally separable). Conversely, the single building can also include very different uses, such as commercial premises, residences, and garages.

The working group systematized the data, editing the records and organizing their consultation about the individual unit according to ownership, hierarchy, floor, building, and site. This new organization of the database has the building as its bigger entity and, as a minimum entity, the real estate unit (defined by its position on the building floor). This approach builds a coherent picture of the urban dimension of the heritage, which can be further strengthened by the associations to the geometries of the properties (for now only partially automatic and to be supervised manually, but with possibilities for further implementation enhancing better interoperability with the land registry system), even before introducing a query on the current con-

ditions of use. In this way, it is possible both to process partial and total counts, according to multiple reading keys, and to link this information to the spatial database of the City of Turin. This organization of the disposable information about the municipal property provides enough spatialized knowledge to elaborate some important reasoning.

1. The absolute number of this heterogeneous set of units is not enough to describe this patrimoine in a satisfactory way: numbers are often offering redundant information, without sufficiently describing the variety and diversifications of conditions and relationships between individual real estate units, buildings, and sites. As an example, in the selected record (properties laying inside the city limits), 11% of the sites contain from 11 to 100 individual real estate units, but 36% of the real estate units are located in the sites; less than 2% of the sites contain more than 100 units, but this group contains 50% of the real estate units in the Municipality of Turin. Dwellings, largely managed by the social housing agency, and garages counted as individual units, motivate this distribution and limit the possibilities for action.
2. The spatial base allows for the construction of a framework in which units can be related to other sources of information in order to measure and explain latent phenomena. As ground floor units were selected as relevant (being these spaces the connective of commercial activities, services, and open spaces for public purposes), the ROCK database was associated with the RETAIL database, fed by data on certified economic activities. On the one hand, this association shows the potential to establish a direct dialogue between spatial information concerning individual units and information about current usage. The limit, on the other hand, is the only partial automatic association, given the inconsistencies in the compilation of the initial record. Even in this case, the partial reading is significant, as real estate units owned by the Municipality “match” the distribution of commercial activities only in the central areas of the city, confirming a long-term trend. On the whole city, instead, the real estate units of the Municipality are distributed throughout the territory as a result of heterogeneous policies and dynamics, in a substantially independent way from the commercial activities that are confronted with the distribution of consumer demand.

As we intend to assess the availability of transformable assets in the urban fabric, the research conducted on the Municipality-owned units explored the impasse distinguishing a number of urban sectors in the city, where properties remain vacant for a long time. The work on Aurora, Barriera di Milano, and Mirafiori Sud neighborhoods was a test for the previous cross-sectional readings on the entire municipal data set. With a limited number of 505 real estate units selected, it was in fact possible to verify the inconsistencies between the automatic associations with field checks. The summary views of the neighborhoods are an invitation not to consider the single real estate unit isolated from the urban context.

A general conclusion is that developing management procedures aimed at optimizing resources, such as those for the alienation and banning of assets, could benefit from a tool that helps to understand why some real estate offers are not meeting demand. Today, space availability is not a value in itself. For a long time, the public mechanisms of value enhancement assumed that working on supply (making the procedures more efficient so that the goods could respond to the expectations of private operators) was enough of a mechanism to stimulate the demand. Today, location, context, and specific characteristics of assets appear to be the minimum standard for intercepting a demand. The public character of the properties in question interrogates the role of municipal real estate presence in neighborhoods that have difficulty keeping up with the structural transformations of the city as a whole. The position and belonging to specific portions of the city, the relations with other public properties in the vicinity, both of the City and of other entities, can diversify the demand of users interested in using the asset itself, with the aim of making a value for the community and let social relations and use values prevail over income and equity values.

Future Conversations

One of the first comments on this effort in classifying and analyzing the public estates owned by the City of Turin, is that to do a good job we need to know more. The road to assessing the qualities and availability of public properties is long and complex and the current state of the art is partial, incomplete, and redundant at the same time. As an example, it doesn't allow today for a real and automatic appraisal of the actual state of occupation of spaces, nor does it incorporate reliable information on recovery conditions. In both

cases, the introduction of more databases (i.e., utility data) and a further population of the existing one with original sources of information (typologies, dimensions, layouts, etc.) seem to play a crucial role. Accessibility and usability of the existing database is another important chapter requiring further work, allowing different departments to access a wider spectrum of information concerning the structure/state of publicly-owned properties. In this sense, better understanding the gaps and discontinuities of the existing records represents that part of the story related to the rationalities that could govern such an archive and of the mechanisms for information collection and systematization. Finally, offering an accessible, usable, integrated, and updated tool for the City's political and technical bodies could be a way to make public property-based urban development process the "new normal", mainstreaming the ROCK Pilot.

As the research was structured and developed, a number of technical and non-technical conversations took place with different actors—internal and external to the public bodies. Reflecting on how to take advantage of publicly-owned property through maps and synthetic representation of phenomena can be a priceless opportunity to set up a local confrontation tool. If presented in an accessible way, information on space availability has proved to be of interest to a much wider variety of stakeholders: these could contribute to rethinking the relationship between public properties and the real estate market, expanding the system of values usually associated with publicly-owned property. To do so, a resolved change in mindsets is required, as well as acknowledging that (more and more often) the free market is not the "one fits all" solution but a political statement.

The reflection brought about during these last three years in the framework of the ROCK project can positively enrich the way the "Urban Commons Regulations" can be implemented in Turin. Far from being exclusively an administrative and legal tool, it could be used as part of a more general strategy to use the transformation of spaces (of underused, abandoned surplus areas and buildings in the city) as a generative common ground for integrated initiatives, capable of activating new governance networks involving public, private and non-profit sectors. The basic idea would be to imagine a strong relationship between material and immaterial actions, in order to use (re-use) the physical assets and give birth to new local services, new urban commons, or new development opportunities for the local system. Suggesting new possible forms of partnerships and paving the way for new governance networks,

this framework could convey urban and regional spatial policies a brand new perspective, offering the discourse on space to perform a more crucial role in framing the local debate, offering a possible “trading zone” (Balducci and Mäntysalo 2013) between different purposes and interests, between the physical and the social level, in order to get the urban political process going, and to foster a different relationship between spatial matters, social inclusion and local development strategies.

Though at its first stages, this analysis of the Turin experience and the encroachments made in the framework of the ROCK project help highlighting some key critical points in a spatial theory of urban commons: the first one is a reflection on the role of the public authority as an actor capable of building agreements and relating to the other parties in the city. This implies a strong orientation to coordination, cooperation, and partnership instead of outsourcing, delegating, and “rejecting” public functions. In this sense, the attitude towards local actors is crucial, as their capability to actively cooperate and contribute to the urban political process must be considered in relationship with the political interest and the operational capability public authority has in fostering empowering policies. Coming to space and its regulation, the changing role of public (and private) property has implications on planning rules: in this sense, the separation of ownership and management of spaces urgently needs to be further explored, as it could have direct implications on the planning tools and the rationalities that govern the intervention on the city, calling for a review of the scales of the urban project—more metropolitan in terms of development strategies, more local in terms of urban changeover, actors network, and problem setting. This would imply a change in the approaches to planning, that should measure the consequences and effects of a work on the city made out of projects for specific urban conditions, resources, actors, and occasions.

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