

Measuring the Magic of Public Space. Le Piazze di Roma

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Abstract

The concept of public space, and particularly of civic public space, is certainly a constitutive element of Italy’s urban culture. The design and spatial configuration of public spaces have always been a synthesis between deeply rooted models and political functions (the *piazza*, the *palazzo*, the church, the civic buildings), and of local circumstances and design inspiration. Hence the fascination of the *piazza*: while all *piazze* perform similar functions, they take very different spatial and architectural characteristics, thus adding to the variety and the “magic”, as it were, of public space experience.

The main purpose of this article is to celebrate the *piazza* as the core symbol of public space magic. In doing so, I set a modest linguistic goal: to discourage non-Italian speaking *piazza* fans from using the plural “*piazzas*” and to impose the Italian “*piazze*”. As to the success of this endeavour, only future will tell.

Keywords: public space; Italy; Roma; piazze; urban magic.

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Introduction

The concept of public space, and particularly of civic public space, is certainly a constitutive element of Italy's urban culture. The design and spatial configuration of public spaces have always been a synthesis between deeply rooted models and political functions (the *piazza*, the *palazzo*, the church, the civic buildings), and of local circumstances and design inspiration. Hence the fascination of the *piazza*: while all *piazze* (the Italian plural of "piazza") perform similar functions, they take very different spatial and architectural characteristics, thus adding to the variety and the "magic", as it were, of public space experience.

Needless to say, no pre-determined norms or standards ever applied to the design of the *piazza* as the centrepiece of Italian urbanism. Only less than a century ago was public space mentioned in the first piece of comprehensive national legislation on urbanism: the *Legge Urbanistica Statale 17 agosto 1942, n. 1150*. This law prescribed that all master plans had to indicate, in addition to transportation networks, expansion and redevelopment zones, and sites for community services, all areas designed to "form spaces for public use": basically, gardens, parks and *piazze*.

However, with the notable exception of comprehensive public housing projects, public spaces were almost totally neglected during the rapid, speculative and disorderly expansion process of urban areas in post-world war II Italy. Hence, the national decree of 1968 (*Decreto Ministeriale 1444/1968*) imposed for all new developments, a minimum of 18 square meters per inhabitant for "public spaces or spaces reserved for communal activities, public green spaces or parking spaces excluding spaces reserved for roads and streets". Of these, 9 square meters per inhabitant had to be provided for "public spaces equipped for play and sports, not counting green spaces alongside road infrastructure".

Despite the fact that it might have been relatively simple to impose on developers, the implementation of this decree encountered many difficulties, such as the alienation of the required public spaces in exchange for permission to build.

Therefore, the full implementation of the decree became the exception, rather than the rule. Later on, plans and planning legislation became a responsibility of regional governments, and in turn municipalities acquired greater powers in drawing and adopting municipal master plans. This became, however, a case of decentralization without empowerment. More recently, restrictive spending policies resulting from the adoption of the common European currency created severe limitations to state expenditure. At the same time, and even more recently, a crucial source of revenue for municipalities, the property tax, was both eliminated in the case of owner-occupier households and its reduced flow re-appropriated in large measure by central government. Consequently, municipalities found themselves confronted with the need to reserve scarce resources for basic day-to-day needs including current expenditure, and left with very little latitude for management and proper maintenance, let alone investment in land acquisition or public space projects. As a result, the qualitative and quantitative public space gap between the consolidated city and new urban expansion areas increased. This gap is certainly a cause, if not necessarily the only one, behind the sense of neglect and isolation many inhabitants of metropolitan Italy feel today as a result of poor transportation, chronic lack of physical maintenance of public infrastructure, urban decay, population aging, widespread youth unemployment, and difficulties between established and immigrant populations.

As always, there is a renowned national talent for coping, intervened by introducing practices, often successful, of “active citizenry” initiatives in improving or maintaining public spaces at the neighbourhood level¹. However, the fragile, small-scale and remedial nature of these practices cannot be ignored. Until the country can again count on financially viable local governments, there will be little hope for a proper supply, distribution and quality of public spaces.

On the positive side, there is a notably increasing interest in public space in Italy. Whilst summer schools and master courses have been devoted to the subject, seminars and meetings on public space, also of an international nature, have multiplied in recent years. Most notably, Architect Mario Spada’s intuition to organize under the INU² flag a “Biennial of Public Space” starting from 2011 has led to an increasingly popular, and increasingly international, event which is nothing but a virtual piazza – a place where people can meet, listen, and intervene to discuss ideas, experiences, and plans. The Biennial, with its Charter of Public Space adopted in 2013, also contributed to filling a gap in the understanding, definition, and guiding principles of successful public spaces.

Going back to the lamentable current conditions and prospects for public space in Italy, we have to underscore the increasing asymmetry between the supply, quality and distribution of public spaces in newly developed urban areas compared to those in the “historic city”. This leads to the bittersweet task of celebrating the financially viable, reasonably well maintained and eminently enjoyable public spaces one can still find everywhere in the country: the historic *piazze*.

Why piazza is more than “square”

The Italian piazza is not simply the translation of the term “square”, in itself a brutish approximation of the spatial variety of public spaces that for so many years, and in so many different cultures, have symbolized and embodied public life.



Fig. 1-2. Piazza del Campo, Siena.

Sources: on the left <https://villaroseito.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/siena3.jpg> and on the right https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piazza_del_Campo

Part of the term’s attractiveness is certainly due to its history. In Italy the piazza assumed a very important meaning in medieval times, when it became the urban space of the three fundamental functions of western urban civilization during the middle ages: religious, civic,

commercial. Luigi Piccinato remarks that at the beginning *piazze* were spaces devoted specifically to one of the above three functions (*piazza della chiesa*, *piazza del comune*, *piazza del mercato*). With reference to its civic function, it is important to note that the *piazza* became the place where citizens congregated to affirm their newly conquered independence embodied in the *comune* (a term still in use in Italy to denote municipalities, and which simply means “shared”, “commonly held”).

The Italian *piazza* is loaded with a rich array of historic and architectural meanings pointing to it as the “public space par excellence”. Here are some:

- *piazza* as testimony of historical events;
- *piazza* d’armi; *piazza* del mercato; *piazza* del duomo;
- *piazza* as a political container (rallies, speeches);
- *piazze* as places of elocution and execution;
- *piazza* as a marketplace;
- *piazza* as an architectural background (e.g. Navona, Piazza San Marco)
- *piazze* as architecture (e.g. San Pietro)
- *piazza* as the quintessence of “public”.

The *piazza* is also an inspirer of commonly used Italian idioms such as: “Mettere in *piazza*” meaning to “make known something that it might be better to maintain private”; “Scendere in *piazza*” which means taking action to seize political advantage; “La pubblica *piazza*” which means a place where any action or activity could not possibly be more manifest; “Spiazzato” which refers to losing one’s point of reference and “Fare una *piazzata*” meaning coming out with an unexpected action, often accompanied by strong expressions, of an unwelcome vigour.

An exploratory sample: le *piazze* di Roma

Of all Italian cities, Rome possibly presents the greatest variety of *piazza*; its *piazze storiche*” (historic *piazze*) presents an extreme example of the public-space asymmetry remarked above. Further, Rome’s *piazze storiche* mark a sharp contrast with their epigones in newly developed peripheral areas because they are points of attraction for the whole city and, of course, for all visitors, national and international.

Measuring the Magic of Rome’s *piazze storiche*

Whilst in its plainest sense, the *piazza* is simply a paved urban surface, surrounded by buildings, and connected to the city’s street network; it is also a quaint, respectable and valuable urban space. Therefore, it is inevitable that the *piazza*’s “urban value” be connected to a number of measurable parameters.

Five of them were selected for the purpose of this brief review. They are:

- 1) Absence, or severe limitation, of motorized traffic;
- 2) Functional variety, i.e. the ability of the urban space to perform different functions, either at the same time or during different times of the day;
- 3) Architectural value, keeping in mind that the quality of the architectural scenery and stagecraft that “forms” the *piazza* has an impact on its use and functions. In some cases, imposing architecture can have a discouraging effect (Boston’s city hall, for example, a celebrated architectural masterpiece, is not exactly an encouraging factor for spontaneous social congregation);

- 4) Locational value - an admittedly more vague indicator signifying the synergy the piazza has with functions and uses in its adjacency;
- 5) Historic interest – an aspect indicating the unfair advantage that “old” piazze enjoy over “new” piazze³.

These five parameters are the result of the analysis of a few Roman examples sketched below. Many others could, and perhaps, should have been added such as safety, or intensity of use. Most of them, in fact, are linked to the “software” of public space (users) as opposed to its hardware (the built environment). But for the time being, these five might suffice.



Fig. 3-4 . Piazza San Giovanni, Rome. Pictures by: Eugenio Monti

Piazza San Giovanni: snails and rallies

Free of motorized traffic	Functional variety	Architectural value	Locational value	Historic interest
			✓	✓

While of less than astonishing architectural appeal, Piazza san Giovanni is the largest enclosed public open space in Rome. At the centre of a popular working class neighbourhood, San Giovanni was famous both for hosting its Saint’s Summer Day and rallies of the PCI, the Italian Communist Party (the saint remains, but the party does not). With the demise of the PCI and the decline of popular political participation, the piazza became a challenge to those who dared repeating the mass gatherings of the past. The last time the piazza hosted a party rally was in 2013, when the populist “Movimento Cinque Stelle” managed to fill the square in a gesture of defiance that meant to celebrate the end of the established political parties’ political domination. The heirs of the communist party decided instead to give up San Giovanni for their closing event and to hold it in a former vaudeville theatre.

The irony was not missed by the voters. Today, the piazza continues to owe its prestige to its size and the basilica it hosts more than to any degree of pleasantness, plagued as it is to this day by hosting more motorized traffic than it should.

A harmonious redesign of the eighteenth century, Piazza del Popolo achieved new significance in recent times. As a result of a comprehensive 18th century design to create a grand northern entry to the city connected to the above Pincio gardens, which later turned into a roundabout *cum* parking lot, it gained new life after being pedestrianized. It

has also become a passage for all visitors exiting the nearby subway stop and flocking to the via del Corso's elegant shopping district. For a while, its appeal attracted semi-permanent exhibition infrastructure, a habit thankfully discontinued in recent times. To this day, the piazza (see photograph) also hosts a variety of spontaneous street happenings and events.



Fig. 5-6. Piazza del Popolo, Rome. On the left, source: [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piazza_del_Popolo_\(Roma\)#/media/File:Roma_Piazza_del_Popolo_BW_1.JPG](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piazza_del_Popolo_(Roma)#/media/File:Roma_Piazza_del_Popolo_BW_1.JPG)
On the right, picture by: Eugenio Monti

Piazza del Popolo: from parking lot to urban oasis

Free of motorized traffic	Functional variety	Architectural value	Locational value	Historic interest
✓		✓	✓	✓

Marking the eastern boundary of the tiny Vatican state, Piazza San Pietro is one of the few squares of the world reserved exclusively for religious events. While it can be negotiated on foot during weekdays, it is often partitioned to a point where visitors cannot even stand on the foci of the Bernini ellipsed portico to savour a joy of the past - seeing the columns as one. In addition, the northern portico has become a corral for the queues of the faithful waiting to be admitted into the basilica, while access can be granted only at the end of an exhausting security check.

The magnificent Bernini enclosure designed to provide a spectacular spatial introduction to the church, literally exploding from the dense mass of popular tenements immediately preceding it, is in stark contrast with the stubborn clumsiness of the *via della Conciliazione*, the avenue created in the middle of the twentieth century to provide a grand motorized access to St. Peter's. To this day, the avenue feeds the temptation to consider everything that is old -worthy of respect, and everything that is new - largely worthless.

The use of the square presents an interesting public space riddle. It is a vast and open urban place, no doubt; but it only holds gatherings linked to Catholic events. One could argue, therefore, that it is not a veritable public space. It is the total randomness and unpredictability of use that makes a true public space.



Fig. 7-8. Piazza San Pietro, Rome. Pictures by: Eugenio Monti

Piazza San Pietro: an imposing public space not quite so public

Free of motorized traffic	Functional variety	Architectural value	Locational value	Historic interest
✓		✓		✓

One of the Rome piazzas taking its name from a patrician family, Piazza Farnese is strongly characterized by the renaissance façade of the palazzo, now hosting the French Embassy. It is perhaps too solemn and too square (literally and figuratively) for Romans and visitors alike, who tend to prefer the contiguous Campo de Fiori.



Fig. 9-10. On the left: Piazza Farnese, Rome. Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piazza_Farnese#/media/File:Piazza_Farnese_Rome.jpg
 On the right: Piazza Campo de' Fiori, Rome. Source: <http://www.prolocoroma.it/piazza-campo-de-fiori/>

Piazza Farnese: order and beauty, but little magic

Free of motorized traffic	Functional variety	Architectural value	Locational value	Historic interest
✓		✓	✓	

This might also due to the fact that Campo de' Fiori does not have a dominating architectural presence. The favour it enjoys is also due to the daily succession of prevalent

uses (vegetable market in the morning, eating and gathering place in the afternoon, favourite spot of the young drinking classes in the evening) and its unique historical significance, with its statue of the reformist cleric Giordano Bruno on the very spot where he was burned at the stake half a millennium ago.

Another reason of the Campo de Fiori prevalence over Piazza Farnese is its closeness to some of the most popular retail shops in the city as opposed to the patrician upper crust of the Piazza Farnese streets, notably the sanitized, elegant and fairly lifeless via Giulia.

Campo de' Fiori: a popular favourite

Free of motorized traffic	Functional variety	Architectural value	Locational value	Historic interest
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Conclusions

This brings us to the end of our cursory and culpably limited review. We omitted important examples like Piazza Venezia, the traffic exchange at the opposite end of Piazza del Popolo, former location of the rallies of the infamous fascist regime, and surrounded by a host of architectural horrors; and Piazza del Pantheon, a gem that can be only enjoyed in the week hours of the morning due to the fact that it is now strangled by huge numbers of tourists, vendors, space-gobbling restaurateurs, and many others.

So, we come back to our initial question: in what way can the piazza embody the “urban magic”?

The question is as baffling as its subject. But we have found that there is no single element that makes a great piazza. Getting rid of motorized traffic is important, but not decisive, as in the case of Piazza Farnese. Architectural props and heroics are important as well, but not decisive either, as in the cases of Saint Peter’s and San Giovanni. Certainly, what is important is the harmony of space and use, as in Campo de’ Fiori. Whenever we manage to have a pleasant urban space enriched by variety and life, we can be confident in its success.

Unfortunately, this apparently simple combination is hard to create in outer urban areas, where the frequently combined lack of history, care and good design militate against that important success factor for public space sustainability – attractiveness.

Notes

- (1) Many of them are described in the archive section of the Biennial of Public Space’s web site.
- (2) INU is the acronym of “Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica”. Of late this non-profit institute, born in 1930 to cultivate and disseminate the culture of urbanism, has internationalized its mandate through the dissemination of the Charter of Public Space, the preparation of UN-HABITAT’s “Global Public Space Toolkit” and the coordination, in partnership with the China Society of Urban Planners, of the Habitat III Policy Paper on Urban Spatial Strategies.
- (3) “Vetustas”, a powerful magnifier of architectural glory that would merit becoming a companion to Vitruvius’s “venustas”, is the winning veneer that transforms all but the poorest architectural expressions into something commanding respect – perhaps a result of living beings’ dismay about human frailty.