Phigital public space approach: a case study in Volpiano

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Abstract. New ways of digital communication, a broader network of digital information and the open data naturally affect also the physical space transforming it into something new we can call "phigital". The phigital spaces are not the common public space as we usually think but these belong to a wider open network where interaction among people and places, between people and space are more "sense-able". Throughout a research experiment carried out by Polytechnic of Turin in collaboration with the Municipality of Volpiano (TO), this paper tries to propose new dimensions of public space where people keep their central role but where virtual interaction empower the design of new sustainable cities and communities

Keywords: e-participation, digital social engagement, social media, public space, crowd sourcing, phigital spaces, place making

Introduction. "Sense-able" and enabled city

The new "Society of Networks" produces a growing development of interaction between physical space and virtual space. This relationship is the starting point of our work which we believe can tell much on the structure of the city, shaped around the combination of place and network.
Urban *phigital* public spaces are the stage for new intentional (or sometimes unintentional) community sharing, where people are both passive users and drivers of new public space's meaning.
Internet and the web offers a new "place" for social relationship instead of the traditional and common ones. Today we can experience of abandon spaces which gather citizen's interest on the web much before than any other administrative process. However, one general limit is the risk that new technologies could lead to lose interest or awareness about the physical space. The social and urban structure might have changed if people can communicate without being in the same place. Actually, new media gave new values to real places.
Moreover, the rise of digital tools fostered the participatory process by enabling people to take part, augment their voices even if not representative and fill the space with data and information. The city become a network of "wireless link" which are

used to connect people, to allow services and, above all, to enable people and space to be differently learned.

Madonna delle Grazie: a digital and phisical square for debating the future

During spring 2013, Polytechnic of Turin throughout an experimental course offered the opportunity to test some of what we call "phigital public space approach". The experiment was held in Volpiano (a city close to Turin) with 25 selected students. Madonna delle Grazie, one of the major square of Volpiano, was about to lose its main activity (market place) leaving a huge public void in a strategic position of the urban structure. This transformation became an opportunity to set a research and formative experience aiming at building a community based design process through both analogical and digital strategies.

Students detected and reported from Piazza Madonna and its contextual area a serious of data and information coming from the Internet (website, e-journals…) and from the virtual debate of a special blog page which was set in place.

Students and a scientific coordination group choose appropriate media and technologies in order to cancel material distance between the participant, shorten the time of gathering data for analyses, making knowledge accessible and debatable to everyone during the design process. However, this physical-digital engagement approach turned the city in a network living in the same public space or interested on the future of this area. Particularly, the participatory process built in Volpiano was based on:

- analogical strategies: a serious focus group and during one week in May, students lived directly in a multifunctional room near the project area, where citizens and people were invited to discuss and to propose some ideas;
- digital strategies: the whole process (activities, analyses and output) was constantly online ad shareable on a wordpress blog (piazzamadonnavolpiano@wordpress.com) hosted by local municipality. Furthermore ideas were gathered and pin up on a virtual map called "ideoteca" which distingushed each suggestion according to four cathegory (which, where, when and what).

Blog's statistics proved how the digital involvement was reaching the interest of people and overcome the inertia of some urban transformation. The workshop site reach on two months thousands of visits (15000) with peaks very consistent on specific posts. On the other hand, very few comments reveal how the weaker point is still the digital interaction which need to be fostered by an analogical strategy.

Using digital media and tools in urban public space design is an approach which can build networks of people, information and knowledge. The experience in Volpiano demonstrates how digital media could be considered as a new virtual platform for studying and participating to an urban space transformation, through an innovative way of thinking about phenomena which is sense-able to real and virtual dimensions.