

The Biennale and its International Spirit*

Once again, in 2017 the Biennale reaffirmed its partnership with its first international partner, UN-HABITAT, which co-organized this year's two workshops on public space and international co-operation following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and of the New Urban Agenda. We welcomed the renewal of established partnerships, starting from the United Cities and Local Governments organization and the City of Bogota', and welcomed new ones, ranging from innovative architects, planners, academics and city officials bringing experiences from Japan, India, Colombia, Guatemala, Poland, Sweden, Spain, the UK, South Africa, the US and the Netherlands, and the EU (the European Commission's Joint Research Centre).

As announced yesterday, over the next few days we shall work together on the identification of the leitmotifs and keywords we can draw from the 26 workshops we held at this 2017 edition. One that comes to mind is overcoming barriers. We attempted to break the language barrier by offering simultaneous interpretation in all our plenary sessions; physical barriers, with particular regard to access to public space on the part of people with disabilities; gender barriers, emphasizing the importance of creating cities that are, first of all, friendly to young girls; age barriers, by opening a multigenerational dimension to public space analysis, planning and design; disciplinary barriers such as the ones between planning and design and popular participation, administrators and citizens; communication barriers, between physical and virtual public space; social barriers between injustice and equality; and knowledge barriers, by trying to rediscover a shared notion of public space in the wake of the Charter of Public Space's classical and internationally accepted definition .

But perhaps the most unexpected barrier that in a way "collapsed by itself" over these last three days was the wall between "national" and "international". We can see this from the sisterhood of vision, if you like, that emerged from the conclusions of the workshops on international cooperation and the other 24 thematic workshops the Biennale hosted. Similar words echoed in different rooms where different languages were spoken, and they were about breaking additional barriers - institutional barriers, both vertical and horizontal; conceptual barriers, between expediency and fun and beauty; and most of all the barrier between doing things in the usual, accepted way and devising and applying new approaches that see the conventional "beneficiaries" of public space on the driving seat of rediscovery, invention, creation, and enjoyment.

Perhaps the most tangible example of this coming together of the Biennale's national and international dimensions is the decision of the "The Country I Would Like" workshop to prepare and publish an "Italian version" of the Global Public Space Toolkit, in order to honour a still unfulfilled promise of the Biennale – offering to the rest of the world the best experiences from the Biennale's host country on the creation and regeneration of public space.

Understandably, the international cooperation workshops devoted considerable attention to the theme of how to reach, and measure, the universally endorsed 2030 target 11.7 of "providing universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, particularly for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities". But in line with the irreverent spirit that has consistently punctuated this event, the question emerged that in order to measure progress in this direction we must clarify the target itself.. Some interesting questions emerged. First, can we be serious about that "for all" if we do not give sole priority to that portion of the "all" who risk being left behind even more? And second: where does that operative verb "provide" leave us when we know that in addition to delivering new municipal parks and playgrounds to citizens we have to develop a comprehensive, shared vision that adopts public space as the structuring element of a city that is more just, equitable and humane? And thirdly: should we not

emphasize the role of municipalities and local governments as the prime, natural actors and monitors of international commitments like SDG 11 and related objectives and the New Urban Agenda?

The door is not shut, and barriers are being opened. Even in this area, our voices can still be heard. Our Biennale will be one more voice – both in the national and international debate - on how to reach, and measure, an unprecedented milestone - the incorporation of public space as an integral part of sustainable development.

Drafted in Rome by P. Garau and shared with Laura Petrella, UN-Habitat, at the outset of the final “Keynote Segment” of the 2017 Biennial of Public Space, 27 May 2017.