

# SYSTEM-EVENTS TOOLBOX - ACTIVATING URBAN PLACES FOR SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH DESIGNING A SYSTEM OF EVENTS THAT RELIES ON LOCAL RESOURCES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflection on the use of public spaces in towns and the development of a system-events toolbox to activate them towards social cohesion. It is the result of a 1 year action research developed together with POLIMI DESIS Lab of the Department of Design to develop design solutions to open up the public spaces of the campus to the neighbourhood. The results have been tested in an event format called "il Sabato della Bovisa" held at the "Durando Campus" of the Politecnico di Milano. It presents a series of initiatives to understand, observe, and to benefit from members of a public university triggering a process of knowledge exchange between residents and students in a climate of conviviality.

## KEYWORDS

Social innovation, cohesion, public places, service design

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Public spaces mirror the complexities of urban society” (Madinapour, 2010) and in the contemporary age public places become fluid spaces (Baumann, 2002) of exchange and participative action, not only as contexts but as scenarios able to embody new meanings, contributing to the creation of community identity (Borlini, Memo, 2008). The public space, forgotten for years by industrialized society, is reclaiming its importance due to consumer and service society. Below this layer of conformity something is moving in the opposite direction: public spaces are becoming places of social innovation, offering a context where creative communities act (Meroni, 2007) to bring original solutions to everyday problems that the current economic system is no longer able to provide<sup>1</sup>.

The bottom-up actions of these active groups of citizens who find their own answers is combined with top-down actions of institutions (Mulgan, 2008). This creates opportunities for social transformation and sustainable growth that modify the current pattern, replacing the old individualistic values with a new sense of community, sharing, exchange of knowledge and information, and mutual support. The reclaiming of public spaces allows people to come together in an inclusive way - opening roads, squares, and the city itself for the free enjoyment of all, and this happens when people become fully aware of their rights and responsibilities, which open horizons to endless opportunities.

One of the design tools that suits this changing and fluid urban context is “the event”. When it is put together with strategic design and design for services, it becomes the system-events toolbox. This is composed of a set of toolkits combined together into a system that provides the opportunity to open up a public place through a series of actions and activities. It relies on local resources and on neighbourhood communities, such as associations, NGOs, groups of citizens, and public and private institutions, who want to actively collaborate in the initiative, and where the space becomes the background and context, open and accessible to everyone. The toolbox defines a system of events: an accelerator of synergies with the aim of:

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<sup>1</sup>It refers to distributed economy as a new economic model discussed by various professionals including J. Green, E. Manzini, R. Murray, C. Ryan, A. Johansson, P. Kisch, M. Mirata

generating cohesion; consolidating relationships among different groups and communities; creating social innovation and a new sense of belonging.

The system-events toolbox can be used in different contexts by local public institutions to activate a public space in unusual ways, such as schools, libraries, parks and public gardens, town squares, and streets. The main feature of the toolbox is to be an enabling tool for transforming a public space into an accessible public place and to trigger social innovation processes by starting collaborative actions in order to engage citizens in active participation and starting conversations with the local communities following a design process.

The toolbox project has already been tested in a public space which is related to the historical memory and no longer used: it is the Durando Campus of the Politecnico di Milano which was established at the beginning of the 90s in the suburban area of Bovisa in the north of Milan. These parts of the campus that cover 60,000 square meters were the old Ceretti & Tanfani Company's premises for manufacturing funicular railways, which employed most of the local residents until the 60s. The conversion of the industrial area by Politecnico di Milano broke an emotional attachment to the place for residents who considered the company as part of the neighbourhood.

Since 2010, the Department of Design with POLIMI Desis Lab ([www.desis-network.org](http://www.desis-network.org)) began a process of opening the campus to the district of Bovisa through a series of initiatives which can lead people to discover the campus and to build a new dialogue between the two communities that, until now, had had little opportunity for interaction: the internal one comprises students, faculty and staff, and the external one, the inhabitants of the Bovisa neighbourhood. The event "C'è Spazio per Tutti" (There's room for all) in November 2011 and the subsequent one in October 2012, involved more than 50 international students from the M.Sc. in Product Service System Design who developed a set of toolkits presented through PAR (Participatory Action Research) with the aim of enabling local residents to reclaim what is, in all respects, a public space by testing the kits directly with the users on the same day.

Thus using the tool of scenario building, through a series of actions set up for the whole event, it has been possible to design periodic and structured occasions for opening the places on campus. These opportunities allow inhabitants into a continuous appropriation process and at the same give the possibility to generate the dynamics of social innovation.

The toolbox project for the specific case of the Campus Durando is "il Sabato della Bovisa". This explores opportunities, both within the university and in the local Bovisa district, to create a system able to reconnect the two communities using the potential of the campus' urban space as an incubator for social experiments that create new opportunities for dialogue. "Il Sabato della Bovisa" is a monthly social event at the Campus Durando of Politecnico di Milano, which proposes a series of initiatives to understand, observe and enjoy a public university space open to the citizens, thus triggering a process of knowledge exchange between residents and students in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Guided tours, book sharing with public readings in collaboration with the local library, sports activities organized by local associations, fashion design and product laboratories that can connect traditional know-how with innovation linked to university research. Opportunities to meet people, share skills, and places to forge new relationships that may have an impact not only in terms of personal connection, but also by creating a place to enhance the development of new micro-economies in the local context.

## 2. THE PROCESS

The process that led to the creation of the toolbox covered a period of twelve months and is still on-going. Traditional research is combined with an "in-context immersion" at the local level followed by a progressive abstraction to a format that could be applied to different contexts.

The preliminary stage of the research aims to outline the contemporary complex framework derived from historical memory and embedded in everyday life and that is made up of multiple variables with the main feature being its multidisciplinary, across different fields of research and action leading to a hybridization of characteristics with three principal directions of investigation:

- The public place and the neighbourhood as a small scale context. i.e. creative communities acting locally.

- The relationship between university and society and its projections on the urban landscape through the specific case of the toolbox prototyping in the Bovisa district.
- The design experience and its achievement through integration with strategic design and design for services.

The designer's point of view is developed by following the thread of public spaces in the city and their daily use, presenting scenarios for enhancing local resources that create multiple levels of opportunities. The reconstruction of the local community, especially through forms and content which can activate social dynamics that generate values, is preferred to the complexity of the issue covered.

The public place is understood as having two main features: the social aspect and the formal aspect. The social aspect is the true essence of society that affects aesthetics and form of the urban site. As pointed out by Manzini (Manzini, 2010) a contemporary designer must be able to interpret the city as "social laboratories where new ideas and new solutions are being invented and experimented within all fields of daily life", where culture leads to new forms of citizens' participation and a deeply renewed sense of community.

In the toolbox solution the potential of a single episode has been effectively amplified in effectively way by a system of events that aims to form micro-communities that are interconnected to the local context, and thus giving it its value. The toolbox provides all the elements needed for setting up actions in a place with the task of answering the new needs of sociability and conviviality, culture and community necessities. Through designing a 'box of possibilities' 'container of possibilities': it creates new relationships, gives new meaning to spaces, innovative relations are interwoven with the physical area, and builds a new language and new forms of expression that go beyond formal constraints.

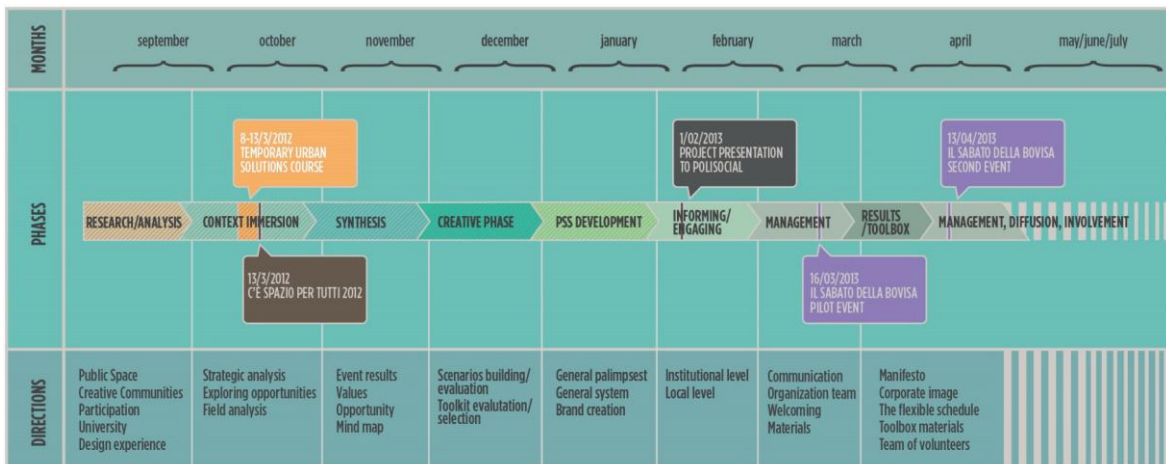


Figure 1. Timeline for the project process, September 2012/July 2013

### 3. DEFINITION OF THE TOOLBOX

The system-events toolbox has been defined as a useful series of tools for shaping events in the public space. It relies on local resources, dedicated to the inhabitants of a neighbourhood and participating communities, to assess the needs of various target groups, characterized by two levels: the progression of events and a series of actions which promote the emergence of opportunities in a structured way using multifaceted tools and methodologies.

It is a format that enables the immediate proposal of events in a public space and facilitates the understanding of the whole system's structure. Related to each contingent situation, the toolbox is composed of several elements designed to be adapted and further developed following the emerging trends of the events themselves:

- The manifesto with the primary and secondary objectives
- The programme with a flexible activity-box
- The materials for the implementation
- The team of volunteers

The core of the system, the programme that changes over time, will be discussed later, while the materials of the toolbox are organized in traditional forms of communication, such as postcards, posters, press releases and press kits, integrated with online media, such as a Facebook page, and a web invitation linked with mailing lists of participants, associations and local collaborators to the project. To facilitate the management of the system several tools have been created: a 'to do list', a Google map for promotion of the area of interest, and a list of requests for necessary organizational permissions.

The group of volunteers who participate in the dissemination and promotion of the project, as well as in the preparation and management of some activities can be made up of people from the neighbourhood, local associations or institutional staff. The administration of tasks is facilitated through meetings and the use of Google group.

The system-events toolbox provides a general framework and structure that can be applied in several contexts, especially in multicultural circumstances and environments where active participation and local resources work together, but the toolbox needs to be adapted from case to case by providing features relevant to each specific context of interest.

### **3.1 The Core of the System**

The instrument used to define the event schedule is a flexible programme structured to assume various configuration and to be adapted to situations as they arise. Each activity that is involved in setting the schedule is developed as an activity that can be dedicated to a precise target during different events. For instance, a vegetable garden can organize an activity dedicated to children for the first event, while for the second event can be focused on the elderly but both the activities are linked through the same activity-box (the garden) and topic (the culture of food).

When the system was tested at “il Sabato della Bovisa” event, the programme was made up of four main activities that at each point of use proposed different activities dedicated to the different target groups to be involved:

- “Sveglia all’Ovale”: Qi Gong lesson offered by a local association of the Dergano-Bovisa neighbourhood.
- “Ricuciamo Bovisa”: knitting and sewing activities for adults and the seniors of the neighbourhood in collaboration with a B.Sc. student of Fashion Design at the Politecnico di Milano.
- “Coltivando, the convivial garden at Politecnico di Milano”: offers various activities for children and adults related to gardening and food culture.
- “Bo-Legge”: book-sharing in collaboration with the Dergano-Bovisa library, together with the exchange of books at a permanent point inside the campus, it offers lectures and workshops for children and for young adults / adults / older people.

Activities proposed by the internal university community, groups of active citizens and by other local actors can also be combined: there are many requests to join the initiative including a swapping activity, the multi-ethnic choir, yoga and tai chi, activities related to film and music, urban and collective regeneration projects, etc.

Within the large area of the campus the individual activities have appropriate sites with two central nodes: the “Ovale” considered by the internal community as the central square of the campus and the community vegetable garden, the other focal point for community gatherings.

### **3.2 Informing, Engaging and Managing**

The creation of the toolbox is complemented by the need to involve and spread the initiative both at the institutional and local level in the area of interest - a critical step in building a dialogue with the district authorities. A fundamental step is, therefore, to identify possible partnerships between local associations, volunteers, groups of active citizens, and commercial activities that can actively take part in the organization both in the communication and spreading of the project and also in proposing activities for the event.

Schools, associations and local markets, as well as being potentially active partners are also channels for conveying information, promoting and disseminating the events, along with social networks (facebook, twitter, flickr) promotion on radios, newspapers, blogs, etc. In the case of “il Sabato della Bovisa” the project established the collaboration of Politecnico di Milano and its organizational areas with the Department of

Design. The initiative has become part of the Polimi Desis Lab, the Design Lab included in the international Desis Network and supported by Polisocial, the programme of engagement and social responsibility at the Politecnico di Milan. Support has been extended, therefore, to the laboratories and some faculty, e.g. professors of fashion design, who take an active part in the organization.

The municipality of Milan has also offered its patronage to the initiative. At the local level, several informal groups are collaborating with the neighbourhood: associations such as de.de.p., il Vaso di Pandora, territorial services such as the district library, urban renewal projects as ZUP (Zuppa Urban Project), ColtivAzioni Sociali, ASF (Architetti Senza Frontiere), etc.

### **3.3 Resources and Investment**

The non-profit nature of the project led to a voluntary commitment on the part of the organizational team, the group of volunteers who support the project, associations and local authorities, and this constitutes the main resource for the success of the project.

Regarding other resources already invested in the project, they are mainly dedicated to the production of information and communication materials such as posters, flyers and postcards to be distributed throughout the neighbourhood, the cost of which is definitely low budget and covered by university funds. Further investment can be proposed that would introduce activities related to increased integration of different cultures, expand promotional activity by using more communication channels and other activities, without losing the non-profit nature of the project.

Further steps will be taken in the application of the system-events toolbox to a different context by public institutions. For instance to a school or public library in a multi-ethnic district for testing and meanwhile implementing the toolbox and starting the creation of a network of interconnected activities in local communities.

To start the application of the system-events toolbox in a different context we have to start creating a network of actors to be involved in the initiative in the area of interest, beginning with the public institution involved and expanding into the neighbourhood to connect the various actors and authorities within the system.

## **4. IL SABATO DELLA BOVISA AT THE POLITECNICO DI MILANO**

“il Sabato della Bovisa” (Bovisa Social Saturday) is a monthly event launched as the result of this research on five occasions, from March to July 2013. The toolbox was tested directly in context and at the local scale with the first three events: the inauguration on March 16<sup>th</sup>, the second event on April 13<sup>th</sup>, and the third event on May 11<sup>th</sup> 2013 and implemented in the June and July events. This opportunity allowed the team to gather feedback and implement new ideas, by which the analysis cycle is overlaid on the traditional discovery, immersion, study, design, feedback collection with new reflections and rediscoveries, ranging from the generation of knowledge and critical reflection. These coordinated cycles are combined to optimize the understanding of the proposed solution and lead to an incremental improvement during the subsequent events.

The overall judgment on the system-events toolbox prototyping on the Bovisa district is extremely positive<sup>2</sup> with an incremental increase in attendance. The total number of visitors for the first three days was around 130-150 adults each day, including several target groups from the elderly to children and families.

During the days of the events some feedback was collected on the basic aspects of communication and organization, and on specific activities. A second request for feedback was made through the Facebook page inviting people to give comments, suggestions and proposals. The work is continuing through the identification of an appropriate communication channel that will disseminate and promote the initiative broadly to the different targets involved in the Bovisa and, more widely, in the city of Milan. This trial event started a process that is gradually establishing a dialogue between the organizations that launched “il Sabato della Bovisa” and the local community in a fertile ground for experimentation. It is a process that is able to

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<sup>2</sup>Video of the opening of “il Sabato della Bovisa”: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=412d5tFUICM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=412d5tFUICM)

place the university within the district network, thus emphasizing the renewed interest of participation in a highly accessible initiative.

Several proposals have been proposed by associations and citizens groups as specific activities during the events and they helped the research team to understand which could be considered and developed later. The possibility to create micro-communities around certain activities, such as “Ricuciamo Bovisa”, or “Bo.Legge”, aimed to convince the university administration to let them become an ongoing activity by involving internal knitting and sewing groups, or just by setting up a permanent book exchange facility.



Figure 2. Photos of “il Sabato della Bovisa” activities inside the Durando campus of Politecnico di Milano, 16th March 2013 and 13th April 2013

## 5. SYSTEM-EVENTS TOOLBOX AS OPPORTUNITY

The objective of a project like the system-events toolbox is to activate urban places through guided actions that lead to social cohesion, integration and social innovation. The dynamics that can be generated through a series of events relies on there being numerous local resources that have a high potential for involvement: not only the reclaiming of a public space by its inhabitants, but deriving new meanings by creating unexpected forms of language and belonging.

This project has been developed through a strategic design process which combines traditional research with an in context immersion and a consequent abstraction for creating a model - the system-events toolbox. The experimental nature enhances opportunities for social innovation, where the system-events toolbox, organized in boxes with different levels of access that act in synergy to create opportunities, is thought to be as open as it possibly can be in order to be able to change during the course of the work. The toolbox is designed to be used mainly by public institutions, which with an appropriate contextualization can follow the guidelines and use this material, moreover, following a real example of opening up a public space. In this sense, the inclusion of the project in the Desis Network facilitates the international spread of the toolbox solution. The design of a system-events composed of activities is the tool that best suits the situation being able to create fixed nodes as well as variables together with the ambitious goal of building micro-communities that share multi-disciplinary and cross-generational interests, knowledge and collective values.

In this particular case, the toolbox applied to the Durando campus of the Politecnico di Milano as “il Sabato della Bovisa” is an opportunity to stimulate the processes of public and cultural renewal: prototyping space for students’ projects, a place for associations and local projects to be seen, an opportunity for university staff to promote and disseminate research projects, the context for active citizens to experience, discuss and propose. The university is not only the context, it becomes a promoter of active participation in finding its integration in the urban district and regaining renewed possession of its fundamental social function, opening up to the surrounding area in an active and practical way. It has to be pointed out how the nature of a space changes with the change of use. The development of the system-events toolbox, as demonstrated by the prototyping in the university campus spaces, is a successful method for rethinking public places, and merging processes of cohesion and sharing in particular for those public spaces that have a surplus of unused space.

The project is therefore moving in the direction of implementation within a different context regarding both destination and dimension, in order to test the performance of the existing toolbox and to make improvements to the toolbox design.

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