

ADAPTABLE URBAN SPACES

SFU ITALIA DESIGN 2007 CHARLES LAW



This paper is a concise analysis on adaptable urban spaces, using the the area around Piazza Guiseppe Poggi in Florence as an example and application of knowledge from the course texts “Dynamics of Delight” and “Pattern Languages”. The goal of this study is a particular understanding of architecture and the movement of people.

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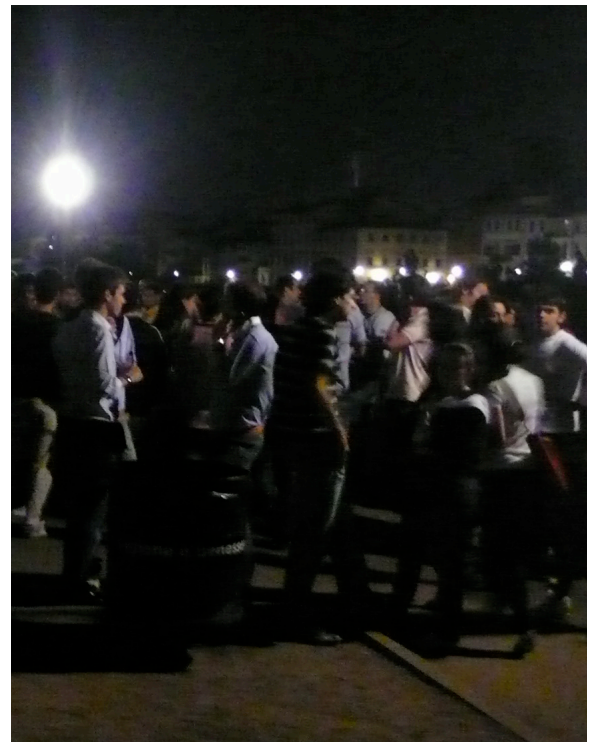


Location

Piazza Guiseppe Poggi is not a typical location for analysis so I will provide some rationale as to why I chose this particular space. I first passed by area at night and was met by hundreds of youths utilizing the space. The piazza was not necessary being used but instead the small park facing the water across from it. At first I thought nothing of it, there was a bar in the middle of the park so it was quite natural for teenagers and young adults to be socially interacting in such an area. The next night, the same could be seen and when I ventured inside the area it surprising to find that the inhabitants of this space were not only all youths, but almost all locals as well. This was the first public space in Florence I had seen so close to city center but concentrated of locals. There were obviously different subcultures and classes within the concentration of youths in this space and with this thought I decided to study this area further.

Socially Intensive Space at Night

There are dozens of piazza's around Florence, hundreds of public points – so why is the area around Piazza Guiseppe Poggi such a socially intensive space at night? I have placed a factor for the fact that there is a bar in the middle of the park serving alcohol, but for the purposes of this study and the many bars around Florence I have to look past this point and place emphasis on the urban, social, and aesthetic planning of this space.



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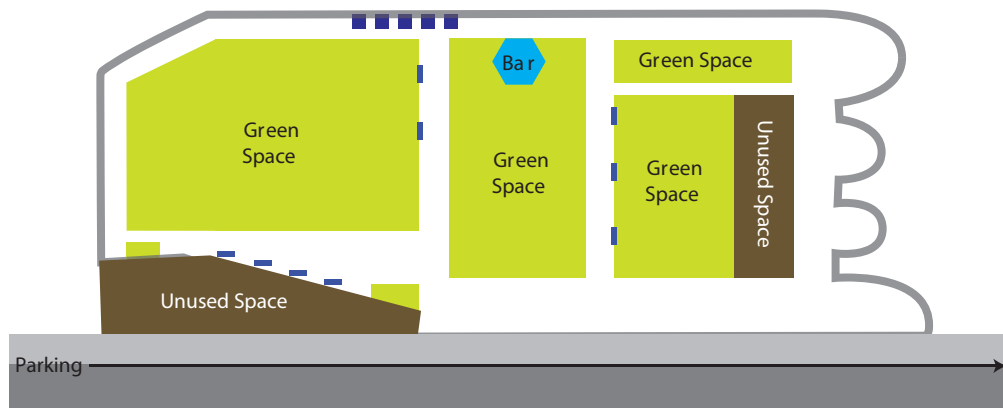
Night Attractors

The old Florentine wall in Piazza Guiseppi Poggi acts as a goal attractor for the piazza underneath and consequently the park across from the piazza. The wall builds up expectation to those traveling towards the tower and is an expression of the urban youth center at night. For those familiar with the activities at the park, it also acts as a social attractor. The combination of this area having both a goal attractor and being a social attractor is a valuable key to the attractiveness of the location.



Nighttime Space Analysis

The following is a visual representation of the key components of the park across from Piazza Guiseppi:

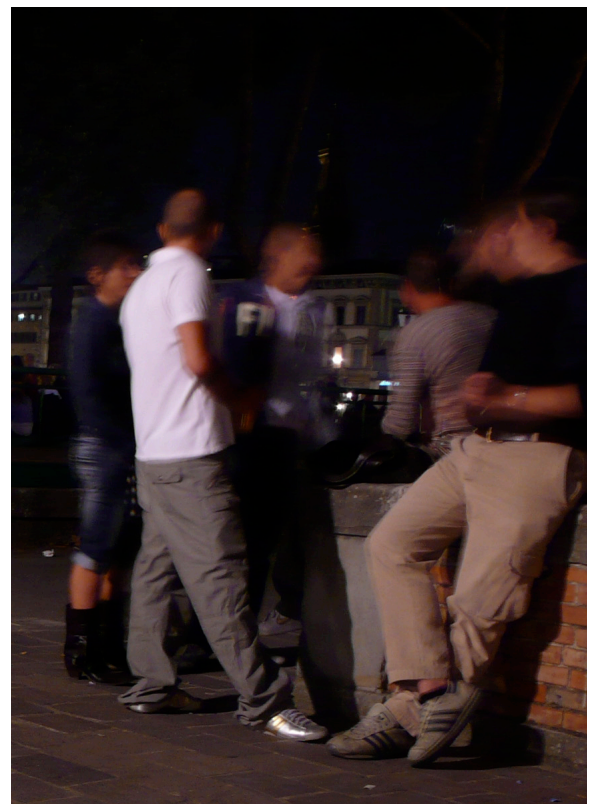


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The ledge of the irregular shaped public area affords many places to sit facing the water and are all always utilized. Park benches placed around the park are also fully exploited. Interestingly enough, the green space in the middle of the area is not really used as a social place. People automatically migrate to the sides of the area and the green space is used for the movement of people around the area. The only green space that people consistently stop and interact with each other is the middle patch of grass where the bar also presides.

Earlier on I mentioned that I believed this area to be a “koinonic space” and now I will use analysis and observation to prove it. The definition of “koinonic space” from Dynamics of Delight is that there are certain spaces in cities where people congregate to signify civic allegiance and cement bond with fellow inhabitants. These places are symbols of citizenship, existence, and typically are found in areas with historical and political significance. What I see at Piazza Guiseppe Poggi is an area that local teenagers and young adults have claimed and the social repercussions of this space is an acknowledged point where people of similar ages and interest express their social allegiances. A consequence of Florence being so overrun with tourists are that historical relevant places such as Piazza della Signoria are social detractors for locals, especially youths, to interact. However, the beauty of the many adaptable urban spaces in Florence as well as consciousness of the area by locals is that new areas can be taken over and established. Architecture is space plus time; we can say that time and people define this space.



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Nighttime Street Analysis

To understand how people flow into Piazza Guiseppe Poggi we need to look at the streets and accessibility of the area. My observations have deduced four general paths that locals utilize to approach the park.

On ground level, the Florentine wall acts as a goal attractor where locals come from the North, East, and West sides of the city. There is complexity in the streets of Florence in general but the simplicity of the park being located beside the Rio Arno, combined with the goal attractiveness of the wall make this area mentally simple to imagine and arrive to. I have talked much about the wall but I believe the significance of it to the space requires such attention. While in the park I felt that the vertical superiority of the wall took prominence over the street and thus connected the park to the fragmented wall and Piazza Guiseppe Poggi. This made the space feel larger than it actually was and connected two spaces that were physically separated by a street and vehicles. The wall is a symbolic value of the urban fabric of the area and facilitates movement as well as serving to fix the orientation and location of an individual.



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Space in the afternoon

I have delved significantly into the park at night but one of the themes of this study is the flexibility of urban design – spaces can be designed for people to take control of them and this can change during different times of the day. Spaces such as the area around Piazza Guiseppe Poggi have an implied consensus during different times of the day and this is an element that is certainly worth investing time into with regards to urban design.

There is great contrast between the area at nighttime and daytime. In the early afternoon there are no local youths in sight. The bar is closed and the park is a passive space used by older locals who relax in the area by the benches as well as creating their own personal spaces close to the ledges looking out to the other side of the city. The feeling of the park is completely different; it is calm and the people who there are enjoying the quiet space, the afternoon, and are engrossed in their personal sanctuary.

What surprised me was the cleanliness of the space. Urban design can only go so far, local politics and policies greatly affect local communities, so the amount of effort that goes into cleaning the city at night certainly has allowed this space to transform and become adaptable for older locals to utilize the area.

Looking at tourism in the afternoon, the streets that intersect Piazza Guiseppe Poggi comprise of tourist traffic. From my observations the park itself is mostly tourist free. Tourists mostly walk pass the park to go to their respective destinations, likely south to Piazza Michelangelo or west to the Ponte Vecchio area. The absence of foreigners certainly has something to do with how locals interact with a space so it is interesting to see a public park close to city center inhabited mostly by locals in a high tourism city.



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Flexible Spaces

It has already been addressed that “cities are architecture plus space and time”, and how the area around Piazza Guiseppe Poggi can be seen as being defined by time and people. Now lets relate this concept to the urban fabric of the city and explore why this is a good example of an adaptable urban space in Florence. Buildings can be seen as the bed cloth to the continual movement of people in a city and through the urban configuration of the area, the park area is easily accessible from all parts of the city. This is especially relevant at night as youths from different parts of the city can easily access major streets that lead to Piazza Guiseppe Poggi. Parking is sufficient and compliments all forms of transportation both night and day. At night there are significantly more cars and motorcycles and in the afternoon there are more bikes. The affordances and capacity to allow for different types of transportation and people is one of the reasons I believe that this area is a successful flexible urban space.



We can view the park and public points in general as a stage. There are little life drama's that occur and these change depending on the time of the day. We can learn from Piazza Guiseppe Poggi that urban design greatly depends not only on space and time, but also the interpretation that people have on space. This is a key point to pull out from the Piazza Guiseppe Poggi analysis and the reason why I think this area is successful.

