

urbanpromo

XVI EDIZIONE URBANPROMO "PROGETTI PER IL PAESE"

TORINO, NUVOLA LAVAZZA, 15 NOVEMBRE 2019

LA CITTÀ CONTEMPORANEA: UN GIGANTE DAI PIEDI D'ARGILLA

Atti della conferenza internazionale
a cura di Michele Talia



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p

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INDICE

INTRODUZIONE

Michele Talia

p. 9

CONTRIBUTI

Percorsi di resilienza in Italia e Spagna.

Fenomeni insediativi contemporanei e nuovi modelli di mobilità

Chiara Amato, Mario Cerasoli, José Maria de Ureña, Chiara Ravagnan 15

Da una 'quinta urbana' statica ad un ambito collettivo dinamico: la trasformazione di uno spazio urbano

Roberta Angelini 22

La pianificazione urbanistica nella Città Metropolitana di Napoli come strategia di adattamento ai cambiamenti climatici: due esperienze

Antonia Arena 30

Quale rigenerazione?

Francesca Assennato, Michele Munafò 35

Re(in)cludo. Il carcere come luogo di accoglienza nella città

Antonella Barbato 41

Quali strumenti per l'uso sostenibile del suolo? Un'indagine tipologica nel contesto europeo

Erblin Berisha, Donato Casavola, Giancarlo Cotella, Umberto Janin Rivolin, Alys Solly 47

Is the decolonial approach in spatial planning

studies an irreconcilable conflict or an opportunity for Western academics?

Francesca Blanc, Antonio di Campi, Andrea Mora, Maurizio Pioletti 55

La ricerca dell'effetto urbano

Antonio Bocca 62

Infrastrutture verdi e blu: l'approccio transcalare del progetto europeo LOS_DAMA!

Sarah Braccio, Federica Marchetti, Maria Quarta 67

Campagna e città: un dualismo da ritrovare per rigenerare gli ambienti urbani e far fronte all'emergenza alimentare

Giovanni Bruschi, Daniele Amadio 72

Riuso, co-living e nuove pratiche urbane

Francesca Calace, Giuseppe Resta 77

Percorsi urbanistici innovativi e condivisi per città che si adattano al Climate Change

Chiara Camaioni, Rosalba D'Onofrio 85

Autorganizzazione comunitaria, produzione dei beni comuni e rigenerazione della democrazia

Giuseppe Caridi 91

The rearticulation of urban processes within China's HSR small cities: empirical observations through data-informed diachronic maps

Francesco Carota, Valeria Federighi, Matteo Migliaccio 96

La città del Terrestre. L'architettura come fonte di innovazione del conflitto locale/globale	Curcuruto	157
Francesco Casalbordino		114
Prospettive di riorganizzazione del commercio (modi, luoghi e tempi del consumo) come possibili fattori di rivalutazione delle aree centrali delle "piccole metropoli"		
Aldo Cilli		119
The cycle network as a soil project for urban resilience		
Antonio Alberto Clemente		126
Verso un paradigma qualitativo per affrontare consumo di suolo e vocazioni funzionali nella Città Metropolitana di Torino		
Federica Corrado, Luca Lazzarini, Giulio Gabriele Pantaloni, Carolina Giaimo		134
Dall'occupazione abusiva alla legittimazione a fini abitativi. Il caso de la Salette a Torino		
Valeria Cottino, Veronica Gai, Annalisa Mosetto, Maurizio Pioletti, Paola Sacco		143
Rigenerazione urbana e città pubblica. Il Contributo Straordinario di Urbanizzazione nelle leggi regionali		
Francesco Crupi		151
La riforma portuale e le innovazioni nella pianificazione: il caso di Bari		
Serena D'Amora, Alessandra Saponieri, Francesco Di Leverano, Anna Maria		
Piani di Mitigazione e di Adattamento congiunti per affrontare il cambiamento climatico sulla costa adriatica: Il progetto Joint_SECAP		
Rosalba D'Onofrio, Stefano Magaudo, Stefano Mugnoz, Elio Trusiani		169
Nuove tecnologie per affrontare la sfida dei cambiamenti climatici, promuovere la salute urbana, la coesione sociale e l'equità		
Rosalba D'Onofrio, Elio Trusiani		176
Smart City e Smart People: dalla realtà urbana alla realtà mista		
Michele De Chiaro, Gabriele Garnero		182
Una urbanistica sperimentale per una società post-urbana		
Donato Di Ludovico, Pierluigi Properzi		189
A GIS analysis reconstructing the regeneration programme of the Liberta neighbourhood of Bari		
Gabriele Di Palma		196
Service Design. Un servizio per la comunità		
Francesca Filippi, Elisabetta Benelli		205
Una partenza in salita. I primi cinque anni della Città metropolitana di Torino		
Gianfranco Fiora, Carolina Giaimo		210
Indirizzi interpretativi e progettuali fondati su un'ontologia delle relazioni per creare		

reti di città e di infrastrutture sostenibili, alternative alle concentrazioni ipertrofiche delle agglomerazioni urbane contemporanee Marco Fregatti	216	città ai cambiamenti climatici: computational masterplanning Lorenzo Massimiano, Andrea Galli	263
Le azioni di depaving dei suoli urbani per una nuova multifunzionalità degli spazi sottoutilizzati Emanuele Garda	225	La Città metropolitana di Torino e la sua dimensione metropolitana: una questione aperta Irene Mortari, Giannicola Marengo, Stefania Grasso	268
Le centralità urbane come strumento di ricomposizione di Bellaria Igea Marina Cristian Gori	232	La riconversione dell'ex area industriale di Crotone. Verso una pianificazione integrata e sostenibile Domenico Passarelli	275
Le sfide contemporanee nella nuova pianificazione territoriale della Città metropolitana di Torino Stefania Grasso, Irene Mortari, Giannicola Marengo	238	Sviluppo sostenibile per la Città Metropolitana di Reggio Calabria. Hub metropolitani-cerniere territoriali Domenico Passarelli, Federica Suraci, Francesco Suraci	280
Walking like needles in the city. Sewing new activities Tiziano Innocenzi	244	Il recupero delle cave dismesse: da vuoti di paesaggio a spazi di aggregazione Elena Paudice	284
S.O.S. Catania: Soluzioni Occasionali per Senzatetto a Catania. Strategie e soluzioni volte a migliorare la qualità della vita dei senzatetto in ambito urbano a Catania Gaetano Giovanni Daniele Manuele	248	La sfida del consumo di suolo a saldo zero: le azioni di rigenerazione urbana delle regioni italiane Piera Pellegrino	290
Gli Investimenti Territoriali Integrati in ambito urbano. L'esperienza della Sardegna Gavino Mariotti, Maria Veronica Camerada, Salvatore Lampreu	257	From unplanned to planned urban settlements. Housing solutions for environmentally-friendly cities in developing countries Viola Angela Polesello	298
Processi innovativi per l'adattamento delle			

Il ruolo delle green infrastructure nella costruzione di strategie adattive resilienti Irene Poli, Silvia Uras	310	di urbanizzazione delle aree costiere metropolitane. Roma, la permanente oscillazione tra mare e territorio interno Saverio Santangelo, Maria Teresa Cutrì, Nicole del Re	361
Il 'Mio Capitale Verde': investire in conoscenza e nell'ambiente Veronica Polin, Lisa Lanzoni	318	Trenta città medie: nuove categorie di interpretazione della conurbazione di Rimini Scarale Annalisa	367
Il benessere attraverso/a la città Chiara Pompei	326	Le 'figure alpino-metropolitane' Roberto Segà	372
La sfida del cambiamento climatico come opportunità per rafforzare la resilienza delle città in cammino verso la sostenibilità. Strategie, strumenti, sperimentazioni Gabriella Pultrone	332	Forme urbane che cambiano: la urban network analysis come strumento per rintracciare nuove tecniche di pianificazione spaziale Maria Somma	384
Are privately owned public spaces effective design and planning tools that can favour the creation of healthy, public spaces in contemporary cities? Notes from an empirical study in New York. Antonella Radicchi	340	Promuovere il Transit Oriented Development in Italia: il ruolo della pianificazione di livello metropolitano Luca Staricco, Elisabetta Vitale Brovarone	390
Spazio pubblico e rigenerazione urbana. Gli strumenti operativi per un nuovo welfare Laura Ricci, Francesco Crupi, Iacomoni Andrea	347	La valorizzazione dell'antica Kroton mediante la programmazione strategica. Interventi integrati e nuova governance Ferdinando Verardi	401
Rigenerazione urbana e riequilibrio territoriale. Per una politica integrata di programmazione e di produzione di servizi Laura Ricci, Francesca Rossi, Giulia Bevilacqua	354	Salubrità degli ambienti urbani mediterranei. Strategie progettuali bioclimatiche ed energie rinnovabili Ferdinando Verardi, Domenico Passarelli, Ivana Carbone	407
La componente turismo e loisir nei processi		INDICE DEGLI AUTORI	414

Are privately owned public spaces effective design and planning tools that can favour the creation of healthy, public spaces in contemporary cities? Notes from an empirical study in New York

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Abstract

In New York, privately owned public spaces (POPS) are spaces owned and managed by the private sector and accessible to the public by law. They are created by developers in exchange for the provision of space or tax reduction, and are regulated by zoning policies. A scrutiny of previous studies about New York City POPS shows that no studies have explicitly evaluated them as spaces that can provide “opportunities for quiet respite” from the city, nor have they focused on the physical and immaterial characteristics which can make these spaces beneficial for our physical and mental health. This contribution addresses this gap in literature by presenting the results of an empirical study conducted by the author in New York in the Spring 2019. After providing an overview of the evolution of the regulatory status of POPS in New York, the fieldwork study is introduced, and the empirically grounded methods, drawn from auto-ethnography and soundscape studies, are presented. Subsequently, results are outlined, consisting of a map of twenty spaces, selected by applying a qualitative approach to data synthesis informed by the Sixteen Hush City Qualities framework. In conclusion, limitations of the study are discussed and preliminary recommendations are given, referring to the NYC Zoning Resolution. Further research will be needed to fully assess these findings and finalize them in the form of recommendations, which could inform planners and policy makers on how to continue their goals in developing regulations that can guide the private sector to produce healthy urban environments.

Key-words: urban policies, public spaces, urban design and planning

Introduction

In parallel to urbanization growing at an accelerated rate with predictions from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development that almost 70 per cent of the world's population will be living in urban areas by 2050¹, researchers have noted that most countries are already pursuing policies which encourage the building of dense cities. If living in dense cities can provide people with a range of benefits, including higher productivity, shorter commutes, preservation of green spaces to name but a few, on the other hand, literature reveals that it can also expose residents to higher levels of pollution and, partially as a result, higher mortality rates (Ahlfeldt & Pietrostefani, 2019). The New Urban Agenda (Habitat III, 2017) was set up to for creating more socially, economically and ecologically successful and sustainable cities and the importance of public spaces² in addressing these goals has been affirmed (Haas and Mehaffy 2018), with the World Health Organization positioning health as key to this agenda (WHO, 2016; Grant et al., 2017). Designing, curating and planning healthy public spaces in large, densely populated contemporary cities are opportunities, which cannot be overlooked by urban designers, planners and city managers, who aim at operating in accordance with the New Urban Agenda, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the WHO Healthy Cities Program (UN, 2015; WHO, 2016; Talia, 2019). Against this backdrop, this contribution reflects on the potential of privately owned public spaces (hereafter abbreviated as POPS) as effective design and planning tools for the creation of healthy, public spaces in contemporary dense, big cities, by looking at POPS in Manhattan, New York. According to the NYC Department of Planning, privately owned public spaces are “spaces dedicated to public use and enjoyment and which are owned and maintained by private property owners, in exchange for bonus floor

¹ See: <https://www.oecd.org> (Accessed October 2019).

² The definition of public spaces used within the context of this study coincides with “public spaces are all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive” (Garau, 2015).

area or waivers”³, and are regulated by zoning policies. The New York POPS Program is dated back to 1961, when the New York City’s Zoning Resolution was overhauled: it was subsequently reformed in the 1970s, 1980s and more recently in the 2000s⁴ and, as of October 2019, it produced over 550 POPS primarily located in Manhattan⁵. Since 1961, several types of outdoor and indoor POPS have been introduced in the New York Zoning Resolution, including: plazas, arcades, covered pedestrian spaces, through block arcades, through block connections, sidewalk widenings, open air concourses, and gallerias, among others (Figure 1).

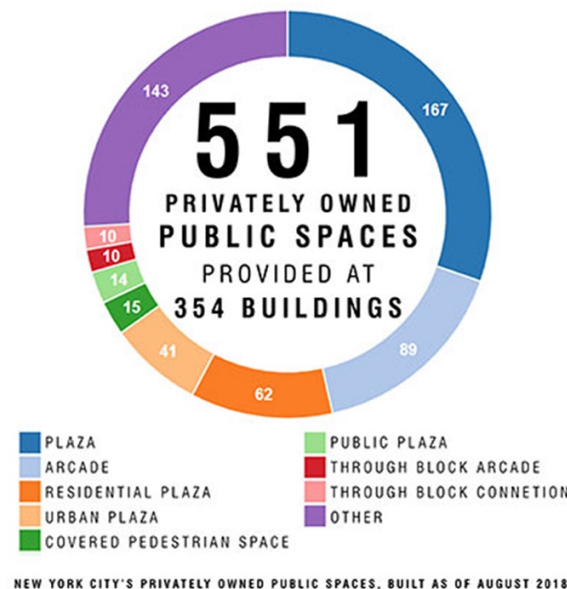


Figure 1 | New York City’s privately owned built public spaces as of August 2018.
Image source: NYC Department of City Planning.

In 2007 and 2009, amendments to the New York Zoning Resolution introduced a new type of POPS, the public plaza, which replaced provisions for urban and residential plazas. In parallel, the Program refined POPS’ amenities and operational standards, following specific purposes. Accordingly, public plazas shall “serve a variety of users of the public plaza area; provide spaces for solitary users while at the same time providing opportunities for social interaction for small groups; and provide safe spaces, with maximum visibility from the street and adjacent buildings and with multiple avenues for ingress and egress” (NYC Zoning Resolution Section 37-70).

The operational standards currently regulating the public plazas are twenty-three⁶, addressing POPS’: location, dimension, visibility, elevation, sidewalk frontage, circulation paths, seating, planting and trees, lighting and electrical power, litter receptacles, bicycle parking, public space signage, additional amenities, kiosks and open air cafes. They also define both the restrictions and permitted obstructions, accessibility, hours of access, uses and walls fronting on public plazas (NYC Zoning Resolution Section 37-70).

A scrutiny of previous studies about New York POPS shows that researchers have extensively researched this topic, for example examining how the evolving regulatory policy has affected the design quality, functionality, sociability and inclusiveness (e.g. Kayden, 2000; Schmidt et al., 2011; Huang & Frank, 2018). However, to the best of the author’s knowledge, previous studies have so far not explicitly evaluated New York POPS as spaces that can provide “opportunities for quiet respite” from the city (Loukaitou-Sideris &

³ See: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/plans/pops/pops.page> (Accessed October 2019).

⁴ For an overview of the history of the New York Zoning Resolution, see, for example: (Kayden, 2000) and (Schmidt et al., 2011).

⁵ Combined, NYC POPS provide nearly 3.8 million square feet of additional public space in the City. Source NYC Planning 2019.

⁶ For the full zoning text related to the public plaza design standards, see Article III Chapter 7 Section 70 of the New York City Zoning Resolution, available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/plans/pops/pops-plaza-standards.page> (Accessed October 2019).

Banerjee, 1998 in Schmidt et al., 2011) or for contemplation nor have they focused on the physical and immaterial characteristics, which can make these spaces beneficial for our physical and mental health. This contribution addresses this gap in literature by presenting an empirical study conducted by the author in the Spring of 2019 in over seventy NYC POPS, namely “plazas” and “through block connections”, including similar small public spaces. Firstly, the fieldwork study is introduced and the empirically grounded methods, drawn from auto-ethnography (Chang 2008) and soundscape studies (Schafer, 1977; ISO, 2014) are outlined. Subsequently, results are presented, consisting of a map of twenty spaces, selected by applying a qualitative approach to data synthesis informed by the application of the Sixteen Hush City Qualities framework (Radicchi, 2019c). In conclusion, the study limitations are discussed and preliminary recommendations are given, referring to the NYC Zoning Resolution, as to exploit the potential of POPS as design and planning tools for the creation of healthy, public spaces.

Methods and materials of the fieldwork study

The fieldwork study⁷ was conducted by the author in New York in the Spring 2019, between February and May 2019, in over seventy outdoor POPS, including similar small public spaces, in the borough of Manhattan, from Harlem down to Lower Manhattan, e.g. in Harlem, Morningside Heights, Central Park, Upper West Side, Midtown, Chelsea, West and East Village, NoLiTa, Little Italy, Soho, Bowery and Lower Manhattan. The categories of the New York POPS investigated included: plazas and through block plazas, the latter indicating “those spaces located on a midblock that connect two street frontages” (NYC Zoning Resolution Section 37-70). In order to investigate both the material and immaterial characteristics which can make these spaces appropriate for quiet respite and beneficial for our physical and mental health, empirically grounded methods were applied, drawn from auto-ethnography (Chang, 2008) and soundscape studies (Schafer, 1977; ISO 2014). Solo soundwalks⁸ (Radicchi, 2017a) were conducted by the author in the spaces under investigation to evaluate their environmental quality, including acoustic characteristics, and to collect in-situ mixed data, such as: pictures, *sonicshots* (i.e. short videos of up to twenty seconds) and observational notes. Sketching was also used as an analytical method to annotate site design characteristics, relevant to making these spaces small islands of relative quietness. Then, the Sixteen Hush City Qualities (Radicchi, 2019c) were applied to assess the potential of each space to provide with opportunities for quiet relief from the city and for contemplation. The Sixteen Hush City Qualities originate from previous research conducted by the author and discussed in (Radicchi et al., 2017; Radicchi, 2019c), and they have been conceived as a conceptual tool for the identification and assessment of small urban quiet areas, i.e. everyday quiet areas. These Sixteen Qualities are articulated in four categories: Spatial Justice, Acoustics, Comfort, Aesthetics. The category Spatial Justice includes: neighbourhood scale, fit within the walking distance grid (Welle et al., 2015), human-scale size (Gehl & Svarre, 2013), accessibility, whereas the Acoustics category includes the presence of natural, animal and/or human sounds, and the absence of foreground traffic noise. The Comfort category comprises options for social interaction and relaxation, options for having undisturbed conversations, and options for primary sitting. Lastly, the Aesthetics category is composed of good visual and landscape quality, cleanliness, and well maintenance. The spaces which mostly the Sixteen Hush City Qualities were included in the list of potential quiet areas (see Table 1), which were mapped by using the Hush City app⁹ (Radicchi, 2017b) and linked to the web-based, global Hush City Map¹⁰ (Radicchi 2019b).

⁷ This fieldwork study was part of a broader research project, conducted by the author within the context of a research stay at the New York University, and aimed at: studying current policies and regulations related to quiet areas; researching state-of-the-art projects across the fields of urban design, placemaking and acoustics, which can positively impact the sonic quality of urban public spaces; conducting field work to study existing and potential everyday quiet areas in Manhattan; and disseminating the soundscape concept and related methods among scholars, professionals, activists and the public, via interviews, public presentations, soundwalks. See: (Radicchi, 2019a).

⁸ Soundwalking as an educational and research practice was first experimented in the 1960s by Michael Southworth and in the 1970s by the members of the World Soundscape Project, and since the early examples of soundwalks, scholars and practitioners have explored a huge variety of methods within the arts and humanities, social sciences, ecology studies and engineering (for an overview of the method, see: (Westerkamp, 1974; McCartney, 2014; Radicchi, 2017a). More recently, soundwalks as a participatory method of conducting scientific research have been defined by the ISO norm on soundscape with the aim of unifying its application, thus facilitating comparative studies (ISO, 2018).

⁹ Hush City is a free mobile app for iOS and Android, invented by the author, which allows the crowdsourcing of mixed, geo-referenced and time-stamped data of quiet areas, which are then linked in real time to a web-based, open access platform: The Hush City Map.

¹⁰ The Hush City Map is available at <https://map.opensourcesoundscapes.org/view-area> and it contains the everyday quiet areas crowdsourced worldwide with the Hush City app.

Preliminary results

The results presented in this section originate from the fieldwork conducted by the author in over seventy outdoor POPS, including similar small public spaces, in the borough of Manhattan in the Spring 2019. These spaces were analysed using the Sixteen Hush City Qualities framework (Radicchi 2019c): accordingly, twenty spaces fulfilled more than thirteen out of the Sixteen Qualities and they were selected as potential everyday quiet areas. Out of these twenty spaces, eight spaces fulfilled all the Sixteen Qualities. The latter are included in the map and represented via images displayed in Figure 2. In terms of spatial distribution, the twenty spaces are located in the borough of Manhattan, with a concentration in Midtown (see Table 1), whereas the eight spaces that fulfilled the Sixteen Qualities (in bold in Table 1) are scattered throughout Manhattan and are located in Harlem, Upper West Side, Midtown, West Village, New York University Campus neighbouring Washington Square Park, NoLiTa and Lowe Manhattan.

Table 1 | List of the twenty spaces, which were selected as potential quiet areas. These spaces were also mapped with the Hush City app and linked to the web-based Hush City Map. The code (#) refers to the number of these areas displayed in the Hush City Map. Table source: Antonella Radicchi 2019

Harlem	Morningside Heights	U p p e r West Side	Midtown	W e s t Village	N Y U Campus	NoLiTa & Bowery	L o w e r Manhattan
#2300	#2299	#2363	#2309	#2072	#2210	#2289	#2380
	#2301	#2361	#2312	#2203	#2365	#2288	#2376
			#2307	#2073			#2375
			#2308				
			#2311				

The typology of these twenty spaces varies and includes: pocket parks (N=1), community gardens (N=2), church gardens (N=2), university campus garden (N=1), free-car alleys (N=1), POPS plazas (N=6), POPS through block plazas (N=4) and square parks (3). In terms of spatial configuration, these spaces are usually embedded in the blocks, have a human-scale size and are at walking distances from residential and working places and public transportation hubs, giving access to subway and bus lines. They are all open accessible outdoor spaces, without physical elements that can limit personal mobility. A quality acoustic environment, determined by natural, animal and human sounds and absence of foreground traffic noise is also a key characteristic of these spaces. With regard to comfort qualities, they offer options for having conversations and relaxing in relative quiet niches, while providing opportunities for social interaction and playing. Seating is also well conceived, offering a variety of comfortable options, including moveable and fixed chairs, fixed benches with backs, seat walls, planter ledges and seating steps. Aesthetic qualities also distinguish these spaces, which are usually well designed, properly maintained, clean and often surrounded by valuable architecture and/or landmarks. Quality landscape, in the form of trees and planting, are essential components of these spaces, along with water amenities, like waterfalls, fountains and reflecting pools.



Figure 2 | Map of the twenty potential small quiet areas resulting from the assessment of over seventy outdoor POPS, including similar small public spaces, in Manhattan. Image source Antonella Radicchi 2019

Conclusion and future work

This fieldwork study in New York was empirical and exploratory in nature, and as so, its findings shall be interpreted as heuristic and indicative for future research and action. Nevertheless, further examination is required to highlight at least three important preliminary results. Firstly, the findings show that the twenty small, quiet areas identified through the fieldwork study do not overlap with the Quiet Zones officially designated by the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (Radicchi, 2019a). This result shows the untapped potential of these New York spaces as an existing healthy infrastructure, which could be protected by the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, by designating these spaces as official Quiet Zones of New York City.

A second important result regards the scattered POPS' spatial distribution¹¹, which reveals that the allocation of the POPS in Manhattan follows the interests of the private sector in the absence of a general masterplan. This result confirms previous studies, e.g. by Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee (1998), who, referring to similar spaces in San Francisco and Los Angeles, highlighted how the creation of such exclusionary spaces indicates a paradigm shift in urban design into a market driven practice, leading to the production of fragmented and disconnected spaces. It would be therefore recommendable to include the POPS within a general masterplan, which could support effective strategic planning in light of spatial justice.

A third important result emerges from the analysis of the common material and immaterial characteristics of the twenty spaces, selected as potential small, quiet areas, if compared with the current standards set up by the New York Zoning Resolution to regulate the POPS' type of plazas (NYC Zoning Resolution Section 37-70). For plazas working as effective spaces of quiet respite and contemplation¹², it would be recommendable to augment some of the current New York Zoning Resolution's standards, for example, as following. Minor portions: the plaza regulations shall not only permit, but oblige for small areas of the plaza to take the form of alcoves or niches adjacent to the main portion of the plazas and located not on the street frontage. Sidewalk frontage: the plaza regulations shall require that 50% of the sidewalk frontage contain traffic noise barriers, in the form of light design elements, like sonic crystal acoustic barriers, not exceeding four feet (approximately one meter and twenty centimetres) of a plaza wall. Water amenities: water amenities, such as waterfalls, fountains and reflecting pools, shall be required as mandatory and their location and configuration shall be regulated as to address quality acoustic

¹¹ The NYC Planning's interactive map provides an overview of all POPS in the city, see: <https://capitalplanning.nyc.gov/pops/M060075#14.09/40.7496/-73.9705> (Accessed October 2019).

¹² For a comprehensive list of design and planning recommendations see: Table 3 in (Radicchi, 2019c).

environment via sound masking and/or sound distraction effects. Seating: options for sitting shall be required to be located in the proximity of the alcoves or niches and avoided on the street frontage. Installation of *sonic islands*¹³ may also be permitted in the plazas. Planting and Trees: specific plants and vegetation shall be positioned along the street frontages to make people feel less disturbed by potential nearby traffic and increase the presence of natural sounds¹⁴. Planting specific vegetation to enhance the acoustic environment of the plazas shall be regulated and planting options and related sonic effects shall be provided (e.g. see the Parisian *Jardin des Bambous*). Circulation paths: regulations shall provide a list of specific materials for circulation path design¹⁵ to enhance the acoustic qualities of plazas.

Overall, in terms of implication for policy-making and urban planning, these findings suggest that, if properly tailored, the regulatory policy of the New York POPS has the potential to favour the creation of spaces for urban quiet respite and contemplation, especially in the case of new development and urban regeneration projects in dense, big cities. However, the interpretation of these results is still at the discursive level and these findings should not be intended as conclusive. Further research is needed to fully assess these results and finalize a set of recommendations, which could inform planners and policy makers to continue their goals in developing regulations that can guide the private sector to produce healthy urban environments.

Acknowledgments

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¹³ Sonic islands are benches with loudspeakers playing natural sounds, like those chosen by the local residents for the redesign of Nauener Platz in Berlin (Schulte-Fortkamp & Jordan, 2016).

¹⁴ For example, see: (Berlin Senate, 2009).

¹⁵ For example, see: (Daumal, 2002).

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