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Tommaso Vitale

► **To cite this version:**

Tommaso Vitale. Grammars of Public Space: The Tensions of Participation and Representation in Urban Conflicts. *Politica e politiche locali*, Sep 2007, Università degli Studi di Catania, Italy. hal-03600640

**HAL Id: hal-03600640**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03600640v1>**

Submitted on 12 Dec 2024

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# Grammars of Public Space:

## The Tensions of Participation and Representation in Urban Conflicts

By Tommaso Vitale

### Abstract

This paper explores the intricate dynamics of urban conflicts and public spaces, focusing on the tension between participation and representation in grassroots mobilizations. Using an emblematic case study from Milan, the research examines how local committees navigate disputes over urban space allocation while addressing divergent interests among residents, public authorities, and organized groups. How do local mobilizations balance participation and representation in the contestation of public space governance, and what are the implications for democratic legitimacy and urban planning? Drawing on theories of public space (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), civic participation (Della Porta, 2004), and normative conflict (Hirschman, 1991), the paper situates the study within broader debates on governance, justice, and urban sociology. It highlights the "grammar of public justification" as a central mechanism through which actors legitimize their claims. The research employs a mixed-method approach, including historical analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. A detailed reconstruction of a 30-year-long conflict over a contested urban area in Milan provides the empirical basis for this study. The analysis incorporates archival data, interviews with committee members and residents, and ethnographic observation of public meetings and neighborhood interactions.

*Historical Context and Mobilization Dynamics:* The first section traces the origins of the conflict surrounding the Colombo Park. It examines the emergence of grassroots mobilization, initial protests, and the evolving demands of local committees, highlighting how these shaped the public debate on urban green space.

*Participation versus Representation:* This section delves into the tension between inclusive participation and selective representation. It critiques the self-appointment of committees as representatives of residents without securing explicit legitimacy, revealing fractures in their claims to democratic accountability.

*The Role of Material and Symbolic Stakes:* The study explores the symbolic and material dimensions of urban green spaces, particularly the contentious inclusion of an amphitheater in the park's design. It analyzes how residents' fears of degradation and safety shaped their resistance to the project, despite its collective benefits.

*Conflict, Compromise, and Democratic Deficits:* The final section assesses the broader implications of the conflict for participatory governance. It discusses the limitations of participatory processes that fail to integrate diverse voices, leading to fragmented outcomes and reinforcing public distrust.

The paper argues that urban conflicts, such as the one studied, reveal critical challenges in contemporary participatory governance. It underscores the importance of institutional mediation to reconcile competing claims and foster a shared sense of the public good. The study calls for more inclusive and iterative participatory frameworks to address the inherent tensions between collective aspirations and individual concerns.

### Keywords:

urban conflicts; public spaces; participation; representation; governance; grassroots mobilization; urban sociology; civic engagement; Milan; amphitheater disputes; collective action; symbolic stakes; participatory governance; democratic legitimacy; urban green spaces.

Local movements are characterized by a certain degree of self-referentiality and spontaneity in mobilization, influenced mainly by the political opportunity system of their urban context (and to a lesser extent by social, political and economic opportunities present at other scales) (Cf. Della Porta, 2004). Their action is characterized not only in reaction to public choices, but also increasingly by its active and proactive character, even going so far as to constitute community services (Cf. de Leonardis, Vitale, 2001; Della Porta, Diani, 2004). In addition, neighborhood committees, territorial collectives and spontaneous groups are often involved by public administrations to express problems and participate in the identification of possible solutions. However, the status of this participation is not clear or even defined in terms of representation. For example, in what capacity can neighborhood committees speak on behalf of the residents of a neighborhood? In order to highlight the tensions between participation and representation, I will draw on an "emblematic" case (Cf. Ginzburg, 1986) because the neighborhood committee actors took it for granted that they represented the interests of the inhabitants, without subjecting themselves to a legitimate test of representation. The case highlights how participation in local mobilizations opens *conflictual*

*processes* not only with a counterpart in public administration, but also with the very inhabitants of the territories one would like to represent (Polizzi, Vitale, 2017).

## 1. The struggle for the park

Around the area between Usignolo, Storno, Val Bavona and Cardellino streets in Milan, some 58,000 square meters in size, an intricate conflict has developed over the past 30 years: citizens have demanded that the area be used for public green space, real estate interests have *lobbied* for its use for private civil construction, and *lobbies* have called for a golf course.

The area in question is ceded in 1967 by a developer as an urbanization charge to the City of Milan, which earmarks it for public use. At one end he builds a municipal swimming pool thanks to a C.O.N.I. grant, and on the remaining area he reserves the right to decide what to do. Immediately real estate interests appeal to the Council of State in order to be able to buy the area and make it buildable, raising an exception with respect to the way (Vitale, 2009) the administration had changed the land use. In 1971, concerned about the risk of losing a possible green space in the neighborhood, some neighborhood associations, coordinated by a local A.C.L.I. club, illegally set up a large tent on the corner of Via Inganni and Via Val Bavona. The occupation continues for over a month and a total of over 40,000 signatures are collected from citizens demanding that a public garden be built on the area as soon as possible. After the initial phase of protest around the Tent, further moments of mobilization followed in the 1970s and 1980s; under the slogan: "The park is there," different repertoires of action are used: parties, collective initiatives to clean up the large abandoned area, other signature collections, appeals to the press. Around the problem of the disused space aggregates a coordination, formed initially by neighborhood associations and citizens of the houses adjacent to the area in question. The space is nicknamed Parco Colombo by citizens, but the municipal administration remains inert, totally disinterested in the appeals and public initiatives carried out. In the second half of the 1980s, a group of citizens decided to clean up and level part of the area, creating and equipping a "free" soccer field, and progressively taking care of its usability.

In the early 1990s, rumors began to circulate that the municipality wanted to allocate the area to build a golf course. In 1992, the Private Building Commission of the City of Milan granted one lot of the area for the construction of apartments; as an urbanization charge, the company that was awarded the lot had to build in the remaining 58,000 square meters an area of equipped green space. The decision of the Private Building Commission is dated Oct. 15, 1992, but the Urban Planning Commission of District 17 analyzes the project only on May 17, 1995; even after that, however, the construction of the apartments remains at a standstill (it will only start in 2000). On Dec. 21, an illustrative report is delivered to the City Hall about the urbanization works due to the concession of the area already earmarked as a parkland for the construction - in contrast - of a three-hole golf course; the course would occupy the entire area and require a 12-meter-high fence. Revived is the Columbus Park Committee<sup>1</sup>, which is lobbying opposition parties, the council and the media to prevent the golf course from being built. However, *no* initiatives or particular mobilizations take place in the neighborhood. On January 17, 1996, the *Corriere della Sera* reports the news of the imminent construction of the golf course. The Committee for Colombo Park denounces the injustice of such a project, saying that the golf course would not only not be usable by citizens, but that it would be unsightly, with its high fences, and that it would disturb neighboring houses by having to be equipped with 18 tall lighting towers. After a few months, the councillors approached replied that the golf course would not be built, as it was only a project under consideration, which was in any case discarded. In the meantime, the green area is given the green light to be designed as an urbanization charge by another construction company. Committee associations are involved in the participatory design of the park. In April 1998, the

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<sup>1</sup> Formed by the A.C.L.I. Oscar Romero circle, the A.R.C.I. Giambellino circle, the Zone 17 Senior Citizens Center, the "Piero Godetti" Cultural Circle, the Villaggio dei Fiori tenants' committee, the "Campo Colombo" users, the Communist Party (later the PDS/DS and Rifondazione Comunista sections).

Extraordinary Commissioner of Zone 17, Dr. Finolli, once again calls into question the intended use of the area, expressing opposition to the plan for a public garden with an equipped green area, and in May of the same year the City Council passes a motion that takes up the idea of the golf course. The committee, which over the years has always changed its name though remaining a form of coordination among the same organizations, now takes the name "Consulta democratica" and launches several initiatives directly in the neighborhood. In particular, it again denounces the injustice of the golf course project and of decisions made without any form of confrontation and consultation with the residents of the area. In the following months, the Council tries to mobilize citizens to clean up the area again. Over the next three years the company builds houses and sells them. The Consulta further changes its name and continues its lobbying activities to demand and obtain the park: it has minority councilors promote questions in the city council and planning commission, and urges the zoning board to take a stand. Eventually, on February 20, 2002, work on the park began. Although more than 30 years late, the park is realized: the administration has guaranteed the general interest, and the dynamic of interests has been bound and forced to give up its claims. *It would seem*, then, to be a good example of citizen involvement in decision-making processes.

## 2. Some signs of contradiction

The week before work was to begin on the construction of the Park, an official from the "Parks and Gardens" directorate of the City of Milan telephoned me to kindly inform me that the litigation was over and that the city administration had 'given the green light' for the construction of the Park. As already mentioned, the Park would finally be built by a private company as an urbanization charge for the construction of a residential complex in the neighboring square. I went to attend the first day of construction more out of curiosity than research interest. I thought that by now I had a rough understanding of the sequence of actions that had characterized the conflict, and I believed that this had now been 'resolved'. I therefore went to see the beginning of the work contented with the outcome of the dispute. I was happy, from my point of view-which was, moreover, not at all relevant to the research-that the conflict had been resolved by constituting a common good in the general interest of the inhabitants and not in the particularistic interest of *lobbies*.

The start of the work was not celebrated by any official speeches, nor did it assume visibility in the media arena. The work began in the presence only of the residents of the houses adjacent to the area. Passing among the elderly who watched the machines and workers arrive, 'grumbles' and expletives came to my ear: broken, hushed, almost confiding phrases between people who knew each other. Although I did not understand what they were saying to each other, I fully caught the tone and mood of annoyance and annoyance. The noises, the half-hearted words of the elders who were annoyedly observing the work of the workers rang as many alarm bells to me. But how? The scene seemed reminiscent of the wailing and timid opposition that characterizes situations in which a green space is devastated, and not the just conclusion of a participatory struggle. I therefore decided to return again on the following days at different times. Each day I passed by for a few moments, but invariably registered an insult or a frown. Day after day these small gestures did not seem to diminish or wane in intensity. I therefore resolved to reopen my questions around the case and resume my interview and observation work in the field. In fact, I had not adequately delved into the dynamics of the conflict and had mistakenly delineated the configuration of actors and interactions, the "attitudinal system" (Cf. Boltanski, 1990): instead of the "inhabitants," I had interviewed the activists of associations and intermediate bodies.

What is the reason why, at the end of a struggle that saw the victory of "active citizens" against both big real estate interests and *lobbies* interested in a 'snobbish' place like a golf course, residents exhibit small forms of indignation towards the Park? Elders and parents, the two topical figures who motivated the entire dynamic of the conflict, walked by the works and instead of showing signs of satisfaction with the victory achieved, they revealed, if anything, upset, annoyance, a sense of disturbance.

### 3. The dispute over the Amphitheater

What is interesting about this scene is that it helps us see the inherent plurality that characterizes the "public" during a conflict<sup>2</sup>. As is often the case in conflicts over the destination of a public space, neighborhood residents, administrative institutions, associations and parties are involved. The issue of participation played a predominant role in the conflict, calling into question the forms of urban *governance* (which I will not discuss explicitly) and the problems of regulation. The dynamics of the conflict have been slow, very time-dilated, and characterized by contradictory processes of recognition of common goods and ends.

While the Columbus Park Committee was fighting its battles, the residents of the houses adjoining the area had seen the project and they did not like it at all. In particular, they had not liked the idea of an *amphitheater* being built within the Park. So they had organized and collected over 500 signatures involving almost all the residents of the houses to demand that the amphitheater not be built. Better, if anything, to do nothing and leave the area abandoned as it was. "Better ugly as it is than dangerous as it will be."

According to many of the inhabitants, the only time they expressed real criticism, i.e., subjecting themselves to the constraints inherent in an action under publicity (Cf. Boltanski, Thévenot, 2006), was when they collected signatures against the Amphitheater in the buildings adjoining the Park. It is clear from the residents' words that the problem does not lie in the Park. They do not have an aversion to green or beautiful spaces. They are not lovers of unkempt areas. They have a shared local knowledge that leads them to worry and reject the idea of the Park. The idea of a park being built under their house immediately worried them. One might say "immediately," but it is this sense of immediacy of concern and fear that needs to be explained.

Residents always seem to trace the concern toward the park back to a particular institutional neglect toward the parks in the area. They denounce how towards the parks in the area there is no investment by the public administration, nor any form of presence of the so-called organized civil society. When I asked citizens what they thought of the Columbus Park Committee's intention to "animate" the space through musical initiatives and various forms of presence, the reactions were always negative.

Above all, the bogeyman of the Amphitheater appears in the words of the inhabitants. The Amphitheater seems to have emerged in the course of the conflict as a fictitious subject capable of motivating the (re)actions of the inhabitants of the houses near the park. Negative expectations around the Amphitheater would derive from the other Amphitheatres in the neighborhood. First and foremost, that of Via Odazio, one of the last "squares" in Milan where drug addicts use heroin under the open sky. At the same time, moreover, protest had arisen against another possible amphitheater, no more than a kilometer away. As part of the redevelopment of the equipped green space on Ciconi Street, the municipality planned to build an amphitheater. Citizens living in the adjacent streets immediately rose up and threatened to garrison the area and prevent the work. Residents, to define the quality of civil coexistence in their area, draw on a repertoire of categorizations formed in previous collective experiences (Cf. Trom, 1997; Cousin, Vitale, 2003; Cefai, 2006). Thus, a kind of "network of relationships" between the Amphitheatres seems to have taken shape in the neighborhood: the *memory of the institutional treatment of the Amphitheatres* helps determine the shape of citizens' expectations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The various forms of mobilization that took shape through the dynamics of conflict rested on attempts to problematize the definition of the situation, the denunciation of injustices, and the articulation of claims. Each of these activities has been accomplished by facing a publicity test. But the public referred to in these trials does not exist except as a rhetorical fiction, as a referent of political and moral action. Rather, what is present in a public arena are audiences, quite different and differentiated from each other.

<sup>3</sup> Memories of common goods and evils in a community are articulated on the dimensions of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. Urban conflicts are occasions in which categories and vocabularies of motives are elaborated that allow citizens to discuss the quality of the neighborhood in which they live (Cf. Vitale, 2003; Quassoli, 2004; Tosi, 2004).

If for the members of the Committee the Amphitheater is a symbol of a common good, desirable precisely because of the collective character of its enjoyment, which multiplies the opportunities of the inhabitants (primarily opportunities for expression and creativity) for the inhabitants it is, if anything, a "common evil," to be avoided, whose necessity is neither understood nor accepted. For residents, amphitheaters are an injustice because they are capable of taking away sociality and fostering the degradation of an area<sup>4</sup>. For some, the degradation would be linked essentially to the encroachment of marginal people and in particular young drug addicts, an indistinct hybrid of noise and social danger. For others, degradation would be ensured more generally by the particularistic use that would necessarily be made of it: to the fact, that is, that occasions for non-regulatable disturbance would be multiplied. In addition to everything, just as the Amphitheater would come from above, from an imposed decision, equally - according to the inhabitants - it would not be possible to concur in regulating its use in a participatory manner.

The denunciation of the potential degradation that the Park would bring about pertains to the observation that the green areas in the area are not public spaces, but places subjected to particularistic use because they are unsafe and can be frequented only by some. These are, in other words, complaints that express a reference of justice that claims to qualify public spaces as practically open for common use, usable by each and all. The park dispute, therefore, does not appear to have anything to do with behaviors of *nimbyism*, from the acronym N.I.M.B.Y. - not in my backyard: "not in my backyard," "not under my house," or the selfish logic whereby one does not want anything in the vicinity of one's home, disregarding the general interest. If anything, residents make arguments for justice that claim generality (Cf. Andretta, 2004). To argue their positions, they refer to two local collective experiences, which have provided them with categories for evaluating public action: on the one hand, the degradation and institutional neglect that characterizes the area's amphitheaters, and on the other, the "Tent" experience, as a source of civic arguments about the need for the involvement of the inhabitants (and not those who arrogate themselves to their representatives) in deciding on common goods. And indeed, to justify their actions, the inhabitants speak of the Park not as an object of private use, but as a public space. In fact, they oppose a particularistic use of the Park, denounce the habits of neglect of parks and Amphitheaters in the neighborhood, and thus end up passing *judgment on the difficulties of park management* not thematized by either the Committee or the City. In this sense, the meaning they attach to this asset is different from the meaning attached to it by the Committee actors. Therefore, the theme advanced by the inhabitants is that of the degradation of the neighborhood. The inhabitants seize the dispute as an opportunity to demand goods that will improve their neighborhood, and from this point of view they oppose the Amphitheater, which they qualify as a common evil, as an object that produces - instead of reversing - degradation.

The residents of the houses in front of the Park publicly declare that rather than trust the solutions envisioned by the Columbus Park Committee, they prefer to keep the area as a landfill. Recognizable in the words of the residents of the houses is a topical argument, the endangerment thesis, whose genealogy Hirschman (1991, p. 87-136) has described. The residents recognize and share the validity of the goal of eliminating the common evil represented by the area's degradation, its abandonment, and its having been turned into a park. They also share that the creation of a park and even an amphitheater, in the best of all possible worlds represent an undoubted common good. However, they point out how the preposterous change involves unacceptable costs and consequences. The step in the direction of reducing degradation will endanger an older achievement, that of relative safety. The opportunity provided by the park is less

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<sup>4</sup> The actors seem to talk about the Amphitheater by analyzing its power with analyses that are implicitly nomothetic and external to the context of action. In other words, the inhabitants seem to ground their reading of the power of the Amphitheater as the impact of a form of architecture that imposes its force on the behaviors of those who come in contact with it. In this sense, the Amphitheater in its materiality would be able to make things happen. Architecture constitutes a cognitive and normative environment that extends individuals' capacities for action. In this sense it is not a medium, but a mediator, placing constraints and conditions on action and fostering ways of coordinating conduct. See also Heurtin (1999, p. 64; cf. Bifulco, Vitale, 2003).

valuable than the 'freedom' and 'security' they enjoy at that time. The endangerment thesis is a motive capable of invalidating any project of political transformation of a context. Here I am interested in emphasizing how this motive implies a very strong devaluation of the opponent. Whoever proposes the project of social transformation becomes a person who contributes to jeopardizing some of the fundamental aspects of our lives, some achievements that are now acquired, aspects that are indispensable and far more important than the benefits that might come later. Those who propose this project are attentive to something fundamental and must therefore be opposed in every way. The use of the jeopardy thesis in the vocabulary of motives entails a quantum leap in the hostilities that characterize conflict. It is one thing to have as a counterpart a person whose proposals and exhibited solutions one does not esteem; it is quite another to have to interact with someone who attends to something inalienable to us.

The introduction of the endangerment thesis into the conflict contributed to the conditions of total distrust of the residents of the houses in front of the park towards both the associations and opposition parties in the area and the majority in the City Council. It has contributed, therefore, to increasing the conditions of isolation and incommunicability.

#### **4. What participation? And what representation?**

The organizations giving life to the Committee played an important role in organizing the application of "rules *and* identity" (March, 1998, p. 81) to situations. If we take the so-called "participatory planning" of the park as a reference, we can see that the strategy of the Committee was to signal as potential users of the park, and therefore entitled to discuss its architecture, only and exclusively collective and organized subjects: associations, parties, schools. Those entitled to speak had to participate as representatives of something or someone. In organizing this principle, precisely at the same time "rule and identity," they consistently made selections being able to justify in full generality their choice, thus maintaining full legitimacy to participatory planning.

During the same period, committee members organized street mobilizations and fully accessible forms of claims in support of the Park, initiatives that saw little participation by residents of neighboring homes.

*Disappointment* over the lack of mobilization of the residents overlaps with the *frame of* the disabling judgment that emerged in relation to the "instrumentalization" situation, activating a feeling of nostalgia in the committee members. Nostalgia for "when the people were there"; nostalgia for the mythical days of the Tent, when everyone, but really everyone, participated; nostalgia for the days when "people for things fought, and you didn't have to fight for them, but with them." Committee activists interpret the situation of non-participation in their mobilization only as a form of political apathy. Nostalgia drives a general judgment about the political culture of the house dwellers, which tends to extend to all neighborhood residents. The inability to participate would-according to the Committee members-at the same time be a result of social mechanisms that fall on the people who suffer them inertly, and a form of moral weakness of the same.

The conflict between the Columbus Park Committee and the residents takes on even greater interest when we consider that the residents of the houses adjoining the Park traditionally have been characterized by a strongly left-leaning vote. They thus represent the target electorate of the parties on the Committee. The presence of a strong conflict between these two parties shows how the decision to have the Park built was unable to establish an object of compromise. The distance and disconnect between the 'inhabitants' and the 'organized citizens of civil society' becomes striking when looking at an opaque process of alliance between the inhabitants and some real estate interests to prevent the construction of the Amphitheater.

As we have said, the collection of signatures was a moment in which residents took the floor. It is not easy to trace this activity back to the *à la mode* categories of self-organization or 'participation of those close to the issues.' While it is true, in fact, that through the collection of signatures the inhabitants shared and

stabilized a repertoire of motives and justified it in full generality, it is not equally true that this process was self-generated as if it were a reaction triggered by the thickening of emotions. Residents tell of being invited from the outside to collect signatures. Some go even further, fearing that they were instrumentalized.

By allying themselves with real estate interests, residents have allowed themselves to be 'instrumentalized' and have exposed themselves to criticism from neighborhood associations and leftist parties. As a result, their 'voice' competence, credibility, and ability to formulate proposals and projects were greatly weakened. The committee has been able to manage the fluctuations in the intensity of the contrast, and make its claims legitimately and effectively and therefore "get justice." However, the committee has not offered spaces for discussion and participation with neighborhood residents. When it comes to participation, a crucial point of reference is the public nature of participation itself. And residents in the course of the conflict denounced the "undemocratic" method of consultation practices of the committee and the city administration. The complaints of injustice by the inhabitants of the houses adjoining the park were very precise, different from those of the Committee: it is not fair that someone should represent us without consulting us; it is not fair that they should design the park without listening to us; it is not fair that they should not provide the park with the infrastructure that would make it safe. The Committee's complaints were very different: it is not right to leave the area in neglect and decay; it is not right that the neighborhood has so few green spaces; it is not right to leave a public place to private interests; it is not right to build a golf course that interests only a few; it is not right to allocate a public asset without justifying in full generality the choices; it is not right to change the rules *ad hoc* to favor a building speculation; it is not right to wait too long; it is not right to prevent the construction of a bar in the future park; it is not right to keep a place ugly. Thus, both the Committee and the residents have been able to argue their claims in full generality, but there seems to be no common ground among them: one and the other have made their claims without sharing them or listening to each other. And, over the years, in the absence of translation of the arguments of the different actors, the residents' claims have morphed, even to the point of arguing that it is not right for the park to be made because it would bring noise and violence. And similarly, after the early stages of mobilization, the committee failed any test of consensus in the neighborhood.

The city council majority also failed to capture the residents' protest, or to address it, or to offer it representation. The struggle between the actors has kept a public arena of conflict open, but the places of collective processing that the conflict has brought forth have not been common, publicly accessible places.

No coordination was attempted between the practices of the Columbus Park Committee and those of the Ciconi Street Green Defense Committee, despite the fact that there were some common actors (the DS) within. No mediation favored the participation of the soccer team born out of the arrangement of an area of the abandoned land. The "participatory design" of the park was a mediating device because it allowed some of the actors to agree on the plurality of possible uses of the space and the infrastructure for its use. The project succeeded in preventing the park from becoming the mere summation of different interests (that of the young, that of the elderly, that of the bocce players), but it failed to translate the position of the inhabitants into any material device. Not only that: the project as a mediation tool does not contain any device that commits the public administration to take procedural responsibility for what will happen in the Park and in the relations between citizens. In addition, there has been very little "participatory design." Unlike the mobilization around the "Tent," the residents in this case did not see themselves: they were not invited and did not find in the "participatory planning" an opportunity to translate their demands. The construction of the equipped green area, and in particular the building of the Amphitheater was for most citizens only a risk factor. The mediations present in the conflict were insufficient to allow the reconfiguration of the inhabitants' horizon of expectations, and if anything, they consolidated it. The initiatives put in place by the Committee did not convince the inhabitants about the forms of reliability on the future institutional treatment of the security-related problems generated by the presence of the Amphitheater. The inhabitants did not find in the adjustments finally decided upon any form of translation of their demands.



Within this framework, it seems that the space for action available to inhabitants remained defined by codes of juxtaposition of interests and associated with conflict strategies and dual relationships, as otherwise noted in many other experiences of urban conflict in Milan and province (Cf. Bifulco 2000: 181; Mosca 2004; Centemeri, 2006; Vitale, forthcoming). Even the physical realization of the park itself does not seem to have been able to create a public arena, a common ground for mutual recognition and conflict processing.

The entry of the dispute into public space had come about through citizen mobilization through "the Tent." The experience of the Tent was an initial, highly participatory moment of mobilization that indelibly marked the participants' experience. According to the protagonists, it was a moment of collective mobilization capable of indistinctly involving all the inhabitants of the neighborhood.

Therefore, it is thanks to the tent, the true mobilizing device for the conflict, that the inhabitants of the neighborhood have emerged "from below" as leading actors. But looking at the actions that have unfolded in the dynamics of the contrast, it is worth noting that, while it is true that in the early 1970s the Committee for Colombo Park, by defining and dealing with the problem of the quality of the abandoned area as a public place, contributed to creating a public arena of discussion and interactions about it, it is equally true that over the years this requirement of publicity has gradually been lost. More precisely, the affirmation and recognition of the public value of the contrast on Columbus Park has been replaced by collective action practices characterized by a low degree of accessibility, visibility and shareability. Over the years, more and more, the residents were 'replaced' by the associations of the Columbus Park Committee, which claimed to represent them. But this process of representation was never tested, never faced a legitimate test of consensus. And gradually the participation of the inhabitants faded away (although they remained actors involved in the conflict).

We can well say, therefore, that the long dynamic of the conflict has progressively posed the problem of the representation of the inhabitants: who is legitimized to speak on their behalf? Who is legitimized to act in their interests? Neighborhood associations and parties have been self-appointed to represent the inhabitants, but the latter have preferred to be instrumentalized by real estate interests than to accept being represented by the local associationism (which, by the way, is politically close to the electoral choices of most of them). In the face of this, the actors did not get involved to try to configure evidence of representation. And when, after 30 years of struggle, the Park was "finally" realized, the residents of neighboring houses did not recognize it as a common good, but only as a source of concern and potential further degradation of the neighborhood. Moreover, while a sense of apathy and fatalism was reinforced for residents, distrust of popular participation and a sense of nostalgia for the past emerged for committee members. The idea that problems should be debated with all actors involved in the conflict did not emerge.

In committees, given the low degree of structuring and the good level of local roots, there is a strong temptation to consider it 'natural' to represent the demands of an area, as if representation were an emergent property of belonging to an area. But this temptation interrupts the process of representation, and only leaves citizens with fewer tools for effective participation. Representation is never an *immediate* given; it is always a mediated outcome of legitimate trials capable of conferring a provisional and revocable status. Participation needs not only motivations, interests and voluntarism, but also and especially legitimate participatory devices that are open not only to highly structured interest groups.

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