

Streets Between Public and Private

“Nei panni degli altri”,
from Venice to China

Anna Laura Govoni

luav, Venice

annalaura.govoni@gmail.com

© The Author(s) 2016.

This article is published
with Creative Commons
license CC BY-SA 4.0

Firenze University Press.

DOI: 10.13128/contesti-20376

www.fupress.net/index.php/contesti/

I have titled my contribution maintaining the Italian expression “nei panni degli altri” on purpose. Literally it could be translated as “in the clothes of other people”, that is dressing with other people’s T-shirts, pants, skirts, jackets or else, meaning, metaphorically, that we are placing ourselves in another new (or different) condition or point of view and gaining experience from it.

Come se si stesse facendo una passeggiata con il lettore, nell’articolo l’autrice tenta di guidare l’attenzione verso oggetti disposti nello spazio. Usando alcuni esempi si specula sui loro significati e valori per mostrare quanto articolata e ricca possa essere una strada. Ci si sofferma più a lungo sui panni stesi, un mezzo di comunicazione attraverso il quale si riduce riduce il divario tra pubblico e privato.

From this initial sensation I start introducing the theme discussed here: the interplay between people acting along the streets and the public sphere through the mediation of objects. I am also including images and captions of examples to support the points discussed, the first in figure 1 and 2.

I took the two shots in Venice, Italy. On the left is a representation of a rat signed as Pansky, and on the right the representation of a pigeon with no evident classic signature with names. The real presence of these two types of animals is

Messages on walls

Venice 2014
(fig. 1, 2)

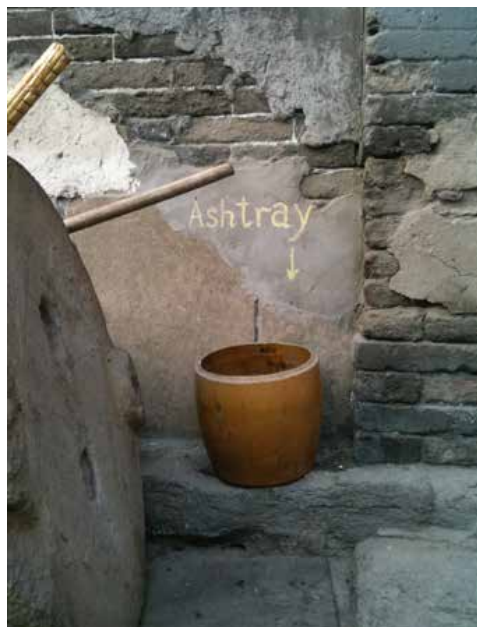
quite a topic in town and it seems to me that the two authors are playing with this idea strengthening their communication¹. The two messages sent through the two images on the walls, are quite clarified by the usage of the written text emphasizing the ironic sense hidden behind. The rat is drawn in the act of leaving after having painted itself: “please, take your dog’s shit”². The profile of the pigeon is standing above the sentence: “Take a shit on gēntrification”, where the usage of the capital letters includes the symbol “€” of the Euro in place of “E”, again, to me, strengthening the message sent having the imaginary rebel pigeon attacking the increasing costs for housing in the city and the related consequences. In both images, the use of the red color worked as an attraction to my eyes, in contrast with the light gray and brownish of the walls and of the materials of the ground. On the left, the rat, the balloon, and the signature are made and glued onto the wall, as can be noticed from the tiny irregular corrugations of the coarse surface; in the second one, the pigeon and the texts seem produced with a kind of stencil technique as observable from the soft borders of the figures. I am not discussing here the legality (or lack thereof) of the actions of painting on urban walls, but just taking the two



Stepping down, bringing the gaze back to the ground level, we could see in the cities how the space of action available to people is constantly adapted and re-adapted according to the everyday necessities and possibilities that they have beyond the spatial design of their physical limits and of the planned provisions of services and amenities given.

examples of messages to the public as signs. A recent book by Giada Carraro (2014) is presenting the case of the so-called *Casa delle girandole*, in Italian – “pinwheel house” [my translation of the name, and also the title of the book]³ – in Venice. The place was given this name because of the external façade adorned once with different pinwheels handmade from recycled materials and installed by Mr. Donato Zangrossi, who lived there. In the book are also included photographs showing the multitude of shapes and colors of the objects carefully disposed on the outside covering the distance between four windows on the second and third floors of the building, at a height of about six to ten meters from the water level and resembling a sort of vertical garden: some pinwheels are in the form of flowers, some shaped as little houses, sun, moon and a series of stars (Carraro 2014, pp.14-15)⁴. Carraro explains that tourists and passers-by were attracted by the pinwheels and students even took the house as a ritual spot to walk by in order to avoid bad luck before attending an examination. I recognize in the development of this communal (collective or

public) sense towards the special (private) spot, the urban aspect of the installation produced. It is (was) a case of a private (single person) generating (consciously or not) a (new) meaning for a small part of the city. Stepping down, bringing the gaze back to the ground level, we could see in the cities how the space of action available to people is constantly adapted and re-adapted according to the everyday necessities and possibilities that they have beyond the spatial design of their physical limits and of the planned provisions of services and amenities given (De Certeau 1988). Paola Di Biagi (2014), observing the communal areas in residential blocks, notices how different populations organize spatiality for practices such as children’s games, sport activities, gardening, and other forms of entertainment, using what is available to them. In her view, those actions are expanding the space of private homes and of private living into a more collective and shared dimension. Passing over communal courtyards, crossing gates, and along public ways, similar forms of adaptations for everyday activities can also be



Object Displacement

Beijing, 2011
(fig. 3, 4)

found in urban contexts
(figure 3 and 4).

The images here are from streets in Beijing, China. On the left, from a residential lane a plastic wire properly knotted is sustaining a can apparently used as an ashtray by somebody. On the right, a larger basket is placed at a precise spot near the entrance to a restaurant. In the first case, the small grooves in the length of the few centimeters at the corner of the concrete wall let me suppose that objects hang there repeatedly and that those are the signs left under the weight of the objects and their movements to the left and to the right, when in use, to accommodate the necessities of people standing there and stretching their arms toward the spot. In the second case, I see a clear invitation to the guests to make use of the container offered as an ashtray and not to leave the cigarette butts on the floor. In both cases I would feel a little strange using those ashtrays even if located on the public way: the first case

reminds me of friendship between neighbors spending time together in the open while chatting in the evening (Gaubatz 2008); while the second one reminds me of the indications of certain parking lots for the exclusive use of costumers of certain services.

I believe that there is a practice of our private everyday doing that, more than any other, helps us to reflect upon the thin relationship between the actions of a private and of a public nature, and that is the display of clothing for drying in the open. I consider this practice as a part of the personal gestures that (again, consciously or not) encounter the other. On one hand, I see the personal transportation of the subject in action as described by Lella Costa (2013) reflecting on her own gestures of ordering the objects due to the need for drying the washing, but also as a practice made of actions full of pleasures for the special mental engagement related to arranging objects by color, shapes, space and things available. On the other hand, I see



Recognizable elements

Beijing, 2012
Venice, Mestre, 2015
(fig. 5, 6)

the public sphere with its values, of which the municipal regulations limiting this practice are an example⁵. In between there are the spatial conformations related to this practice, the tools, the objects available for this purpose, the attitudes of the subjects, and their beliefs (figure 5 and 6).

While surveying in the Chinese cities from North to South of the country, I have frequently noticed the presence of towels placed in lines out to dry. Sometimes they are hanging next to each other on clotheslines stretched between poles or trees along walkways, sometimes they are just appearing from a balcony, or they are carefully placed on metal bars belonging to urban facilities. They are rectangular pieces with an average size of forty to fifty centimeters which suddenly appear in groups of ten to twenty identical pieces in the same form and color. Often they belong to businesses which use large amounts of towels, such as at hairdressers' shops, for instance, and seen from a distance they occupy the space of an urban monochromatic poster.



Laundry in the open makes façades more colourful, it modifies boundaries, and it defines spaces. In certain areas of Venice one can find clotheslines hanging between buildings crossing the narrow alleys at a height of about eight to ten meters above the street level, sometimes even more. When passing along, the feeling can be one of being under

Sophie Watson studies how laundering practices contribute to the generation of the relationship between private and public spheres through the movement of the objects to clean from the people's homes to the public laundry services located in urban contexts.

a spectacular roof with more or less regular and parallel lines of pennants dancing quietly in the wind and creating flowing shadows on the floors. Once, walking in the city with the Chinese-American artist Shan Shan Sheng⁶, she suddenly stopped me, pushing for a little deviation from our direction due to the objects above us: "oh, oh. Go there!" pointing to a pair of pants, "Why?" I asked, looking up, "you see" she replied, "it's like passing under people's legs". In China, she then explained me, people say that passing under other people's pants brings you bad luck: "as in reality, you don't want to do that", in her words. she taught me that this superstition originated more as a game among kids playing in courtyards where laundry is hung out to dry, as well as in spaces between buildings.

Laundry becomes an element of the landscape and a symbol of a living place. The Chinese architect Yung Ho Chang, during a lecture in Milan (Chang 2013), showed a photograph of a Chinese agglomerate of a few low-rise buildings in contrast to an image of a high-rise development from Shanghai with large roads and a lot of traffic. The picture was taken centering a channel mirroring the soft clouds in the sky and the small white outlines of the buildings in a typical style of reproductions

of Chinese traditional elements such as red lanterns hanging at the corners of the dark-gray roofs. "This is not Disneyland, [...] you can see the laundry", commented the architect, "and so on", he continued (Chang 2013, p. 22), bringing our attention to the blue linen displayed outside a large window and to the few pieces hanging under the awnings installed on the facades (figure 7).

This image is also taken from Beijing, from an area under renovation. When I was there, a few constructions were still standing and from the laundry I had the strong impression that somebody was living inside. In the movie *La Doppia Ora* by the director Giuseppe Capotondi (2009) we can see an example of this interpretative concept strengthening the intentional messaging to the outside. Sonia, one of the protagonists, hangs a red bedspread outside her balcony to secretly inform her partner about her movements in and out of the house: "*comunichiamo al solito modo*", he affirms, - "let's communicate as usual", - "*Il copriletto rosso*", she replies in confirmation - "the red bedspread" - [both my translations] (Capotondi 2009, p. 33). He drives down the street and with just a glimpse at the building's façade he can understand whether she is in or



Signs of presences
Beijing 2008
(fig. 7)

not. The couple is sharing a code, a little like what happens in hotel rooms when people hang a sign outside the door indicating: “do not disturb”, but theirs is private.

While in the field of art the practice of hanging things in the open generates curiosity and attracts attention⁷, in urban studies the topic appears less investigated (Watson 2014). Sophie Watson studies how laundering practices contribute to the generation of the relationship between private and public spheres through the movement of the objects to clean from the people’s homes to the public laundry services located in urban contexts. If we look closely we can see that there is a gradual intensity of these practices of washing and drying, considering how people do it and where they do it according to their necessities and the things they have available. Spatiality can be

found to be purposefully designed at both the architectural and the urban scale, while more improvised solutions can be found too. In the creation of both phases, indoor and outdoor places can be recognized in both collective and private forms happening around the world. As the two extremes, regarding washing, we could imagine on the one hand the river, as the public access to the water, and on the other the use, in the intimacy of each home, of the washing machine, that is the privately owned instrument for this purpose. Similar observations can be made regarding the actions of drying the laundry by using a private dryer at home and the usage of the street as the free and most public space available, with the highest chances of meeting others (figure 8 and 9).



In the two images we can see examples of uses of the street as the space where to leave garments in the open. Spatiality along walkways is used as it is, or is adapted at best convenience. As for murals, the colors attracted my attention as if they had been patchwork banners.

And so what? Through all the cases presented I have tried to bring examples of actions that could create communal or public effects and meanings. Through reflections on one of the most personal and private action regarding care for personal objects that creates special landscapes, both in material terms, as physical presences, and non-material, as imagery of itself, I aim to contribute to the studies of people's practices in the city and to enlarge the consciousness of what a street could be considered to be.

Definitions of publics

Shanghai 2010
Shenzhen 2012

In the two images we can see examples of usages of the street as the space where to leave garments in the open. Spatiality along walkways is used as it is, or it is adapted at best convenience. As for murals, the colors attracted my attention as if it was a patchwork banner. (fig. 8, 9)

Endonotes

Anna Laura Govino got a PhD in Regional Planning and Public Policy from Luav University, Venice (Italy), 2015.

¹ The Municipality of Venice indeed activated special measures to prevent from rats infections including periodical hygienic campaigns and a list of indications to support citizens facing this issue; for a complete explanation please see the page dedicated at the website of the Municipality: <<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/31583>> (05/15). Against the increasing population of pigeons and the consequent damages that this would cause, the Municipality of Venice promoted a specific ordinance to contain their growth; see the complete document (Comune di Venezia, 2007) about this available at the link: <<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/12585>> (05/15).

² The picking up of dog's feces is also a practice for which the Municipality of Venice promoted actions; see for instance the presentation of distributors of bags for this purpose located in the city at the link: <http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/18790>> (05/15).

www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/EN/a/17215?uniq=f9f1a6903ddcc2628614f5dda3645ddc> (05/15).

³ My translations of the quotations from Italian are provided in the article only to give a sense of the passages to non Italian readers and are not official translations.

⁴ See a few images of the façade within the board titled "Balconies" in the online archive that I created for my research using Pinterest at: <https://www.pinterest.com/gaoal/> and where images are linked from various on-line publications sources are automatically indicated and the reader can reach the original sources directly by clicking on the link reported.

⁵ See for instance the regulation in Venice (since 1987, lastly changed in 2015) available at the link: <<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/18790>> (05/15).

⁶ The episode and talk with Shan Shan Sheng quoted here took place in September 2014.

⁷ See for instance the temporary light installation named "Ieri, Oggi, Domani" designed by the architect Fabio Novembre in Milan

reproducing shapes of clothing hanging on lines between buildings in the historical center: <http://www.novembre.it/design/led-lighting-milan/#>; or the works by the photographers: Michael Wolf with the project "Lost Laundry", who took shots of pieces blown away from balconies and windows in Hong Kong: <http://photomichaelwolf.com/#lost-laundry/1>; Sivan Askayo with the project "Intimacy Under The Wires", which captures laundry hanging in the open while standing at street level looking up, but not only: <http://sivanaskayo.com/intimacy-under-the-wires-> (Pisa, 2013); Giulia Tabacco (2013), documenting styles of practices worldwide (Landoni, 2013). To get an idea of the growing interest in the larger public see also the slide-show published on the website of the Italian newspaper La Repubblica presenting the project "notmypanni", a tag generated to collect images about laundry in the open and share them online (Perilli, 2015). All the links in this footnote were last consulted on August 16th, 2015.

References

Capotondi G. 2009, *La Doppia Ora*, Medusa Film.

Carraro G. 2014, *La Casa delle Girandole*, Linaria, Roma.

Chang Y.H. 2013, *Five projects. Post-Euphoria in China. Lecture held at the Scuola di Architettura Civile*, Campus Bovisa, Milan on April 11th.

Costa L. 2013, *Nei miei panni*, in Tabacco G. (a cura di), *Ad asciugare al sole*. Benzoni, Varese.

De Certeau M. 1988, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Di Biagi P. 2014, *Abitare lo spazio comune: quotidianità, cura, progetto*, "Territorio", no. 69, pp. 61-65.

Gaubatz P. 2008, *New Public Spaces in Urban China*, "China Perspectives", no. 4, pp. 72-83.

Landoni L. 2013, *Panni stesi ad asciugare: le foto fanno il giro del mondo*, "La Repubblica", in: <http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/11/29/foto/panni_stesi_ad_asciugare_le_foto_fanno_il_giro_del_mondo-72253980/1/#1> (08/15).

Perilli N. 2015, *#notmypanni, il bucato è un'arte: gli scatti più belli*, "La Repubblica", in: <http://www.repubblica.it/tecnologia/socialnetwork/2015/03/24/foto/_notmypanni_il_bucato_e_un_arte-110329420/1/?ref=HRESS-12#1> (08/15).

Pisa P.L. 2013, *Da Tel Aviv a Napoli: tutti i colori delle lavatrici*, "La Repubblica", in: <http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/08/16/foto/da_tel_aviv_a_napoli_tutti_i_colori_delle_lavatrici-64842447/1/#1> (08/15).

Tabacco G. (a cura di) 2013, *Ad asciugare al sole*, Benzoni, Varese.

Watson S. 2014, *Mundane objects in the city: Laundry practices and the making and remaking of public/private sociality and space in London and New York*, "Urban Studies", 1-15.

Websites

Askayo, Sivan – Intimacy under the wires [photography project]: <<http://sivanaskayo.com/intimacy-under-the-wires->> (06/15).

Comune di Venezia. Inaugurato il primo dei cento distributori di sacchetti per la raccolta delle deiezioni canine: da oggi saranno 37 in Terraferma e 63 fra Venezia e isole: <<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/EN/IDPagina/17215?uniq=f9f1a6903ddcc2628614f5dda3645ddc>> (05/15).

Comune di Venezia. I roditori (ratti e topi): <<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/31583> – Last update May 24th, 2013> (05/15).

Novembre, Fabio – Ieri, Oggi, Domani [installation]: <<http://www.novembre.it/design/led-lighting-milan/#>>

Personal online archive using Pinterest: <<https://www.pinterest.com/gaoal/>>

Wolf, Michael – Lost Laundry [photography project]: <<http://photomichaelwolf.com/#lost-laundry/1>>

Documents

Comune di Venezia (2007). Ordinanza sindacale n.153474 del 30.09.1997 – Disposizioni per la regolamentazione della somministrazione del cibo ai colombi e controllo dei siti di nidificazione-modifica ai sensi art. 82 Regolamento Veterinario Comunale: <<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/12585>> (05/15).

Comune di Venezia. Regolamento di polizia urbana: <<http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/18790>> (08/15). (Regulation since 1987 last modified in 2015).