

**Participating and Belonging. The
Construction and Negotiation of
Group Identities in a
Neighbourhood of Milan**

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This batch of papers has been presented at the Third Conference “Diversity in cities: Visible and invisible walls”

Participating and Belonging. The Construction and Negotiation of Group Identities in a Neighbourhood of Milan

Summary

The paper focuses on diversity between political groups (associations, committees, parties) acting in a Milan neighbourhood against a Municipality's urban project. The ethnographic analysis of civil society's dynamics leads to interesting issues concerning the theme of participation, showing how differently each group succeeds in creating its identity and belonging to a place, by the aim of different languages and strategies, and how often those groups may even collide. Thus, the closure or openness of each urban system, whether of an organized political group or of a group of inhabitants, become contextual and relative to the observer's emic point of view and, moreover, it might be used as political strategy. Anthropology of civil society, via the analysis of the visible and invisible walls among groups, of the differences and the reciprocal influences, succeeds in underlining which are the identities at stake and the political implications of each collective action repertoire.

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Participating and belonging. The construction and negotiation of group identities in a neighbourhood of Milan.

Alessandra Micoli

1.

"To promote the sense of local belonging is the combination of elements (...) that improve urban quality, the social recognition, the reaffirmation of that social and cultural texture, heterogeneous and rich such as Isola neighbourhood is. The Event is a public performance of the neighbourhood. The Event builds and shows the identity characters that make Isola a vital and unique place where to inhabit, but also just "to live". The Event, thus, can become an interesting vehicle for the construction of a "public" image of Isola, that will be attractive because it is strongly attached to an identity recognition".

"Planning urban quality? The question moves towards the possibility to plan a shared vision of what is local quality and which are the dimensions that, in Isola, constitute it. Dimensions that partly already constitute the specificity of Isola and that can be assumed as the resources of this territory, and that, partly, will be the result of this common work" (Cantieri Isola, Presentation Manifesto, 2001).

2.

"We are a group of citizens inhabiting Isola neighbourhood. We are students, workers, retired people... we are very worried about the Garibaldi Repubblica – Fashion City Projects (...) a slab of concrete will cover our neighbourhoods. We decided to found the "I Mille Committee": it's necessary to unify the forces of all those who inhabit and love Isola neighbourhood, together we will be more visible and we could ask the Authorities to take into consideration our needs" (I Mille Committee, leaflet, 2002)

3.

"Sunday 13th of April, the Isola biological market, together with hens, cauliflowers and biological peppers, will present Isola dell'Arte Association (IDA), hosting artistic performances in the gardens of via Confalonieri, and a public conference on "Which spaces for art today?"

Isola dell'Arte is an association founded by artists, critics and curators, aimed at proposing to Milan Municipality the use of some empty spaces of the Stecca degli Artigiani as a Contemporary Art Centre and to create a dialogue with the social groups operating in Isola neighbourhood (...)."The one thousand and one nights" consists in a series of events, created by Ida in order to show a concrete alternative way for the use of the Stecca and to create a corpus of masterpieces that will constitute the core of this art centre" (Isola dell'Arte, leaflet for "The one thousand and one nights", 2003)

I decided to start the analysis of groups relation by giving a quick glance on their respective languages, a useful way to get into the theme of collective participation forms and into the analysis of the meaning of diversity between political

groups. The examples above refer to sentences taken from the documentation produced by the three main collective actors I dealt with for the preparation of my PhD thesis.

Before introducing them, a brief description of the analysed context.

The context is *Isola* neighbourhood, in Milan, an industrial and popular district now living a gentrification process, thanks, among others, to an important urban project. This project, the Garibaldi – Repubblica, since five decades should have been intervened in a big strategic area, mostly a terrain-vague or inhabited by old ruins. A minor part of the project should affect Isola neighbourhood, demolishing two small parks and the vestiges of an old factory¹ situated in between, and then building in the emptied area. The project, since 1953, has blocked a lot of times, even before being approved, occasionally thanks to the protests of some Isola groups: the work here presented deals more precisely with the last vague of those struggles, analysing its actors' diversity in terms of strategies, languages, aims.

Today, as yesterday, associations and committees oppose the project; again, as yesterday, collective action expresses a process of identity construction, transformed into a tool to preserve one's own life place, the space of definition and sharing of individual and collective meanings. Although diverse, every form of participation concerning the issue of the urban project or the future shape of the neighbourhood, gives voice to the desire of a political involvement in society, to avoid disappearing, following De Martino's thought, lost in the world's transformations.

This creative and expressive action, aimed at preserving a place in history and society, is thus strongly tied to a "matter of power". This perspective on collective action leads me to share Olivier de Sardan's definition of participation, not as a mere and "sentimental" act, but as a complex and wise activation of a development process: "the ensemble of social processes driven by voluntary actions of transforming a social milieu, actions driven by institutions or actors external to that milieu, whose aim is to mobilise the milieu, drawing on an effort to graft resources, techniques and/or knowledge"² (Olivier de Sardan, 1995:7).

How much this perspective fits the theme of participation can be seen looking to the issue of diversity: the perspective brought into the field by the anthropology of development shows a major ability in recording situations characterised by an open or latent conflict. The complexity of the contexts this anthropological perspective has dealt with, leads it to put at the head of the rank, in the theory and terminology

¹ Whose nick name is "Stecca degli artigiani" (artisan's rope).

² All the translations are made by the author.

agenda, concepts as *strategies* and *practices*, considered as main tools in the creation of a process approach to social reality.

A multi-shaped anthropological approach is needed to analyse the heterogeneous theme of diversity: it could be the socio-cultural and economic diversity concretised in a gentrification process, as well as the difference between strategy action of old and new political movements, a transition [from old to new] pointing to a changing world. All of the approaches constituting this lens will create a unique theoretical perspective which could represent that complexity and explain the transformations and the insurgences of diversity.

The ethnographic work focuses on the association born in 2001 that manifested very innovative aspects in its opposition to the Municipality's project. *Cantieri Isola* was composed by inhabitants and non-inhabitants, students, researchers, artists, some members of other associations of the neighbourhood (environmentalist, anti-racist...). The novelty of the association's strategy consists in the idea to oppose Municipality's project by promoting local development and empowering local resources (historical, cultural and economical): both of them considered as efficacious tools for a different urban and social regeneration.

The first *Cantieri Isola's* action, in 2001, consists in the organization of an event, "*La strada rovescia la città*"³, quite far and wide known in Milan, that will be then repeated in 2002. The event of 2001 is aimed at breaking into the public city scene, while fixing the ideological (see the manifesto) and methodological bases and, moreover, showing the strong professional attitude of its members. From the moment of the event on, the association works on the construction of a network inside and outside the neighbourhood, and plans an information strategy concerning the Garibaldi-Repubblica project. Willing to give more visibility to the group, and in order to spontaneously revitalise the area, aim expressed in their manifesto, *Cantieri Isola* occupies⁴ an empty space inside the *Stecca degli Artigiani*, space that will become the association's seat, opened during meetings or events. Ex post, one of the association's founders considers how much the fact of having their own space had contributed in the group's identity definition:

"we needed a different presence in the neighbourhood, the fact of having a physic place makes you more attached, creates a different sense of belonging to a group but also to those walls, which means also that you have to go there

³ The street upsets the city.

⁴ None of the squatting in the *Stecca* (that of *Cantieri Isola* and the forthcoming) host people during the night or all day long. It's an occupation that wants to make clear the belonging of a group to a place, for this reason this doesn't need the constant presence of somebody in the spaces.

and clean... so the opening of this space has accelerated this process of formation of a group identity" (Francesca).

This occupation is important because it will determine a series of occupations inside the *Stecca*: more than by the concrete act, relevance is given by the symbolic and political meaning:

"the occupation of a public space is the fulfilment of a space considered as empty⁵. It's a symbolic occupation, an attribution of meaning to an abandoned space that, instead, will be lived, constructed and thought" (Greta).

From the very beginning the group composition becomes a specific element of an identity that is internally defined, by all of its members, as heterogeneous, thus flexible and able to fit to the most diverse situations. Two are the more relevant characters: the rather professional uniformity – the majority of the members (at the beginning) is architect, planner or artist; the fact that almost the half of the members don't live in the neighbourhood. This second specificity, apparently paradoxical, is instead the main base of the group identity. The group shows the capacity of auto-analysis, since it's able to see, in its own specificity, the social transformation of the neighbourhood, as it appears in the following lines:

"Francesca: *I am not from this neighbourhood, so it can perhaps be weird that the president of a neighbourhood association doesn't live in the neighbourhood. Or is it just our double identity?*

Marco: *I don't think that the fact of not living here is a discriminant, also because the association is very well known on the metropolitan level.*

Bert: *in Isola there are a lot of people that come here just to work; after all we are not a neighbourhood committee, in that case, perhaps, it would be relevant" (Cantieri Isola meeting, 25/01/03).*

Few months later (June 2002), a new neighbourhood committee (*I Mille*, the Thousands) was born, in opposition to the Municipality's project but also to *Cantieri Isola*: the quest, made to the last one, is for a much more comprehensible language and for more transparent and concrete actions. Against the apparent common aim, though differently interpreted, stood not only opposite languages and strategies but also different identities and ideas of participation.

The different socio-professional composition of the Committee shows from the very beginning, a diversity made explicit through a linguistic and conceptual divergence, emerging in the first *Cantieri Isola's* meeting attended also by the future members of the Committee. This group of people complains about the language and

⁵ For an analysis of this interesting concept of empty spaces, see Rutheiser, 1997.

the characteristics of the other group: the two worlds seem so diverse that the new militants feel the necessity to ask *Cantieri Isola's* members which is their identity and to better define their aims, since they look too ambiguous. Despite the effort of clarification, a common ground is not found: so the new group of inhabitants gives birth to *I Mille Committee*. The group starts to act in Isola area on the bases of similar aims, compared to *Cantieri Isola's* ones, but, nonetheless, showing relevant differences on the level of performance and communication.

The first difference concerns the physical ground of action. *Cantieri Isola's* actions establish the *Stecca*, as the core of a social and cultural revitalization of the area, keeping a metropolitan-centred perspective, where this revitalization is thought as a tool to weaken the Municipality's project; the Committee, instead, mostly uses the two small parks, especially the one where Bert Theis (one of *Cantieri Isola's* artists) had built some white benches, artefacts very useful as tables for picnics for children, organizing, by that mean, a family-oriented activity. The confrontation of the two attitudes toward the contested action's context gives an idea of the multiple levels where diversity is settled: the different audiences the two groups refer to (the whole city, in a case, the neighbourhood, the other), the communication (one is complex and articulated, the other is linear and immediate), two different ideas of what makes the efficacy of the action (the artistic performances or the organization of an information-point, in the first case, a children-snack or a recreational activity, in the second one).

Both of the groups contribute in feeding the conflict lying behind the respective actions and both of them see the weakness that this conflict can constitute. Inside *Cantieri Isola* some members self-criticise the scarce consensus they are able to build inside the most "traditional" spheres of the district, while other members are more secure of the choice they made to refuse a neighbourhood-committee strategy in favour of a highly professional association. This associative specificity has a very solid theoretical and methodological base which determines, also, an interesting external perception of its identity, as an excessive diversity that weakens its representation and hinders the possibility to adhere. The diversity is verbally signalled by the Committee and by the association's members: we can compare the internal and the external description of this identity.

"Francesca: *I would reflect on the way we got related with the neighbourhood, on its involvement, even if I wouldn't say only "where is the neighbourhood", because we are the neighbourhood, too.*

Antonio: *here there's nobody from the neighbourhood, I see!*⁶

⁶ Antonio is a man who inhabited in Isola, in the past, a former PCI militant. At the moment of the research he passes from one group to another: during this meeting he had just approached

Paolo: *I think that we're not and that we do not represent the neighbourhood. As far as the Garibaldi-Repubblica project is concerned we can say that we instrumentally use the neighbourhood. Our point of view is not representative, it's constructive. We are making a construction on the bases of what we think, the issue is the conflict between old and new, the confrontation can be very productive, but it's quite complex.*

Guy: *we have to find something that can gather everyone's opinion, the young man, the lady, the nanny. You don't represent the neighbourhood, but a common need.*

Marco: *more that representation, we have to think about how to fill in this place, in order to have the contractual strength to defend it. Than, if it comes from the neighbourhood it's ok, but not only from it.*

Paolo: *the success is not given by big numbers or by the representation of the neighbourhood, but by a work on metropolitan networks. It's not a quantitative, but a qualitative work, we have to look for those subjects that are more powerful.*

Francesca: *I am a little bit puzzled by this apparently winning strategy: to find the neighbourhood equal the victory. I don't think that this would bring us to be more powerful, towards the Municipality. Our task is to make the connection between different scales. But I'd not say that a three hundred people manifestation is more efficacious that a one year cultural agenda inside the Stecca" (Cantieri Isola's meeting, 8/7/02).*

A.: *we founded the Committee because, other while, we wouldn't have known to whom to identify ourselves in order to oppose the project. We could not identify in Cantieri Isola because they are an association, they could not gather more than a certain number of people... then all of them are architects.*

P.: *they are not the people.*

Question: *in which sense?*

P.: *because the association has a limited number of adherents, its' closed, there is the membership card, the Committee, instead, goes around to gather people...*

A.: *the Committee goes around to inform people, we made these information points in the market. We went to some Cantieri Isola's meeting, but then we saw that people were decreasing. We could not adhere, and the people neither". (A. and P., members of the I Mille committee, 25/2/03)*

The first piece, from a *Cantieri Isola's* meeting that took place in the most conflictive period with the Committee, shows two aspects highlighting the main problematic difference between the two groups.

The first one concerns the groups identity: starting from the analysis of groups' languages and strategies we come to the thematic core, that is the construction of a vision, of an action and communication aimed at a specific aim. The aim of anthropological analysis is to closely observe those collective identity representations, that are not static or immanent elements, but "changing strategies", drawing on individuals' identities, on context's characteristics and on the other collective actors of

Cantieri Isola. He here very well expresses what could look like the "voice of the neighbourhood". After this meeting he will appear next to I Mille, and then disappear again from the Isola field.

the context. Civil society's anthropology doesn't aim at determining which action repertoire is more efficacious or powerful, but at pointing, after the analysis of its constitutive characters (age, professional, members' socio-cultural background), the political and identity implications determining the choice to use a specific collective action repertoire.

The second aspect lying behind the conversation, sharpening the difference between the two action repertoires, refers to a deep difference in the way of seeing the relation with *place*, with everyone's belonging and ways of creating it. The relation with place, thought as a social space, changes according to the group and constitutes another characteristic that, ethically, allows to shape its identity, emically, it's used in a strategical way as a political tool on the public scene.

The organization of the picnics and the sentence "they are not the people", or, on the other hand, the possibility to appoint a non-inhabitant to the post of president of the association, are all elements reflecting two opposite ways of considering what "one's own place" is, ways used to trace the groups' social boundaries. Again, groups are not fixed and closed social ensembles but dynamic realities, able to build and to change their own boundaries: the border can be open or closed according to the emic point of view and, most of all, according to the political strategy that is worth to adopt.

Going back into the Isola facts, in the second half of 2002 and the beginnings of 2003 *Cantieri Isola* and *I Mille* participate on two parallel but conflicting and scarcely communicating tracks. At the end of 2002 the artists' group inside *Cantieri Isola* starts to define a more distinct strategy, even if still belonging to the "mother" association. The artists clean and open a new space, in the *Stecca*, called OUT (Office for Urban Transformations), that, at the beginning of 2003, became the seat of their new association *Isola dell'Arte*. The aim, similarly to *Cantieri Isola*, is to oppose the Municipality's project through a revitalisation of the neighbourhood spaces: that would be done through the realisation of a contemporary art centre, at the second floor of the *Stecca*. To do that, the artists start gathering signatures in the art and fashion spheres both Italian and international, to support the proposition of their project to the Municipality. IDA's objective is double: one looks to the neighbourhood, the other to institutions and public opinion.

As far as the neighbourhood is concerned the aim is to create, through art practice, a common struggle: art is used to realise an aesthetic and social sculpture, to construct a shared image, though differently thought and acted by the groups composing the whole. The practice reposes much on participated urban planning which, because of its immediate language, as it was the Committee's request, leads

groups to find a commonly shared communication. Thus, it is prepared the first common action, between *IDA* and *I Mille*: it's a drawing distributed in the neighbourhood, among inhabitants, shops, schools and the parish. In the drawing figures the *Stecca* and the two small parks: people will contribute writing what they would like to add, remove, how they would like the area to be. This drawing will thus become a sort of manifesto for the future of the *Stecca*.

The second side of *IDA*'s struggle looks at institutions, using the association as a lobby, following the strategy of the preceding events of *Cantieri Isola*. But *IDA*'s action wants to be more powerful: the aim is to create very mass-mediatic events that, without forgetting the local scale, will create a critical opinion among culture, art and fashion milieus. Concrete objective is to prevent the *Stecca* and the gardens from demolition, symbolic aim is to transform the *Stecca* into a place endowed with social, historic and cultural value, thus, a sort of cultural heritage that can not be demolished.

The foundation of the new association is read, by *Cantieri Isola*, as a desire to put some distance in between, in order to create a new political strategy, that could partly proceed autonomously. This relation, that will be now collaborative then clearly autonomous, is often puzzling, for *Cantieri Isola*'s members, who now see *Ida* as a sister with the same group identity, now a simple ally proceeding with different languages and strategies. Uneasiness derives from this dynamic that blurs the boundaries between the two groups' identities. On the top of that, *Cantieri Isola*, now laying on five years of activity, start fearing a loss of specificity and a lack of acknowledgement of their past enterprises. In a word, a loss of power.

"How this can be permeable to the inputs we can give it? We were the origin for something that, than, continued on its own way, but now Cantieri Isola's question is: is there the possibility for a communication between the two realities? It seems a sector stuff, of artists, so perhaps it's interesting, for you, to work with a group of non-artists. Will the artists' association promote the counter-project, which is made not only by Cantieri Isola but by the whole neighbourhood?" (Francesca)

If the conflict between *Cantieri Isola* and *I Mille* was determined by their strong diversity, in this case it is determined just by their extreme similarity.

Both *IDA* and *Cantieri Isola* are new movements, endowed with very similar characters, as far as the socio-professional and cultural backgrounds, the age of the members, the languages and strategies are concerned. For both of the associations relation with place is conceived in a flexible and innovative way: both of the respective networks strongly draw from outside the neighbourhood. Paradoxically the extreme similarity causes the need to create some diversity that, where it doesn't exist, is

especially constructed. This construction, expressed through a continuous quest for much more innovative and communicative actions, hides two different power overlapping.

Even if the arenas of audience are different, art, in one case, and architecture and planning, in the other one, actions often intersect and overlap, so that competition for the primacy of innovation is at stake. Luckily, conflict is often latent or overtaken thanks a strong willing to dialogue and negotiate. It will blow up only after the fieldwork's conclusion, when a new design of the Municipality's project brings into the neighbourhood new power perspectives that will suddenly break the fragile coalition until then constructed.

After the birth of IDA, another important event marked the beginning of 2003: Bert (IDA's president), reposing on art language's immediacy and communicative power succeeds in bringing one of the Committee's members inside the *Stecca* in order to finally look for some common element between the groups' struggles. So, only in middle of the fieldwork, after a long period of confrontation, conflict and definition of each group's identity, interesting coalitions start to come into evidence. This long phase of identity strengthening and of consensus building is very well described by one of the two founders of the Committee. Ex post, she looks at the process each group built and, finally, not only she recognizes everyone's worth, but she also clearly describes the implications determined, on the strategic choices level, by the group's identity and consensus building process:

"P: they had the important task and result, mostly Cantieri Isola, to avoid the Stecca to be occupied by fearing presences. That's much worth, because the neighbourhood would've done nothing with the Stecca, but they made this space be useful and used. Otherwise we would have defended only the gardens, without caring about the Stecca, instead that of Stecca is a very interesting project!

Q: a lot of people in the neighbourhood don't like the Stecca...

P: yes, the Stecca was a non-place that became a place thanks to all of those organizations. Our [of the Committee] task was to make it be a place for the neighbourhood. If it was only for the young people or intellectuals, it would still be a non-place, for the neighbourhood. (...)

As "delegates" of the neighbourhood, we could not occupy the Stecca, but we had the permission to go into. We didn't have a seat, so perhaps we had the right to occupy, but if we did we would have left behind every chance to get related with common people, where the middle class, for us, is the strength of our movement. Now that things are much clearer we could, if we wanted. Now we don't have any more identity problem, we don't fear our legitimacy to be weakened: but before acknowledgement is constructed it's not safe" (P. A.).

The knowledge of the Other is worked out through the common construction of projects, through praxis, on the base of that "performing identity" described by Rita

Astuti (1995), according to whom one *is* what he/she *does*: action allows the knowledge of the Other and the identities to be re-adjusted. This process leads again to the theme of diversity, and in particular to its flexible dimension. Colette Granet and Maryline Albano (1990) show, in their article, how the use and the action in/for some green areas create an attachment to the place and, moreover, create ties inside a group. The creation of a sense of acknowledgment and of belonging to a group, thus, would be obtained through a re-appropriation of places and through the birth of a sense of belonging to them. If in the Grenoble case study, described by the authors, the use of the public spaces collectively cultivated progressively brings to the acknowledgement of the skills of the incoming Portuguese group and to a slow fading of the defences between French and Portuguese people, even in the Isola case the active use of the space of the struggle is useful to create the belonging to the neighbourhood and also to overcome some barriers or communication difficulties between groups. This process is very well told in the sentence above: at the beginning P. recognizes the reciprocal influence between groups, she then explains that the major conflict phase coincides with the internal and external identity construction process, with the group's self definition. Once this base is made solid, that diversity is not an hindrance any more, but, almost, a plus-value: as well explained by Maher, borders have an instrumental function, so that "they disappear when the reasons for the social practices determining them disappear, too" (Maher, 1994:28). The negotiation and re-negotiation (Melucci, 1982) whom collective identity is made of is then recognized, but only after a phase in which groups try to close it, to make it an autonomous and impermeable universe. In this closure phase (that I would see as apparent, since a form of confrontation always exists) the action of diverse groups inside the same physic space, make it become contested, instead of being shared.

A new external menace can create a sudden coalition: it's exactly what happens in Isola, as soon as a new group appears into the scene. This is a well known dynamic in anthropology, that in Isola context brings to a quick realignment of all the diverse realities that, just in the period preceding this turning point, were starting to look for the construction of a common dialogue.

Before the arrival of the last group of occupiers, the *Stecca* was already well populated: *Cantieri Isola* and *Apolidia* (an anti-racist association) were in the *Stecca* since quite a long time, some months before another group of young architects and designers had occupied a space, creating the *Controprogetto* association. Since its birth, this group cleans up an ex artisans' workshop and builds ties with the realities living in the neighbourhood, giving their specific contribution. Some months later *Isola*

TV, a street television, was born, that got tightly related with the other groups, supporting their project.

In April 2003 a new group occupies a space that, informally, was "booked" for the *Giovani Comunisti*, a group related to *Rifondazione Comunista* party. This arrival engenders a lot of discussions and the birth of a *Stecca Network* that, for the first time, officially unifies *Cantieri Isola*, *I Mille*, *IDA*, *Controprogetto*, *Rifondazione* and others. At the beginning of the Network's meeting, organised to discuss the arrival of the last group, Bert clearly speaks of the conflict and of the common aims that, instead, unifies everybody's struggle:

"this is the network of all the realities participating on the gardens, the Stecca and the neighbourhood issues. It is a very new thing, only after this wild squatting. We decided to meet in order to decide and to speak as one. We saw that everyone has interesting ideas, that the others don't know well. Since we all want to defend the Stecca and the gardens, we'd better agree and act together.

During these last years I Mille and Cantieri Isola, without knowing, created a sort of Stecca project, it's surprising to see how the ideas match. Now we are together, we can join our ideas for a Stecca Network: this will make us stronger to the eyes of Municipality. What does Isola miss? I Mille spoke of the old people, we need projects that make people feel belonging to this place. On April the 13th, to symbolize that Isola's destiny is here at stake, we'll build a huge writing⁷ to show that this place must not be destroyed. This is not an artist's work, it can be done in a collaborative way. The occupiers brought into evidence a problem that, in my opinion, we have to solve together" (Bert, 24/03/03).

The squatting engenders a complex debate, because it's animated by different positions. As can be read in the sentence above, on one hand there is the idea of the space as a public space (thus, without property rights); on the other hand, there is a sort of property idea or, better, the idea that the legitimacy to occupy a place is given by the length of time the group has passed in it. Again, it is a problem of conflicting positions between old and new groups, not as far as the dwelling age is concerned, but as far as the political struggle is.

The Network then decides to meet the new squatters, to listen to their projects and to give them a sort of ultimatum: they can stay only if they spouse the political and cultural project already existing. During this meeting the not yet solved issue whether it is more legitimated to participate who inhabits the neighbourhood is suddenly solved by the means of the creation of a new heterogeneous category of "old militants", opposing to a much "newer" group:

⁷ He's referring to the ISOLA writing that will be raised upon Stecca's roof during the Sunday Biological Market.

"Giò: *you have nothing to do with the neighbourhood, you came here because it's trendy, but in your project to write Isola or Bicocca⁸ was exactly the same! Here there are people with strong ties with the territory, that have been working for years in the neighbourhood. The first thing to do, to get close with a territory, is to go around and get informed.*

A: *before all, go and study what Isola is, we're born in Isola!*

P: *yours, it's a cultural love for Isola!" (25/3/03)*

The permeability and the instrumental dimension of social borders between groups is thus showed: the categories of "old" and "new", used among inhabitants, as Elias describes (1997), or among militants, doesn't stay for hermetic ensembles, but for perspectives. As analysed by Elias, the "older", when referred to inhabitants, is not an age description, but a sociological one: so, even militant groups, faced to the threat of the newcomers, auto-define themselves as "old" only when that perspective appears as the most suitable to an identity and power strategy. Edwards (1998) rightly proposes not to speak of groups but of *shifting perspectives*, a much more interesting and dynamic concept. Perspectives shift so much that, in this new scenery of groups relations, the individual's identity can be related to multiple memberships, thus creating a hybrid belonging: that of artist, of *Cantieri Isola's* or *I Mille's* member. According to the different role played in the collective action, diverse will be the ideological and action repertoires used by the actor.

The *Stecca Network* thus constitutes a sort of arrival for Isola's collective realities: an arrival that will be, at the same time, the departure of a new way that, from that moment on, though still containing the specificities that make the whole, expresses the quest for a form of uniqueness, expressed through the search for a common perspective and a use of diversity that, instead of weakening the movement, could give it more strength.

The project that, after two years, the diverse realities start to draw as an alternative to the Municipality's one is thus signed by all of the associations and committees and is collectively exposed during a neighbourhood meeting in Isola's parish. For the Sunday biological market of April 2003 the Committee prepares a leaflet that, though using the linguistic style proper to them, witnesses the changed groups relations, now able to propose actions and events that, still characterised by each group's identity, constitute a common and shared project:

"To defend the only green space of the neighbourhood, the Association IDA and the I Mille Committee organize a day of activities and amusements for Isola's

⁸ The name of another neighbourhood, not very far from Isola.

inhabitants, during the biological market and other events organised by the local group of Legambiente "Compagnia del Parco" and Cantieri Isola.

Here's the activities organised in the gardens of via Volturmo:

-the artist Liliana Moro will realize the "Casedagioco" project, consisting in four little coloured houses that will be used as children toys, leaving to them the creativity to use them will dolls or small cars.

-The artists group DEABC (L. Pancrazzi, S. Piccolo, G. Sato) will present its "isola d'ascolto" project, and will put a cylindrical cabin, whose shape will allow the visitors to experiment personal positions and placements.

-At 4 p.m. I Mille Committee, together with the traders of the piazzale Lagosta Market will offer a snack to the children" (leaflet, Comitato I Mille, 13/4/03).

The trespassing of diversity and the finding of a common strategy (though heterogeneous) seems to be found in a common reference to the past and to an idea of the urban and social space as cultural heritage. Past constitutes an element of the associations and committees action repertoires: the difference with other elements is given by its strong malleability. Beyond the question of who's the eldest militant group of the neighbourhood, it is Appadurai's very concrete idea of the past that prevails: "today past (...) became a synchronic storage for cultural scenarios, a sort of central time archive, where anyone serves as he/she wants" (Appadurai, 2001:49). A lot of important contributions can be cited on the theme of the political and symbolic meaning of monuments and public space (Wanner, 1991; Palumbo, 2003; Bourdin, 1996): their reasoning can be transposed into the study, which is not less political, of associations and committees actions which base their struggle on the interpretation and conservation of the past and of its symbols, as it was a struggle, using Herzfeld's words (1991), "for the future of the past". The perspectives on future constitute, through a re-appropriation of the past, the base for the constructions of an action able to put together the diversities constituting it, in view of a common aim.

A good example, for the representation of this successful arrival, can be an activity organized at the end of 2003. A12, an architects group, realizes "The timeline", a production between art, history and archives, consisting in a wall-book that collects press-releases, leaflets and documents produced in the last 40 years Isola movements. Past and present are thus unified in a unique performance. During the press-release presenting the alternative neighbourhood's urban project, the meaning and the social importance of the project (that of A12 as well as that constituted by the huge numbers of events organized by Isola's movements) is very well explained: through the bridging of past and present the neighbourhood came finally to speak with "one voice".

"here on the walls you see neighbourhood's story, all the struggles since the 70s, organized to defend the neighbourhood's quality of life. The Stecca degli Artigiani is an historical monument because the industrial history of Milan

started form here, at the end of XIX century. This neighbourhood has an historical identity which is important to acknowledge. In a Milan Municipality's publication this building is recognized as industrial archaeology but then, weirdly, it's demolished" (Anna, press release "Garibaldi Repubblica Project? Here's the answer of Isola neighbourhood", 10/11/03).

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