Vacant Buildings as Triggers for Bottom-Up Urban Regeneration

The bottom-up projects, in the years after the Great Crisis, have been considered as a popular measure to solve urban issues, overcoming the conditions of austerity faced by public actors. However, these initiatives not only seem confined to solve very specific issues but are often linked to a more comprehensive urban regeneration strategy, thus capable of addressing the economic, social and physical aspects of a wider part of the city. This article presents the first findings of wider research, which analyses the link between bottom-up practices and the concept of urban regeneration. In particular, this article focuses on an element that appears to be fundamental for the development of these bottom-up urban regeneration practices: the presence of vacant buildings available for the reuse. This article suggests the possibility to analyse how vacant buildings are embedded in these practices through three steps, called steps for the regeneration through the reuse of vacant buildings (SteRVs), namely Recognition, Appropriation and Design. The validity of the three phases is demonstrated through a multiple case study analysis, that considers two renowned bottom-up urban regeneration cases developed in Europe mainly after 2000: Farm Cultural Park, in Favara (Italy) and NDSM wharf, in Amsterdam.

Keywords: Urban regeneration, bottom-up, vacant, Farm Cultural Park, NDSM

Introduction

Urban regeneration, according to the widely accepted definition provided by Roberts (2017, 18), is the ‘comprehensive and integrated vision and action which seeks to resolve urban problems and bring out a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change or offers opportunities for improvement’. However, in the contemporary debate, the term appears to be used in a wider and less precise way, including ‘a lot of various interventions in the city related to urban design and planning, social and economic renewal or cultural planning “regeneration”’ (Acierno 2017, 7).

In the current debate the concept of ‘urban regeneration’ (UR), used with its wider meaning, is often related to practices that are developed ‘from the bottom-up’. The main characteristic of ‘bottom-up’ practices is to involve the dimension of the social responsibility, meaning that the objective is not the individual profit but instead a redistribution of benefits (Rabbiosi 2016). The bottom-up projects largely base on the strong participation of people, also on a voluntary basis (Tonkiss 2014). This tendency is shown in a large number of projects developed since 2000, in the period defined as ‘regeneration in recession’ (Roberts 2017).
Even though the definition of UR is currently used in a wider and less precise way, it still refers to a practice developed in order to improve neglected or deprived urban areas. Regarding the physical aspects, UR is developed in contexts of degraded urban fabrics, where it is possible to find a large number of buildings in poor conditions and often a certain presence of vacant estates. The market value of the estates is often an indicator of the issues faced by an urban area, indicating the lack of appeal of the existing buildings. The presence of an extraordinarily high rate of vacant buildings can indicate the need for an UR project to be implemented. As a matter of fact, regeneration strategies and the presence of vacant buildings are often combined in bottom-up urban projects.

Vacant buildings seem to be both a reason and an opportunity for the bottom-up projects to grow. The research project ‘Urban Catalyst’, that produced a large debate on temporary uses and that contributed to acknowledge the importance of the ‘do-it-yourself’ approach to urban planning, recognized the importance for informal practices to find space ‘available at a reasonable cost or even at no charge’ (Oswalt, Overmeyer, and Misselwitz 2013, 14). Such projects, where ‘Individual initiative, sociocultural capital, and the principle of minimum intervention take the place of financial means’ (Oswalt, Overmeyer, and Misselwitz 2013, 14), often face issues connected to the financial sustainability, having troubles in sustaining current expenditures. This translates in the necessity to base their activities in buildings remained vacant, available at no or low charge.

However, there is no study about how the vacant buildings are strategically integrated in bottom-up initiatives that are supposed to achieve the urban regeneration (UR) of deprived areas. In this article, I analyse the role played by the presence of vacant buildings, an element that appears not only common to a countless number of bottom-up projects but also one of the premises that permit these initiatives to begin and develop. The methodology is the multiple case studies analysis, in consideration of its capacity to analyse contemporary phenomena in their real context (Yin 1994), comparing two European projects mainly developed after 2000, during the period of the ‘regeneration in recession’ (Roberts 2017).

The paper is developed in more four sections: the second demonstrates the theoretical possibility of a bottom-up urban regeneration, the third analyses some previous works on vacant buildings, in the fourth I present the three steps for the reuse of the vacant buildings (SteRVs), in the fifth two case studies are analysed.

**Bottom-Up Practices and Urban Regeneration**

The cause-effect link between the bottom-up activities and the regeneration of the urban environment is not still demonstrated in academic literature, but it is currently a subject of doctoral research. However, the
existence of a link between the reuse of a building and the regeneration of a wider area is grounded on at least three theoretical elements.

First, its existence is confirmed by a general conviction of academics and urban practitioners. As Julie Fanovar (2017, 14) states, the projects of occupation, even if temporary, ‘are an added value for the occupier, but also for the society itself’, benefitting the surrounding neighbourhood through the opening of new activities like ‘bike workshop open to all residents of the neighbourhood, a grocery store, a homework school ...’

Furthermore, as I have also demonstrated in a previous article, in at least two European experiences, namely NDSM wharf in Amsterdam and FARM cultural park in Favara (Italy), bottom-up activities and urban regeneration appear to be consequential, basing on the promoters’ opinions.

Second, many authors admit the existence of catalysts in the urban environment: Attoe and Logan (1989) admit the possibility of an urban ‘catalytic effect’, defined as the possibility given by ‘the introduction of a new element (the catalyst)’ to cause ‘a reaction that modifies existing elements in the area’, that led to a product that is better than the sum of its ingredients (Attoe and Logan 1989, 46–47). Also, Aldo Rossi (1978) talks about ‘primary elements’ as ‘catalysts’, as broadly depicted by Davis (2009). Moreover, the research ‘Urban Catalyst’ confirmed how ‘spontaneous, temporary uses have positive long-term effects, both at the sites where they were originally located and well beyond’ (Oswalt, Misselwitz, and Overmeyer 2006, 280)

Third, the phenomenon called ‘Bilbao-effect’, defined as the possibility for a single architectural intervention to generate effects on a wider scale, even if questioned in its long-term outcomes has still its validity (Franklin 2016).

The link between bottom-up practices and urban regeneration, if not yet proven, can be however considered based on a large academic consensus. Admitting the existence of this link, the following sections will present how this relation involves also the reuse of vacant buildings, which can become an important asset for the development of these practices.

The Vacant Buildings: Issue or Occasion?

Many factors can produce the phenomenon of vacant buildings. It can descend from the specific conditions of a building, or from macro trends, that can influence the whole real estate market of an area. Depopulation and migrations, deindustrialisation or economic development are dynamics that change the pressure on the real estate sector, requiring the construction of buildings, or on the opposite generating loss of value and abandonment of urban areas (Manganelli 2015). I will not delve deeper in the causes that generate a vacant property, that differ for each case, and whose macro trends

1‘Ces projets sont une plus-value pour l’occupant, mais également pour la société elle-même. Au-delà de la vie collective qui se met en place au sein du bâtiment, certains projets s’ouvrent également sur le quartier : atelier vélo ouvert à tous les habitants du quartier, une épicerie, une école des devoirs…’
are broadly discussed in the literature (Alker et al. 2000; Marcuse 1985; Mallach, Haase, and Hattori 2017). I will instead consider the presence of a vacant building as an existing premise, an element whose existence is given.

Academics suggest the impelling need for public administrations to push for the reduction of vacant properties, in order to contain the land and energy consumption (Myers and Wyatt 2004), to control the crime (Spelman 1993) and reduce the costs (Winthrop and Herr 2009). If the reduction of abandoned buildings is a need for public authorities, the solutions adopted are different. The potential approaches involve subsidizing the extra costs faced by the community, developing policies that favour the intervention on existing buildings, or intervening actively through public development agencies. However, not all the public administrations are willing or have the funds necessary to directly intervene in solving the issue of an abandoned building in their territory.

For this reason, it appears relevant to analyse and compare different paths that vacant building can follow in order to be reactivated and reused directly by the citizens, in the bottom-up projects. Despite the importance of the topic, a few works studied the link between the reuse of vacant buildings and urban regeneration strategies.

The importance of vacant buildings is confirmed by the existence of self-constituted networks of citizens, that aim at giving new meaning and bring new activities inside the cities.

It is the case of Trans Europe Halles, a network born in 1983 in Brussels with the scope of giving a unique representation to the European bottom-up cultural centres (Sayin 2019). In fact, as Sayin, the communication manager of the network, pointed out in a recent interview (2019), solving the issue of vacant buildings was the main concern that conducted to the foundation of the network: ‘there are so many empty industrial buildings that are abandoned, unused, empty around Europe at the moment, how can we reuse these buildings and spaces for culture and art?’ (Sayin 2019). This initial intention is still a prerequisite in order to become a member of TEH, which accepts only ‘citizen-initiated’, ‘independent and not-for-profit’ cultural centres ‘based in a repurposed building’ (Trans Europe Halles 2019).

Also, the Italian based ReCreo (recreo.network) was born on similar concerns. ReCreo attempts to build a map of rural vacant buildings in Italy, in order to connect the owners and citizens that have a proposal for the reuse (Porcelloni et al. 2019). ReCreo is essentially a web-based platform, where citizens can collaborate in building a map that individuates the presence of all the vacant estates, considering the buildings but not only. Moreover, people that have an idea for the spaces can register the platform a communicate their ideas, making possible a positive encounter between the owner and actors that need a space.

These networks are only two examples of how the presence of vacant buildings strikes the citizens’ imagination and triggers creative projects and networks.
The reuse of empty buildings in contemporary cities has been recognized as an opportunity also by public actors. The recent activities carried by a network of eleven cities in the framework of European programme URBACT (Scheffler 2018) aimed at working on the concept of reuse, to ‘support a sustainable city and neighbourhood development’. This network, called 2nd Chance, has developed a guidebook for the reuse of vacant industrial buildings. Adopting the public administration’s point of view, the guidebook, edited by the lead expert Sheffler, individuated six key activities that are necessary in order to achieve full reuse of the vacant buildings (Scheffler 2018):

- understanding the current state of the building and its history;
- making stakeholders and citizens aware of the building;
- opening the building;
- engaging stakeholders in the reactivation process;
- developing a reactivation strategy embedded in the city development strategy;
- checking for alternative financial resources.

Differently from the above presented public and private networks, the intention of this article is not willing to produce any directly operative knowledge, but instead aims at developing a conceptual framework that will be useful in further works.

Three Steps for the Regeneration through the Reuse of Vacant Buildings (SteRVs)

The process through which a vacant building become an asset in a UR project is complex and differs in each case. However, the article demonstrates the possibility to distinguish at least three phases, each characterized by its proper goals and outcomes, through which the empty buildings can become part of a more comprehensive UR strategy. Differently from Sheffler’s work (2018), that individuated six operative phases in order to achieve a successful strategy of reuse, the ones that I describe in this article are more generally valid. From one hand, the three steps theorized have not operative purpose, i. e. they are not a directly useful tool, on the other, they offer a theoretical framework adaptable to a variety of situations, allowing the comparisons between different projects. This research, in fact, is a part of a more comprehensive study on bottom-up urban regeneration. Once individuated that the vacant buildings are an asset, and the macro phases through which they are embedded in regeneration strategies, the analysis and comparisons would be possible. The phases individuated are three. They are called steps for the regeneration through the reuse of vacant buildings (SteRVs), and will be below demonstrated through the multiple case studies method.

- **Recognition.** It is the first phase, in which an actor, public or private, individuates the presence of a vacant building. The building can be ‘easily
found’ because its location is in a traversed street, or be more ‘hidden and less open to the public look’ (Franck and Stevens 2006, 231). This first phase overcomes one of the issues faced in the reuse of vacant buildings, namely the fact that ‘the opportunities are frequently not identified and often hindered or delayed by poor information’ (Myers and Wyatt 2004). The ‘recognition’ is something similar to the ‘discovery’, intended as the action to ‘find a space in order to put it to use’, recognizing ‘not just the space but a new purpose for it’ (Franck and Stevens 2006, 30). The spaces are ‘found’ through the ‘recognition’, in the sense that the actors identify a place where to develop functions that ‘were not originally designed to serve’ (Rivlin 2006, 39). Moreover, ‘recognition’ not only involves the acknowledgement of the existence and the possibilities offered by a space, but also to recognize the complexity of values related to a specific place, which can involve economic, social, historical, aesthetical or symbolic values.

- **Appropriation.** In the ‘appropriation’ phase an actor, be it public or private, appropriates the space, in order to reuse it and to put in place a project. Jiménez-Dominguez refers to appropriation as a ‘collective activity’, related to ‘communication and social relatedness in urban space ... urban culture and living memory’, ‘based on identification’ (2006, 99). However, also a building, that is a closed space with usually well-defined thresholds, can be appropriated. A vacant building, that lost the functions originally assigned, have many similarities to the ‘loose space’ conceptualized by Franck and Stevenson (2006), such as to offer a myriad of possibilities, to ‘frame opportunities for expression and for social engagement’ and the ‘absence or abeyance of the determinacy’ (Franck and Stevens 2006, 9,17). As the ‘loose space’, a vacant building needs to be appropriated in an intentional way, often more strategically than a generic activity ‘part of the everyday life’ (Franck and Stevens 2006, 29). Regarding a vacant building, which can have a private owner and be closed to the public, appropriation passes through different activities that can involve also the legal and economic aspects, for instance, the purchase or the rent, beyond the physical appropriation through spatial practices (Boer, Otero Verzier, and Truijen 2019). This phase can be radically different if the actor that appropriates the space is a single person, that can for instance purchase an estate, a grassroots organization, that can set up squatting strategies (Boer, Otero Verzier, and Truijen 2019), or a public administration, that may use agreements or expropriations (Badcock 2019). As defined by Schneider and Till in the project ‘Spatial Agency’, appropriation ‘can include the taking of another’s property for one’s own purposes (either legally or illegally, short-term or long-term), or through highlighting abandoned or unoccupied space’ (‘Spatial Agency: How? Appropriation’ n.d.).

- **Design.** It is the phase through which the actors involve the building and its specificity in a project of reuse, reactivating it. The ‘design’ phase is the one where the activities inside the building, or in the external spaces, are linked to a more comprehensive urban strategy that considers also the surrounding urban fabric. This can be explicit, in the intention of the promoter, but also implicit, and become a spontaneous regeneration project. The ‘design’ phase,
in the bottom-up projects, often involve not only professionals but also citizens (Tonkiss 2014). As conceptualized by Manzini (2015), and demonstrated in a previous work referring to the bottom-up urban regeneration projects, these experiences are made both by ‘diffuse design’ figures, the citizens, and ‘expert designers’, the professionals. From the collaboration of this variety of actors born the ‘bottom-up’ urban regeneration projects, whose design involve the strategic use of the buildings as assets. It is a spontaneous co-design process, where the affordability of the vacant buildings becomes strategic to the sustainability of the initiative.

In the following section, I will demonstrate how the so-defined three phases are consistent with the real practice, and how it is possible to recognize them in two projects that have been developed through very different approaches.

The Case Studies

The informal urban practices in literature have been traditionally categorized basing on the duration, distinguishing between permanent and temporary projects. The research ‘Urban Catalyst’ (Oswalt, Overmeyer, and Misselwitz 2013), used ‘temporary’ to define the projects ‘if those initiating it and the other actors involved expected it to be of limited duration’, however, they also admitted that ‘uses can lose their classification as “temporary” as soon as their status changes and they consolidate into an established use (Oswalt, Misselwitz, and Overmeyer 2006, 275). The definition of ‘temporary’ appears as a loose concept, not defining the peculiar characteristic of the urban practices. Paraphrasing the words of Cirille Hanappe2 (2017), perhaps would be useful to admit that there is not ‘temporary reuse’, but only the ‘reuse’. In the framework of this specific research, it seems not useful to make the distinction between projects born to be temporary or more permanent ones. If the concept of ‘temporariness’ still has its validity in successfully grasping a certain grade of informality and improvisation in these kinds of urban practices, however, the duration appears not to be the main characteristic. Basing on these considerations, the article considers ‘bottom-up’ urban projects, without distinguishing in permanent or temporary, that:

- involve the return of benefits to the local community (Rabbiosi 2016);
- don’t only deal with physical improvements, but also social relations, ownership models, resource funding strategies (Tonkiss 2014);
- are based on the reuse of vacant buildings, as a necessary precondition for these initiatives to born and develop.

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2Il n’y a pas d’habitat temporaire. Il n’y a que de l’habitat. Il y a des chemins de vie, qui font que l’on passe d’un habitat à l’autre. Et il n’y a pas un lieu où l’on dort qui n’a la même attention qu’un palais, car ce quelqu’un y habite, pour plus longtemps qu’il n’aurait pensé.”
All around Europe there are cases of reuse of abandoned building by communities of citizens: Manifatture Knos in Lecce (Italy), Farm Cultural Park in Favara (Italy), NDSM wharf in Amsterdam (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017), Ex Rotaprint in Berlin (Ferguson and Urban Drift Projects 2014), Zinneke and Recyclart in Brussels, are only some examples of a huge tendency in Europe that finds in abandoned buildings the occasion for innovative projects. As mentioned above, some of these bottom up projects are linked to the concept of UR. In the following sections two renowned European cases are presented, analysing their development using the SteRVs as a conceptual framework.

FARM Cultural Park

Favara is a town in the South-Est of Sicily, in Italy. In 2010, after the tragic death of two children due to collapse of a historic building in the city centre (Corriere della Sera Redazione Online 2010), the municipal administration decided to earmark for demolition all buildings that were not considered safe (Consiglio and Riitano 2015).

In the same year, Andrea Bartoli and Florinda Saieva, a married couple, decided to accelerate the development of a project they had in mind. They were thinking about a project to change the conditions of the historic centre of Favara, that was semi-abandoned, with a high rate of unemployment and many buildings built without permits (Faraci 2017). The town didn't have any strong touristic or industrial destination, and the 2008 economic crisis was a disaster for the several construction companies of this zone. The Bartolis made the initial economical investment to purchase some buildings in the city centre, called Sette Cortili (Seven Courtyards) with the intention to build a new independent cultural centre. The design by architect Liotta, Castelli and others led to the opening of new spaces, that are now linked each other, and the general refurbishment and renewal (Di Carlentini and Liotta 2016a). Today thanks to the urban regeneration operated by Farm Cultural Park, the economy of the city has been reactivated, becoming the second touristic destination of Agrigento Province, attracting many people, and thus producing the necessity of open structures to welcome them such as B&Bs, hotels, restaurants, cafes (S.-J. A. Liotta n.d.).

Recognition. The Bartolis, in a moment of their life, decided to go back to Sicily. They decided to live in Favara after having lived in Paris for a period, to reconnect to their native place and their families (TEDx Talks 2017). They knew the town very well, mostly Florinda that was born in Favara, and they were aware of the conditions of the architectural heritage. The buildings purchased constituted an occasion for the couple. Sette Cortili was a semi-abandoned area, unsafe and in poor structural conditions (Di Carlentini and Liotta 2016a). However, according to Andrea Bartoli (2019), the purchased happened almost by chance, as he and Florinda were considering different buildings in the city centre. Castelli refers to have contributed to the purchase of ‘Palazzo Miccichè’ (Consiglio and Riitano 2015), another historical palace
that will become part of the FARM project. However, the recognition phase passes through the acknowledgement of the value of the historic centre, as a part of the city that deserves to be regenerated, in opposition to the 1980s external real estate development of Favara in large part abusive. Furthermore, from other interviews I carried out in Favara, it was made clear that the success of the FARM is also due to chosen area, called Sette Cortili, that was the symbol of the historic town.

Appropriation. The ‘appropriation’ phase passed through the purchase, at a very low price, of the vacant and neglected buildings. This was not an exceptional possibility in the city centre, as demonstrated by the interviews with some local experts (Cuschera and Cuschera 2019). A lot of buildings in the city centre were in fact sold at a very low price, others were earmarked for demolition. The Bartolis’ choice to purchase them in the historic centre demonstrated the existence of a possibility for the regeneration. Andrea Bartoli, notary by profession, purchased the buildings in the historic centre in the more classical way. The appropriation was an economic and legal transaction that allowed the Bartolis to become owners of the former vacant buildings. But after that, as pointed out by Faraci (2017, 677), they also developed a ‘process of recovery, re-appropriation’ that provided ‘new meaning to the area by involving artists and designers’. The very poor conditions of the buildings were not only the issues tackled by the Bartolis but were also the premise that allowed the purchase at a very low price, consenting de facto the project to develop.

Design. The ‘design’ phase included physical and non-physical interventions. The renewal of the buildings involved the restoration of walls, windows and doors, the refurbishment of the interiors and the connection of the different spaces. As I demonstrate in a forthcoming article, the design phase included the setting up of social cooperatives and art and culture events and expositions. The design phase heavily continued also after the purchase of the first buildings. It involved the collaboration of the Bartolis with the professionals, like the architects Castelli and Liotta, but also the graphic designers, the video makers etc. According to Andrea Bartoli, the design of the initiative is very demanding and absorbing, even if the results seem so immediate (A. Liotta 2019)3.

Farm Cultural Park reactivated some vacant buildings in the city centre of Favara, hosting the new functions, succeeding in animating the whole city centre. Farm Cultural Park is a clear example of how, through the mentioned three steps, vacant buildings can be the trigger for the regeneration of an urban area, in this case of a historic neglected centre.

NDSM Wharf

The wharf of the Netherland Dock and Shipbuilding Company is situated in a neighbourhood with an industrial past in the north bank of the IJ of

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3Andrea Bartoli, talking about the initiative ‘Countless Cities’, said that it has taken some months to develop the concept, while once realized it seems so immediate.
Amsterdam. The area is abandoned from the 1980. In this context, an abandoned industrial building has become not only the bigger sanctuary of Europe, but also succeed in changing the perception of the whole area. In 2000 the creative group Kinetisch Noord, made up of artists, craftsmen, skaters and no-profit organizations, started the process of regeneration of a building in this area, the old shipbuilding warehouse, to create affordable rent studios, a theatre, dance spaces, a skate park and either a school (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017). They achieved also the reuse of internal spaces as ateliers, using adaptable architectural structures designed by Dynamo architects (Bakker 2008). They could achieve this result through the cooperation with local governments, building authorities and professionals, becoming one of the bigger examples in Europe of regeneration from the bottom up.

However, also the public administration played a role in the development of the wharf. In 1999 the Amsterdam Nord municipality organised a competition for assigning the building to an association with a project for the temporary reuse of the NDSM shipyard (Bishop 2015). The role of public administration is however restricted to activities of ‘supervising and supporting the process’ (Gainza 2018, 807).

Form this point, the history of the NDSM regeneration is the one of a bottom-up regeneration: the Kinetisch Noord raised money in order to submit an entry in the competition, raised a consistent network of people around the initiative and succeed in winning the bid (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017). In the years that followed the community of the NDSM organised in 4 entities: an umbrella organization, the tenants, an external board, and a foundation (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017).

Recognition. The North bank of the IJ was almost not considered as a part of the city of Amsterdam. As stated by Chris Keulemans, artistic director of the Tolhuistuin, ‘Noord used to be to Amsterdam what Australia used to be to England’, a place where to send ‘criminals, their alcoholics, their homeless, their general outcasts’ (Weickgenant 2011, 1). It is clear that the recognition of the value of this area, similarly to the FARM case, needed to pass through the acknowledgement of any sort of value. The recognition, in effect, happened years before the proper reuse by Kinetisch Noord, and it is evident from the activities of other actors of Amsterdam’s vibrant cultural scene. As reported by Eva de Klerk (2017), the NDSM shipyard was already used, previously, as a stage by Dogtroep, ‘an international site-specific theatre company, creating shows at extreme locations’ (Threes n.d.). As reported by Anna Threes, artistic director of Doegtrop from 1990 to 1999, ‘in August 1994 Dogtroep played Noordwesterwals for a month, on a slipway of the former NDSM shipyard in Amsterdam-Noord’4 (Threes n.d.). However, there are ‘still very few people that recognize the potential of the transformation of the shipyard buildings in 1998’ (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017, 69). Eva de Klerk, as a promotor of Kinetisch Noord, has seen potentials in this part of the city, and Jolien van der Maden, an entrepreneur of the food sector, and Maik ter Veerm,

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4‘In augustus 1994 speelde Dogtroep een maand lang Noordwesterwals, op een scheepshelling van de voormalige NDSM-scheepswerf in Amsterdam-Noord.’
organizer of art and technology festival Robodock, have done the same. Also, a number of theatre companies were urgently searching for available spaces. The NDSM shipyard represented a spatial and aesthetic asset for these actors. In fact, the character of the industrial site was considered ‘appealing’, even though that part of the city was not ‘very popular at the time’ (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017, 69). However, it is possible to say that also the municipality of Amsterdam has acknowledged the value of the building. In fact, in a time when ‘it is still unclear what the future of the NDSM shipyard will be’ (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017, 73) the District Noord decides to organize a public competition for the reuse of the shipyard. This demonstrates the intention not to demolish the building but instead to preserve its integrity giving new functions.

Appropriation. The appropriation of the NDSM wharf is a complex phase. From the legal point of view, it passed through the winning of a public competition organized by District Noord of Amsterdam. This led to the legal appropriation of the space by the grassroots organization Kinetisch Noord, that winning the competition concluded the first agreement with the municipality of Amsterdam Noord for a 5 years use, then extended (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017). The appropriation through the reuse of the space, however, happened even before. In the years after the Dogtroep performance, in fact, the NDSM wharf was ‘one of the options people can move to when the evictions on the south bank of the IJ start to become concrete’ (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017, 73). The port buildings are appropriated by people coming from other squat experiences, such as ADM site and Plantage Doklaan (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017). It is evident, form the description of this variety of experiences, that the appropriation by different actors, through spatial practices, happened before the legal appropriation by Kinetisch Noord. However, when the building is assigned to Kinetisch Noord, the appropriation becomes more structured and less informal and guided by the winning bid for the reuse.

Design. The design phase started before the legal appropriation, with the preparation of the dossier to submit to the public administration. Differently from other totally private-led initiatives, the design phase has been very demanding also in the preliminary phase, involving a lot of people and professionals and requiring an initial investment. (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017). The design phase appears to be typical only of the Kinetisch Noord activities, and not of other actors that appropriated the building before. In fact, the previous appropriations of the areas were characterized by informality and the lack of legal basis and did not allowed to make mid-term programs for the area. The public bid is a shifting point in the approach for the area. In fact, from this moment, it is possible to individuate an actor, the grassroots organization, but also a design plan that foresights a future for the area regarding the activities and the financial plan. The design phase appears to be an interdisciplinary work, and as demonstrated for the FARM’s case, not only involved professionals with different expertise but also citizens. The design phase included a ‘crowdfunding avant la lettre’ campaign in order to
raise the money necessary to design and print the competition proposal (Klerk, Feldbrugge, and Zonneveld 2017, 77). The design phase for the NDSM wharf was in large part influenced by the need to build a dossier to enter the competition.

Conclusions

The SteRVs constitute a theoretical instrument to analyse and understand how the vacant buildings are embedded in an urban regeneration strategy developed from the bottom up. It is possible to recognize the SteRVs also as more universal categories, which can be applied also to other processes of reuse. However, this article is limited to the development of a conceptual framework that will be directly used in the research I am carrying out on bottom-up urban regeneration, and the case studies refer to this phenomenon. This does not limit the applicability, under further study, to a wider range of cases.

Regarding the usefulness of such a theoretical concept, the SteRVs will be fundamental in:

- analysing, as done in this article, how these complex projects develop, also admitting comparisons;
- understating how the vacant buildings have been chosen and used in the urban regeneration strategies, allowing speculations on the reasons that allowed or not the success of the initiatives.

Moreover, through the analysis of the two case studies, this article demonstrates how the abandoned buildings can become part of these strategies, independently from the actors and the path followed. The recognition of the presence of an abandoned building that can be reused for different functions, the appropriation through formal or informal activities and the design of a new function to reactivate the building in an urban strategy appear to be three indispensable phases. For this reason, it is possible to state that the SteRVs constitute a useful framework in order to better understand bottom-up urban regeneration projects.

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