

# ADAPTABLE URBAN SPACES

SFU ITALIA DESIGN 2007 CHARLES LAW

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This paper is a concise analysis on adaptive urban spaces. The area around Piazza Giuseppe Poggi in Florence will be utilized as an example of an application of knowledge based on the course texts *Dynamics of Delight* and *Pattern Languages*, as well as personal observations and theory. The goal of this study is an in-depth understanding of architecture and the movement of people.

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## Location

Piazza Giuseppe Poggi is not a typical location for analysis so I will provide some rationale into why I chose this particular space. I first passed by the area at night and was met by hundreds of youths utilizing the space. Piazza Giuseppe Poggi was not necessary being used but instead the small park facing the water across from the piazza was. At first I thought nothing of it, there was a bar in the middle of the park so it was quite natural for teenagers and young adults to be socially interacting in such an area. Passing by it again the next night the scene was the same. Intrigued, I went inside the area and was surprised to find that the inhabitants of this space were not only youths but they were almost all locals. This was the first public space in Florence I had seen that was so close to the city center but had a concentration of locals. There were obviously different subcultures and classes within the group of youths in this space and with this thought I decided on analyzing this small park across from Piazza Giuseppe Poggi.

## Socially Intensive Space at Night

There are dozens of piazzas around Florence and hundreds of public points so why is the area around Piazza Giuseppe Poggi such a socially intensive space at night? A factor may be that there is a bar in the middle of the park serving alcoholic beverages, but for the purpose of this study and due to the many bars around Florence I had to look past this point and place emphasis on the urban, social, and aesthetic planning of this space. For my analysis I will look into why I believe this area is a “koinonic space.”



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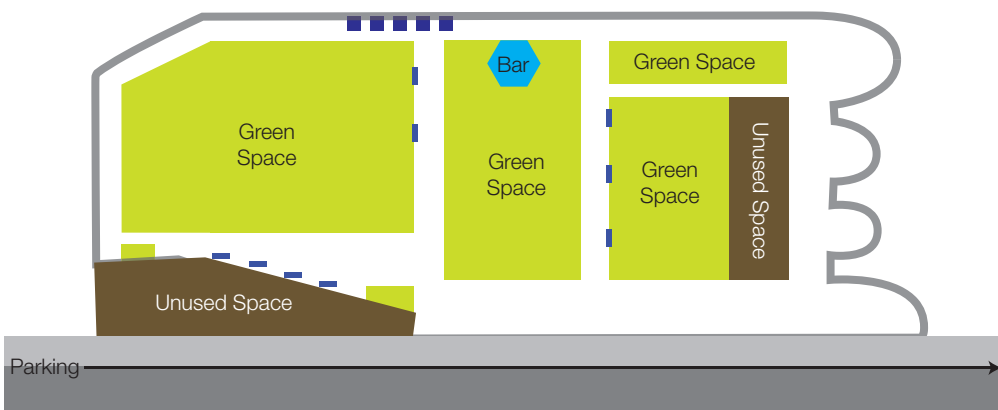
## Night Attractors

On my way to the area I noticed two things. The old Florentine wall in Piazza Giuseppe Poggi acts as a goal attractor for the piazza underneath and consequently also for the park across from the piazza. Reaching the wall is a build up of expectations and the wall itself is an expression of the urban youth center at night. Also, the group of people in the park forms a social attractor. It is a ritual, where teenagers and young adults can comfortably converse, have a drink and a smoke, and interact with one another in a public space. I found the blend of the goal attractor and the social attractor in this area appealing.



## Nighttime Space Analysis

The park across from Piazza Giuseppe Poggi is a heavily utilized space at night and below is a visual representation of the space:



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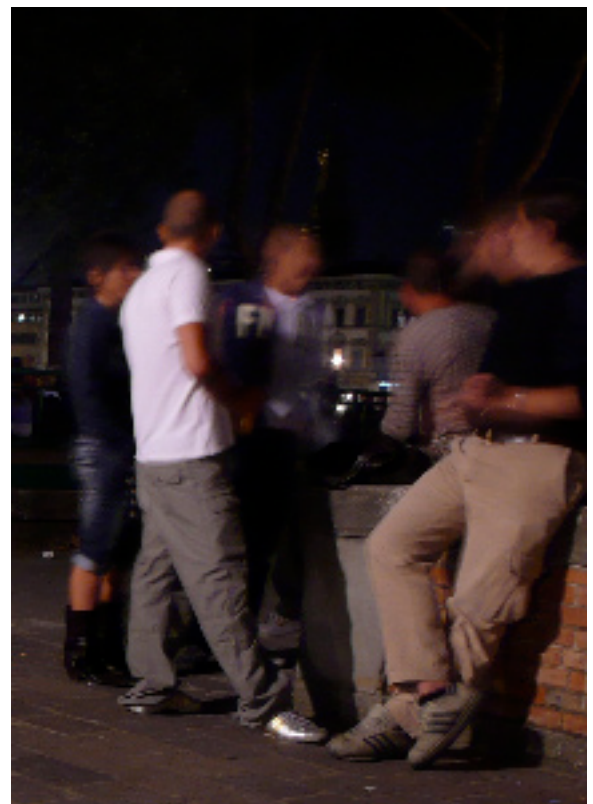
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## Nighttime Space Analysis (continued)

The ledge of the irregularly shaped public space affords places to sit while facing the water, and they are all always utilized. Benches placed around the park are also fully occupied. Interestingly enough, the green space in the middle of the park is not really used as a social place. People automatically migrate to the sides of the park and the green space is used by the people to move from one side to another. The only green space where people consistently stop and interact with each other is the middle patch of grass where the bar also resides.

Earlier on I mentioned that I believed this area to be a “koinonic space” and now I will use in-depth analysis and observation to provide support. Koinonic space, as discussed in *Dynamics of Delight*, refers to certain spaces in cities where people congregate, signifying civic allegiance and cementing bond with fellow citizens. These places are symbols of citizenship, existence, and typically are found in areas with historical and political significance.

Piazza Giuseppe Poggi is an area that local teenagers and young adults have claimed, acting as an acknowledged point where people of similar ages and interests express their social allegiances. A consequence of Florence being so overrun by tourists is that historical relevant places such as Piazza della Signoria become “social detractors” for locals, especially for local youths, to interact within. However, the beauty of many adaptable urban spaces in Florence is that new and old areas can be taken over by locals and become established. Architecture is space plus time and in this case we can say that time and people define this space.



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## Nighttime Street Analysis

To understand how people flow into Piazza Giuseppe Poggi we need to look at the streets and the accessibility of the area. My observations have deduced four general paths that locals utilize to approach the park.

On ground level the Florentine wall acts as a goal attractor when locals come from the North, East, and West sides of the city. There is complexity in the streets of Florence in general. However the park, being located beside the Rio Arno, is easy to find, and with the wall acting as a goal attractor, this area requires little effort to memorize and get to. I have mentioned much about the wall but I think the significance of it to the space deserves such attention. While in the park I felt that the vertical superiority of the wall takes prominence over the street, connecting the park to the fragmented wall and Piazza Giuseppe Poggi. This makes the space feel larger than it actually is and connects two spaces that are physically separated by a street and vehicles. The wall has a symbolic value for the urban fabric of the area and facilitates movement as well as serving to guide individuals to the area.



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## Space in the Afternoon

I have delved significantly into the park at night but one of the themes of this study is the flexibility of urban design - spaces that is designed for people to take control of what goes on in those spaces - and this can change during different times of the day. Spaces such as the area around Piazza Giuseppe Poggi have an implied consensus of usage during different times of the day and this is certainly worth investing time into to understand urban design.

There is a great contrast between the area at nighttime and that during daytime. In the early afternoon there are no local youths in sight. The bar is closed and the park is a passive space used by local elders relaxing on the benches and creating their own personal spaces close to the ledges, looking out onto the other side of the city. The feel of the park is completely different during daytime; it is calm and people there are enjoying the quiet space and engrossed in their personal sanctuary.

What surprised me was also the cleanness of the space. Urban design can only go so far. Local politics and policies greatly affect local communities, so the amount of effort that goes into cleaning the city at night certainly has allowed this space to transform and become adaptable for local elders to utilize the area in the daytime.

The streets that intersect Piazza Giuseppe Poggi comprise of tourist traffic in the afternoon, although from my observations the park itself is mostly tourist free. Tourists mostly walk pass the park to go to their respective destinations, likely south to Piazza Michelangelo or west to the Ponte Vecchio area. The absence of foreigners certainly has something to do with how locals interact within a space so it is interesting to see a public park that's close to city center being inhabited mostly by locals in a highly touristy city.



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## Flexible Spaces

It has already been addressed that “cities are architecture plus space and time” and I’ve also discussed that the area around Piazza Giuseppe Poggi can be seen as being defined by time and people. Now let’s relate this concept to the urban fabric of the city and explore why this is a good example of an adaptive urban space in Florence. Buildings can be seen as the “bed cloth” to the continual movement of people in a city and through the urban configuration of the area, we can see that the park is easily accessible from all parts of the city. This is especially relevant at night as youths from different parts of the city can easily access major streets that lead to Piazza Giuseppe Poggi. Parking is sufficient and the location can be reached by all forms of transportation both night and day. At night there are significantly more cars and motorcycles and in the afternoon there are more bikes. The affordances and capacity to allow for different types of transportation and people are some of the reasons I believe that this area is a flexible urban space.



We can view the park and public points in general as a stage. There are little life’s dramas that occur there, changing depending on the time of the day. We can learn from Piazza Giuseppe Poggi that urban design greatly depends not only on space and time, but also on the interpretation that people have on the space. This is a key point to pull out from the Piazza Giuseppe Poggi analysis and it is also the reason why I think this area is successful.

