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Social capital and public policies for commons: bottom up processes in public real estate property valorization

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Abstract

Valorisation of public real estate property has been lately matter of political and administrative discussions at national level. The policies currently promoted by public administration are oriented to simplify patrimonial and planning procedures. Recently, new valorisation forms of public property took place. In Italy, following relevant international examples, self-organized communities promoted profit and no profit activities in abandoned or undeveloped public real estate assets. The aim of the research consists in the analysis of the conditions for the successful value creation generated by bottom up, self-organized processes in the public real estate valorisation. Two hypothesis have been tested: the first one concerns the role of social capital as a premise of these initiatives; the second one regards the public policies supporting bottom up valorisations. The multivariate statistics have been used to analyze data and three clusters emerged from the empirical survey. The findings confirm the initial hypothesis of the research. Social capital is crucial for the development of bottom up public property valorisation. Nevertheless, where social capital is lacking, public policies appear to be relevant to support local bottom up entrepreneurship in cultural activities, welfare, and profit activities.

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1. Introduction

Valorization of public real estate property has been lately matter of political and administrative discussions at national level. The policies currently promoted by public administration are oriented to simplify patrimonial and city planning procedures (Agenzia del Demanio, 2015; Camagni et alii, 2014), ensuring that the process of value creation in real estate property is as quick as possible and providing it more attractiveness for private investors. Up till now, public policies were focused on the supply side, aiming in particular at all the administrative procedures, but the large amount of stalled real estate operations shows that these policies are not able to ensure an effective creation of financial and economic value in public real estate.

Recently, new forms of valorisation of public property took place. In Italy, following relevant international examples, self-organized communities promoted profit and no profit activities in abandoned or undeveloped public real estate assets. This bottom-up approach represents a reaction to a radically changed market (Antoniucci and Marella, 2014; Campagnoli, 2015; Colomb, 2012; Inti, 2011; 2014, Németh and Langhorst, 2014). New forms of coalescence of demand have been growing, transforming public properties in containers of activities in different areas, generating values for citizenship and for local authorities with no connection with the traditional development activity (Coscia et alii, 2015; Finan, 2014; Inti, 2011; 2014).

The aim of the research consists in the analysis of the conditions for the successful value creation generated by bottom up, self-organized processes in the public real estate valorisation. The paper is organised in three parts. The first one shows the relevant features of these new valorisation processes promoted by the grass-roots participation. The second one presents the research methodology, moving from a large survey of the Italian experiences and adopting the multivariate statistics tool of the cluster analysis. The third one points out the determinants of these processes with particular concern to the social capital and to specific policies for the urban commons.

2. The bottom-up valorisation of public real estate: where it starts from and the role of policies

For years public authorities promoted a valorisation strategy of their real estate assets based on essentially two pillars: flexible zoning rules and simpler and more effective procedures to access the market. In other words, public entities on one hand allowed any type of zoning rule according to the highest and best use principle; on the other hand, they set the simplest rule in order to sell real estate asset, eventually identifying the financial vehicles for the most effective valorisation (i.e. the funds). A large number of initiatives set by the local and national public administrations have largely failed, leaving a vast portion of the public real assets underused or abandoned. This unsatisfying result is relevant for the local policies: public authorities have to move to radically new strategies to create value on the real estate assets and to prevent the externalities typically deriving from abandoned properties, namely vandalism and social insecurity.

To date, a significant number of urban regeneration experiences relies upon self-organized social and economic processes. A new development strategy takes place, employing public real estate assets for alternative uses. Start-ups, no profit initiatives in subsidiary welfare, co-working offices, artists' ateliers and cultural productions and laboratories: the emerging demands transform the abandoned public real estate properties in locations to develop a wide range of profit and no profit entrepreneurial activities. Most of these processes took place valorizing abandoned – often for years - real estate properties, without a specific valorization tentative promoted by the administrations. In other cases these bottom-up processes are the response of countless valorization tentatives launched by public authorities that did not find a response by the market. In this scenario, when traditional public policies do not prove to be successful, social innovation contribute to a new type of property valorization.

The goal of the research consists to examine how, and to what extent, both the social capital and the public policies effectively contribute to these processes and if they are determinant for their development. Bottom-up valorisation processes appear to be based upon the social capital (Gastaldi, 2011; Putnam, 1993; Sdino and Castagnino, 2014), meaning: the presence of an active local community attached to local resources and involved in public choices. The presence of an active citizenry, self-organized in an open and flexible community, seems to be the essential premise for the successful results of the bottom up initiatives (Branca, 2011; Della Spina and Calabrò, 2014; Fusco Girard, 2011).

The development of these bottom-up processes intersects the issue of the temporary use. Usually, the assets are

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