

ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT: THE MEDIEVAL PORTICI OF BOLOGNA

LOCAL
CASE

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The Portici of Bologna represent an inclusive time machine, where the development of the urban hardware among centuries adapts to the social and economic demand.

Cities have grown by following the development of public life quality. One of the oldest examples of this phenomenon is the city of Bologna, where the medieval urbanisation process embraced the concept of inclusivity and revealed how organic growth can truly adapt to the needs of the time.

Since 2006, Portici of Bologna, which extend some 38 km along the city streets, have been considered UNESCO heritage, not only for their architectural value but also for their social and inclusive meaning. They represent the identity of the city, as semi-open and semi-public spaces where cultural, material and immaterial heritage is embedded (Cineteca, n.d.).

BIRTH OF UNIVERSITY STIMULATES THE GROWTH OF THE CITY

The birth of Portici dates back to the 11th century and their development has undergone a number of phases, in relation to their physical structure as well as their land use. The most relevant historical fact that is concurrent with the growth of this architectural typology is the birth of Bologna University in 1088. Considered the oldest university in Europe, this new institution attracted a consistent number of students, professors, researchers and academics from Italy and Europe. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of migration from the countryside to urban areas became more and more frequent.

URGENT NEED FOR BIGGER HOUSES

While the economy of the city was growing incredibly fast, the municipality of Bologna had to cope with a real housing emergency; the need to invent a new urban space became essential (In Italia, n.d.). The citizens of the city understood the financial value of migration and started adapting their houses to the urban trend. In a spontaneous and informal way, the upper floors of houses were enlarged, by building wooden beam extension. As time went by, the bulks developed into more jutting shapes hanging over the public streets and the need for supporting columns from the ground up became vital. This is how Portici were born and became the representative architecture of the plinths of Bologna's city centre.

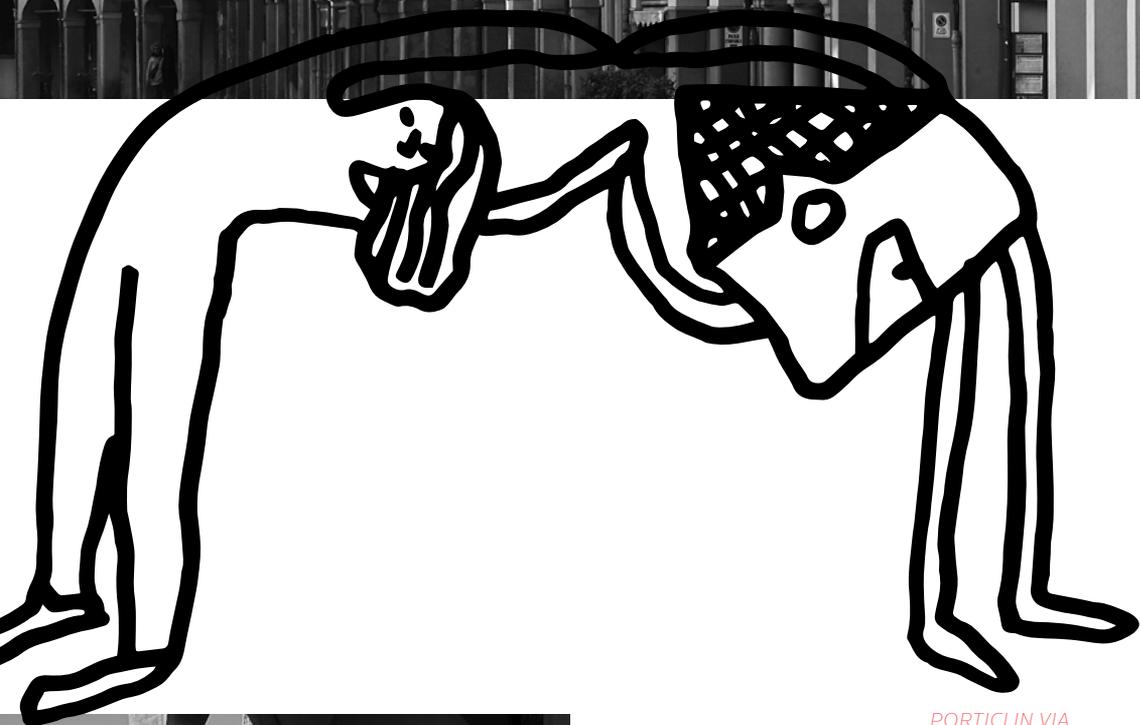
PORTICI CREATED NEW PUBLIC SPACES

With the birth of a new type of urban area, diverse activities took place too, all in the same time and space: students and professors found homes and at the same time a gathering area, where commercial and daily activities were also taking place (Informa Giovani Italia, n.d.). The semi-public/semi-private characteristic of Portici allowed people to create a network and to be spontaneously included in it. Nevertheless, the semi-open structure solved into the ideal zone to move through the streets, protected from the sun during the hot season and from the cold rain and snow during the winter.

MUNICIPAL SUPPORT

As this urban phenomenon happened in diverse cities, not all the municipalities of the region reacted in the same way. Many majors conceived this new architecture as informal, not legally approvable and decided to demolish them for a new urban reconstruction. On the other hand, the city of Bologna perceived the recent development of the urban fabric as an advantage to preserve and improve. In 1288 a municipal ban established that each household had the responsibility as the owner to build and maintain the arcade adjacent of their houses. The land ownership shifted from public to private, although the function of the space itself remained as public, in other words as a pedestrian public path. Nowadays, Portici of Bologna still represents the inclusive identity of the city, as a space of sharing and connecting (In Italia, n.d.).



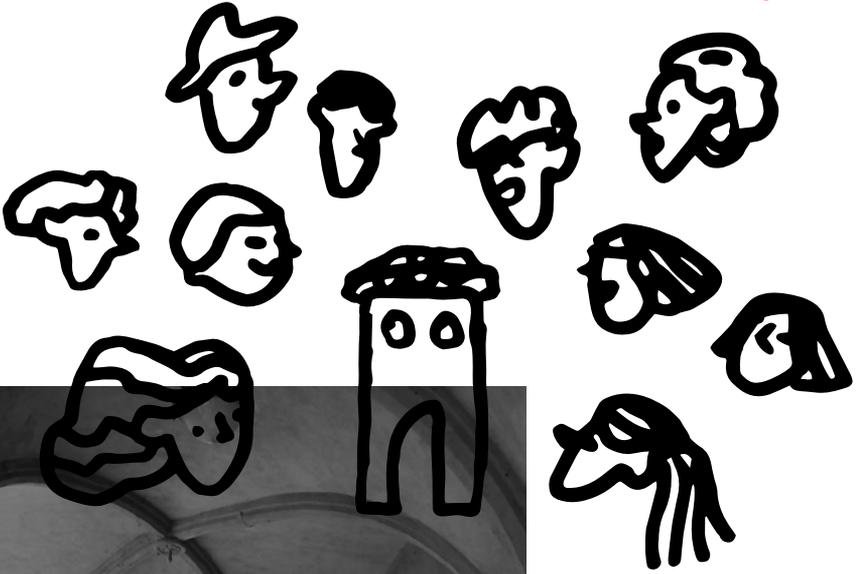


*PORTICI IN VIA
SARAGOZZA WITHIN
THE WALLS*

Source: Francobraso

PIAZZA VERDI

*Source: Alessandro
Siani*



MEDIEVAL LESSONS

The unique case of Bologna development during medieval times shows how back in history we can travel to understand what a fundamental effect public services and amenities have on our cities' expansion. The first explanation is related to the connection between city growth and human interaction. As a wealthier public life attracts financial initiatives and their entrepreneurs, in the same way, the University of Bologna has welcomed a great number of students and professors. Whose result arises in the positive adaptability of the local community and the collaboration of the municipality to accept the change and embrace it as advantageous. Nonetheless, the dynamic and effective face-to-face interaction between different people took place in the today called mixed urban areas, whose outcome is a dynamic network of experts, their sharing of knowledge and innovation. Portici represented one of the most effective adaptation and inclusive processes to answer to the social and economic demand of cities.

How back in history an this time machine travel? I recommend you to look back through the past of your own cities and discover for yourself.

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