Producing the just city: Self-organising Urban Labs for the re-appropriation of public spaces

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Abstract

Nella città contemporanea, le forme di riappropriazione da parte dei cittadini di spazi urbani degradati e abbandonati sono molto cambiate. Alle consuete forme antagonistiche di autorganizzazione dei cittadini si sono progressivamente sostituite nuove forme basate sull'interazione fra cittadini e istituzioni. Queste hanno suscitato grande entusiasmo in quanto considerate capaci di aprire possibilità di recupero di spazi urbani abbandonati, inimmaginabili utilizzando approcci top-down o dialogici. Enfatizzandone le potenzialità trasformative, non si è indagata la possibilità di rafforzamento del controllo e dell'ingiustizia sociale, o di uso dei 'cittadini' per compensare la scomparsa di opportunità di democrazia urbana e di politiche di welfare.

Indagando il programma della Regione Puglia "Laboratori Urbani: vecchi edifici per giovani idee", il contributo riflette sulla capacità di queste forme interattive di autorganizzazione di favorire una riappropriazione civica delle aree urbane in abbandono realmente democratica, rivendicandone il carattere di 'spazi pubblici'.

In the contemporary city, the forms of re-appropriation of degraded and abandoned urban spaces by citizens have profoundly changed. Usual antagonistic forms of citizens' self-organisation have been increasingly replaced by new forms of interaction between citizens and institutions. These have arisen great enthusiasm as innovative urban policies that seem to open up the possibility of recovering abandoned urban spaces, which was unthinkable in the logic of top-down or dialogic approaches. In many cases their transformative potential was taken for granted, and has not been explored the possibility that such policies become means of control and injustice, and spaces where 'citizens' are used to offset the disappearance of opportunities for urban democracy and social support through the welfare state.

Assuming the program of Apulia Region "Urban Laboratories: old buildings for young ideas" as case study, our paper reflects on the ability of these interactive forms of self-organization to favour the emergence of real democratic civic re-appropriation of abandoned areas by claiming their character of 'public spaces.

1. Can Urban Labs promote the re-appropriation of urban public spaces?

Contemporary cities are shaped by capitalism, and are always changing (Lefebvre, 1991), but in the last thirty years, they have been modified in a capillary way by a pervasive, creative-destructive

neoliberal economic restructuring (Moulaert, Rodriguez and Swyngedouw, 2003; Harvey, 2005). This has transformed the same idea of a city into nothing more than an incoherent set of spaces (Sassen, 2014) dominated by the free market and inhabited by the precariousness of its inhabitants' lives. By paraphrasing Geertz (1983) such a process of transformations can be defined as urban involution. It is characterised by the disappearance of urban common spaces as a result of a process of appropriation by capital that is necessary to guarantee the conditions for the production-reproduction of capitalist relations (dos Santos Junior, 2014). In such a process, public spaces are continuously abandoned, subtracted from communities and put on the market as areas available for more profitable uses or substituted with quasi-public recreational spaces (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001). With the material disappearance of public spaces, the political and social meaning of public spaces in urban life also disappears, leaving in their place fertile conditions for the diffusion of processes of disempowerment and disenfranchisement determined by the erosion of the welfare state and the transformation of basic rights such as the right to work or to housing into structural uncertainties accompanying people's lives.

Therefore, as the commodification of cities proceeds through neoliberal transformation, a new polarisation of urban spaces emerges which is no longer based on the centre-periphery dualism, but rather on the attractiveness of places and people. Urban space becomes highly contradictory, ambivalent and individualised. On the one hand, cities seem to be open to everyone and offering happiness, things and spaces at no cost, on the other, large and small cities have now their own consumerism areas, fortified enclaves and "interdictory spaces" (Davies, 1998) that exclude anyone who is considered threatening or unsuitable because of his/her social class, ideas and cultural position (MacLeod and Ward, 2002; Sassen, 2014). Beyond the myth of attractiveness, cities become populated by interstitial spaces, places «that look empty and appear as though they no longer have any use» (Hudson, Shaw, 2009:3), suspended spaces waiting for appropriate flows of money.

At the same time, the continuous shrinking of spaces of democracy, co-optation and de-politicisation of urban policy-making, and the associated erasure from them of crucial issues such as social justice, have discouraged citizens' activism. The

coupling between trends of commodification and polarisation on the one hand, and the erasure of public space and de-politicisation of urban policy-making, on the other, undermines some of the taken-for-granted *rights to the city* and weakens the capacity of contestation of disempowerment and disfranchisement processes by urban inhabitants, as individuals or groups. The consumer and fragmented city prevails over the common good.

In such a context, and in order to cope with the challenges or the unjust dynamics raised by urban involution, several local governments as well as groups of citizens have experimented new forms of re-appropriation of public spaces. These are different from the usual antagonistic forms of contestation and/or collaborative dialogues between citizens and public institutions. Often considered too ideological or vulnerable to co-optation (VanHoose & Savini, 2017), these practices seem unsuitable to obtain immediate as well as meaningful and enduring social changes. A myriad of experimentations, for example based on DIY (Do It Yourself) or performative acts, have led local communities to obtain immediate and relevant results in terms of provision of public service or spaces.

In particular, several local governments have created or co-produced urban laboratories to capture or trigger both organized and latent citizens' creativity in order to imagine or implement new ways of urban transformation and management both for responding to the needs of the neoliberal city and for contrasting problems of social polarization and erasure of public spaces associated to urban involution. In both cases, urban labs spring from and share a co-production perspective on the form of collective action and an experimental approach to urban policy making (Evans and Karvonen, 2014; Karvonen and van Heur, 2014). They also draw on the idea that an urban lab can «change the knowledge-production process that underpins urban change through a recursive process of experimentation and policymaking, and that its appeal as a mode of governance is based largely on this transformative promise» (Evans and Karvonen, 2014). They are open and highly interactive spaces with multiple purposes ranging from the production of fresh knowledge to the promotion of social innovation and exploitation of creativity and entrepreneurship, as they emerge in the city of everyday life. Citizens and institutions, old and new actors, without any preclusion or rigid attribution of roles and tasks, co-produce collectively experiments of urban

transformation through non-hierarchical interactions. Urban labs offer a space and a possibility of networking with the myriad of experimental city-making practices, which are spread over and take place in very different fields of action, places and scales. Openness, co-production, creativity and networking have made urban labs symbols of a new form of city-making beyond the well-established urban planning traditions.

However, if urban labs can be considered spaces of action aimed at enabling the re-appropriation of urban space they still remain a controversial issue. On the one hand, they are reported as an opportunity to face the contradictions of contemporary cities, to avoid a distorted use of participation, and enact a more just transformation and management of urban space. On the other hand, they are described as places of social control and production of injustice, and spaces where 'citizens' are used to offset the progressive disappearance of opportunities for urban democracy and social support through the welfare state. When examined in practice, urban labs seem to open up the possibility of recovering or regenerating abandoned urban spaces that are unthinkable in the logic of top-down or dialogic urban transformation. However such capability is not the same as a process of re-appropriation of public spaces, at least as declined in the Lefebvrian tradition.

In the following sections, we reflect on the potentialities of urban labs to enact processes of re-appropriation of urban space, with the aim to find some directions for producing a more just city than the neoliberal one, and to inquire into possible roles for local governments. In such spaces of action, is the role for government necessarily incompatible or opportunistic? Or is it possible to imagine a role that advocates empowerment of marginalized groups, offers opportunities to those who do not have sufficient resources to self-organize, and allows non-predefined relations to evolve independently from government action? Is it possible for government bodies involved to play a role that does not destroy self-organizing abilities, openness and creativity?

In the first part our paper delineates the key characteristics of the concept of re-appropriation to which we refer. In relation to this, we highlight the crucial need of problematizing the meaning of self-organisation and its exclusive association to citizens' autonomous practices of self-organisation. In the second part the paper focuses on the experience of Urban Laboratories (Urban Labs) developed in Apulia under the Bollenti Spiriti youth program.

This is a typical case of controversial practice that raised criticism (Romano, XX) as being part of the roll-out of neoliberalism and at the same time is considered a model of successful innovative practice. After highlighting some key points of the political vision underlying Urban Labs, the idea and experience of Urban Labs are discussed by focusing on the ExFadda Urban Lab. In the last section, the paper draws attention to some peculiarities of this experience focusing on the different forms of re-appropriation of public spaces that it implies.

2. Re-appropriation and self-organisation

What makes urban labs sites of re-appropriation of public space? Any possible answer to this question requires some explanation concerning the meaning of re-appropriation. From our point of view, it has to be related to the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008). In such a perspective, re-appropriation is an act of reorientation. «It reorients the city away from its role as an engine of capital accumulation and toward its role as a constitutive element in the web of cooperative social relations among urban inhabitants» (Purcell, 2003, 149). It implies a meaning of accessibility to urban space that includes an antagonist content that opposes the dynamics of commodification of urban space, a collective vision of urban space based on urban participation in it as autonomous citizens or groups of citizens, and the power to change urban space following their own desires. While we retain these dimensions as crucial to re-appropriation of urban space and therefore to deal with our research topic, we contend that in the contemporary city the re-appropriation of public spaces can no longer be exclusively associated to citizens' autonomous practices of self-organisation. In debating this topic it is crucial to know if urban labs are sites favouring forms of self-organization aimed at boosting social innovation and delivering services, or if they are also aimed at triggering a radical change which directly copes with the wide range of injustices characterising the contemporary city, and in particular with issues concerning social polarisation and the exclusion of the most vulnerable citizens from urban life.

3. Problematizing self-organisation

The notion of self-organization has recently been getting increasing attention from the spatial planning community. It takes on different meanings coming from diverse scholarly frames and

disciplinary perspectives. As a consequence, spatial planning research has framed self-organization in different terms, which do not necessarily appear mutually-exclusive. A deep-rooted line of research is based on the science of complexity. In this perspective, self-organization is a descriptive-interpretative concept that can assume explicative power. It generally hints at the unpredictability, instability, and uncertainty of urban system dynamics. It is essentially based on the interpretation of cities as living, open, complex and thus self-organising systems that change from the bottom up (Portugali, 2000; Batty, 2005). It challenges linear assumptions that are traditionally part of the planner's perception of the world (De Roo, 2016). In such an approach, self-organization is defined as the «emergence and maintenance of structures out of local interaction, an emergence that is not imposed or determined by one single actor, but is rather the result of a multitude of complex and non-linear interactions between various elements» (van Meerkerk, Boonstra & Edelenbos, 2013, 1632). From a paradigm to understanding the emergence of order from chaos in physics and chemistry (Prigogine and Stenger, 1984) or the autopoietic self-reproduction of living systems in biology (Maturana and Varela, 1992), the science of complexity has become a perspective to interpret and address the dynamics, flows and uncertainty of systems. As such, in the field of spatial planning it has been gradually embracing broad and open theoretical frameworks and research lines, which sometimes appear intertwined but are not always consistent (for example, De Roo, Hillier and Wezemael, 2012).

Rather than being used to explain the dynamics of transformation of urban systems or to identify specific forms of social action, the concept of self-organization is increasingly arousing principles and methods to innovate spatial planning forms and procedures. Dissatisfaction with the established interpretation of public participation as an institutionalised part of planning processes (as for example in Alexander 2008) contributes to motivating emergent interest of planning scholars in self-organising practices. For example, in Innes & Booher (2010) the study of complex adaptive systems and the inadequacy of established decision-making process with such systems, underlies the idea of a collaborative rationality as the ability to manage decision-making situations characterized by multiple, interdependent stakeholders through rational collaborative deliberations. These

appear to be able to loosen the constraints within the social-institutional structures and open spaces for more adaptive decision-making processes. From a point of view revolving around the uncertainty and unpredictability of complex systems, self-organization is looked on favourably as a way to loosen a strong planning regime and produce workable alternatives in the face of growing inability of the state to respond effectively and adequately to social-environmental changes. Here the focus is on proposals for more flexible, adaptive, and dynamic planning approaches (Hillier, 2011; Davoudi, 2012) or for radical reform of regulatory instruments centred on substantive-qualitative planning model (Alfasi, Portugali, 2007) or simple abstract and general relational rules that enable society itself to be highly flexible (Moroni, 2015). The ongoing budget cuts are causing the growing consideration of self-organization as a political ideal. In such a perspective, «'the system' with its endogenous and ingenious principles of self-organisation (i.e. the market and civil society) » is distinguished from «'interventions' as carried out by some agent alien and exogenous to the system (i.e. the state) » (Uitermark, 2015). In such a perspective, the state is not considered as a foundation or an integral part to urban and social systems. Its role becomes to accept and encourage the self-organising abilities of communities and particularly the market.

A different tradition of research on self-organization refers to radical/insurgent planning. As is well known, the protagonist of Friedmann's visioning is an autonomous, self-organizing civil society, active in making claims, resisting and struggling on behalf of the good city within a framework of democratic institutions (2011, 158). The insurgent (planning) practices, representing an assertion of legitimacy by marginalised groups, challenge the assumption that the state is «the only legitimate source of citizenship rights» (Holston, 1998:39).

In fact, a growing variety of practices emerge. In the global North they involve local groups and communities in the recovery of degraded and abandoned urban spaces, neighbourhood regeneration, housing production, the provision of services or cultural development among others. In the global South such practices may be an expression of antagonistic forces that contest the state but also the market in efforts to counter a failure to provide homes and jobs (Meth, 2010). But the complete lack of any kind of mediation renders extremely fragile these forms

of antagonist action which state the issue of control over key collective resources (Melucci, 1996). The asymmetries of power hinder the proper functioning of public participation in radical/insurgent planning too (Monno and Khakee 2012). On the other hand, promises of an inclusive citizenship in neoliberal governance are often illusory (Miraftab, 2009), and insurgent practices can assume multiple, contradictory, and repressive forms in everyday living places (Meth, 2010).

Self-organizing practices often represent a response to the inability of the state to provide services and equipment and create minimum conditions of urban liveability (Cellamare, 2016). But they are also a way to legitimize the incessant dismantling of the welfare state through the government's retreat from sectors in which it has traditionally played a vital role (Nederhand, Bekkers and Voorberg, 2016), and to make use of the self-organizing capacities of citizens to provide services in new ways. Self-organization practices are considered also a way towards a 'productive' use of people's self-motivation to achieve more socially embedded results in terms of heterogeneity and diversity in urban development, against government policies supported by comprehensive systems of control and accountability that destroy creativity and produce «standard, uniform guidelines for conduct, to which large groups of actors and citizens must submit themselves» (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011).

The same terrain unlocked by the difficulties (and failures) of the neoliberal state to face changes and meet social demands, opens the way for completely different processes. They encourage the emergence of 'autonomous geographies', i.e. «spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation» (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). These include social centres, eco-villages, alternative currencies, food production, housing cooperatives and self-education, and experiments in non-hierarchical organization and consensus-based decision-making. On the other hand, they inspire new government approaches to spatial planning promoting small-scale, flexible and short-term interventions that undermine the capacity of public governments to oppose increasing socio-economic inequalities across city-regions (Savini, 2016).

A number of practices of self-organisation are increasingly developing under the benevolent gaze of government institutions

or even with their support. In such cases, the traditional boundaries between state, market, and civil society are quite fuzzy. Self-organization practices, which are presented as antagonistic and emancipatory, can be unacceptable from the point of view of social justice, because they do not offer the possibility for participation to those on the margins. Furthermore, time is a key variable for investigating these practices. Experiences which are initially presented as antagonistic and emancipatory forces, can evolve into collaborative experiences or become important for the market. The practice of 'alternative' economies, which limit the general neoliberal logics of waged work, corporate control and privatization, reveals ambiguities in the dichotomies between market and autonomist logics (Vanolo, 2013).

In this new world the concept of self-organization has ambivalent, evolving, and even contradictory practical implications: self-organization is a part both of the neo-managerial thinking, with its emphasis on the ability of continuously adapting to change, and the antagonistic thinking, with its accent on resistance to oppressive systems of government. To make the analysis more appropriate to this new world, and therefore criticism and proposals more effective, it is necessary to overcome the hackneyed debate over liberalism vs. statism (Boltanski and Chiappello, 1999), to distinguish and reveal differences in what is obscured by the use of fuzzy concepts or approximate analyses, and focus on the substantive issues implied by the right to the city and social justice.

4. Investigating Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs

Investigating Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs as a self-organising process of re-appropriation of urban spaces that continually evolve is a complex task. In many circles, both at a regional and international level, among policy makers and ordinary people, it is considered a successful initiative, a best practice, a sort of flagship of a specific style of policy-making developed by the Apulia regional government in the field of youth policy and beyond this specific field. The Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs initiative was identified as a best practice for the European Year of Creativity and Culture 2009. In 2013, it was included among the 100 best urban regeneration experiences in Europe within the 100EUrbanSolution initiative, and in 2017 in the inventory of good practices of youth work and entrepreneurial learning in EU Member States (EC,

2017). The story of the ExFadda Urban Lab, on which we focus in section 5, has been considered a best practice too (WWF, 2013; Campagnoli, 2014). However, success and failure are not suitable categories for developing an analysis on unique, ambiguous and uncertain processes of re-appropriation of public spaces and, in any case, they cannot be used to analyse constantly changing realities such as Bollenti Spiriti initiatives. Urban Labs involve self-organising processes that assume a hybrid form, continually evolving alternate phases of frenetic and creative activities with moments of stagnation or even profound crisis, and therefore avoid definitive judgment of success or failure. On the other hand, the choice of methods and categories of analysis is tentative, since Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs are characterised by a hybrid form of self-organisation based on co-production processes. It is difficult to label such a variety of activities using one definition among those abundantly offered by the literature on self-organization, urban labs, or co-production. This applies even more to the case study on which this paper focuses: the ExFadda Urban Lab. Social innovation, social or community enterprise, self-help, co-production, are all definitions that capture only part of the processes, projects, and activities, which are being developed in the ExFadda. In practice, the individual categories, and the attributes with which we try to describe them to encase them in a model, risk being reductive.

Therefore, we have analysed Urban Labs as processes of re-appropriation of urban spaces focusing on their conceptual pillars, their activities and interactions among actors. Following this idea, we have been developing research based on systematic analysis of the Urban Labs' experiences underway. This paper is part of this research. Here we discuss an example of particular interest: the ExFadda Urban Lab. This was selected because it has been effective for five years, with particular emphasis on "not planning anything" and continuously expanding activities. Although from this case study we cannot draw general conclusions on the role of urban labs for the re-appropriation of public spaces, it can give some indications on the potential of Urban Labs within a policy framework that encourages self-organising practices.

4.1 Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs: old buildings for young ideas

Bollenti Spiriti (Hot Spirits) is a program launched by the Apulia Regional government in 2005 within the framework of youth policy.

This policy can assume different perspectives, some of which mirror how the government perceives the role of young people in society. Bollenti Spiriti is the first regional policy in Apulia where young people are explicitly targeted. Traditional Italian programs targeting young people have been characterised for a long time by a particularistic approach, and a focus on preventing deviant behaviours and unemployment, rather than developing youth creativity and innovation potential for the benefit of their own individual lives and the society. Bollenti Spiriti differs from these characteristics. It abandons the problem-oriented perspective and takes with conviction the view of considering young people as a resource in society. As imagined by its creator, Guglielmo Minervini, young people are not a "problem to be mitigated", but a "resource to be activated" by emphasizing "their talent, energy and the desire to participate".

Minervini was deputy president of the Apulia Regional Government from 2005 to 2015. He had profound knowledge of young people, especially of more vulnerable ones or with special needs: since the 1980s he has been the promoter of many social, youth, pacifist and civil disobedience initiatives, and as founder of the association "Casa per la Pace" in Molfetta has taken many young people away from crime.

Bollenti Spiriti is based on the idea that in contemporary society the State is no longer sovereign: the concentration of power, and its management from above, has been shattered. This implies «a radical exodus (i.e. which touches the root) of the conception of power: from an instrument to control society to a lever to act change. Or, even, from a chain of control to a platform for change. From a means to manage social needs to an open application to free widespread energies. From a tree to exercise command to a facilitator that eases processes. From concentrated power to shared power» (Minervini, 2016). This is the core of "generative politics". Its «key word is co-power. (...) Because it takes a lot of power, the power of each person, in fact, to rewrite a vision of the future».

Bollenti Spiriti is not a "una tantum" (one-off) policy that has broad mandates and wide target populations. It includes a number of different initiatives and actions. One of the most important initiatives is "Urban Laboratories: Old buildings for young ideas", for the rehabilitation of abandoned public buildings and their transformation into places to support youth creativity. This

used different tools and financial resources: national funding for Urban Policies and Youth Policy, European Community (European Regional Development Fund 2007-2013), and regional budgets.

"Urban Laboratories: old buildings for young ideas" started in March 2006. The purpose of the initiative is the refurbishment and reuse of abandoned public buildings (such as schools, factories, warehouses, market places, military barracks, slaughterhouses, and so on) to be used for activities supporting youth creativity. The buildings are then referred to as "laboratories". Each Urban Lab has its own purpose and thematic activities: arts, performances, local traditions, new technologies, training and other initiatives, also in the form of/together with entrepreneurial activities.

Urban Labs aim to create public places with adequate infrastructure where young people can meet to put in practice, develop and experiment creative activities. They involved 169 municipalities (of the 258 in the Region) that made available 150 buildings that have been rehabilitated and equipped to become spaces for young people.

Urban Labs has contributed to the development of project-design activities at local level, promoting active citizenship and civic dialogue. The Open Space Technology and on-the-spot visits have enabled the development of creative actions among public bodies, NGOs and other associations supporting young people.

Young people have come closer to local governments and made suggestions for the use of public spaces. This has created also difficulties in cooperation and even mistrust between local authorities and young people. In this regard, it is to be highlighted that the regional program authority played a mediating role between the local councils and youth actors also through capacity building initiatives addressed to the managers of the Labs. Specifically, a regional resource center called CrLab (regional center of services to support Urban Laboratories and public spaces for creativity) was created at the end of 2012 (Morciano et al., 2016). The development of the Urban Labs initiative was strengthened and enlarged thanks to other initiatives for young people included in the Bollenti Spiriti program mentioned above, as well as other policies for social inclusion of disadvantaged people.

4.2 The governance structure
The system of governance adopted by the Bollenti Spiriti program

to sustain Urban Labs as self-organising processes is really simple (Fig.1). It involves as key actors the regional and municipal governments, the managing authority and young people, the latter being the true essence of the Labs. In particular, the regional government is the enabler of the process. It orientates the constitution of the Urban Labs through its vision, principles and guidelines. However, it never interferes with private or public organisations, associations and ordinary citizens who are the other actors involved in a laboratory. Urban Labs are developed by young people and other private actors and public institutions which interact according to such a governance system. In order to preserve Urban Labs' autonomy the governance frame has been continuously monitored and adapted. The team responsible for the design and implementation of the program has consistently addressed the following key questions: (a) how to make it possible for the government bodies involved in the Urban Labs governance system to play a role that does not destroy youth self-organizing abilities, openness and creativity? (b) How to preserve the self-organizing practices over time? (c) How to balance between social and creative goals and to adapt the governance structure to the continuous evolution of Urban Labs?

In particular, the continuous monitoring of Urban Labs has helped the regional government to adapt its role in the co-production process limiting it to that of enabler agent. Thus, it has gradually evolved towards the creation of a sort of hub specifically aimed at supporting the development of horizontal relationships between young people. More problematic appears the role of the municipal government.

Currently a prominent role is played out by the municipal government that has several tasks to accomplish: from the selection of the old building to be transformed into an Urban Lab to design of the rehabilitation project; it also has to select the managing authority through a public competition and interact with the entrepreneurs who have to carry out the rehabilitation project. It also monitors the Urban Labs activities.

The managing authority has a very important role. It has in its hands the success of the Labs. Its management plan must be open to everybody to allow every actor -inside and outside the Urban Labs- to be part of the process of co-production concerning the cultural activation of the territory. Young people are the brains, the creative minds that have to change their own and other people's

quality of life and, through their activity, possibly re-signify the urban space in its multiple dimensions: social, cultural, physical and economic.

The relationships among these actors are in some ways hierarchical but such a hierarchy does not imply a top-down approach. On the contrary, the hierarchical governance structure seems to express the need to maintain strong autonomy at all levels of action. In particular, it seems to be aimed at preserving the autonomy of young people so that they can organise or let 'things' self-organise.

A systematic evaluation of youth participation in the Urban Labs initiative proved that such a governance structure largely generated the expected outcomes in terms of cultural opening and obligation of the local councils to give young people a voice, as well as in terms of «the ability to activate a process of discovery, stimulus and support to young people's capabilities for both the design and the management of Labs» (Morciano et al., 2016).

5. The ExFadda experience

The ExFadda Urban Lab is located in San Vito dei Normanni, a municipality of 20,000 inhabitants, where young people have few job opportunities, poor social mobilization capacity, and low power in negotiation vis-à-vis public authorities. At the same time, in this town the few public spaces are in a state of abandonment, exposure to degradation and vandalism, because of the lack of ideas about their future use. Even when public buildings or areas benefited from public funding that enabled their recovery and maintenance, they fell back into the spiral of neglect due to the lack of social processes to support the physical transformation of places and their effective management. Some of these publicly-owned buildings are located in the historic centre and are of cultural and architectural value (San Vito dei Normanni, 2017).

The ExFadda Urban Lab was established in a former winery housed in a building of 3,000 square meters plus one hectare of garden, owned by the municipality and abandoned for about 50 years. A group of local companies and associations led by a communication company got management of the public space, with a grant of 50,000 to be used for the rehabilitation of the building.

After a difficult start that lasted about a year, the arrival of Roberto Covolo the new project manager, triggered an innovative process,

consistent with the basic idea behind the regional program. His background includes skills in the field of community building, community animation and youth policies. He had also work experience in the department of the Apulia Region responsible for youth policy.

For him, the process of transformation of a public space into a laboratory consists in opening a public space, making it inhabited, and taking care of it. For this to happen, people have to do something. Having no idea of how to use it is key to the permanence and evolution of the laboratory as a self-organising process. The new manager "opens the door" of the ExFadda to all the local people who may possibly improve the place with their ideas and skills. In a post-ideological era, for him it is vital to activate different experimentations that can give birth a new political project. He thinks «… we need policies that focus on social innovation because it is essential to have a sustainable welfare, which produces work and contrasts widespread poverty. In times of strong inequalities, welfare is crucial to keep up our country».

Three main pillars have to sustain any ExFadda initiatives: a focus on people needs, who are regarded as knowledge resources with great potential for self-mobilization; the interpretation of action strategy not as achieving a predetermined target, but as the opening of processes aimed to develop activities in the place; the sharing of responsibilities for the design and implementation of any initiative not only to strengthen participants' capacities and skills but also to instil courage in those who have to start and develop them. The search for economic sustainability for the activities promoted, be they entrepreneurial or cultural or socially-oriented, is a survival strategy in a society that excludes and denies fundamental rights, decent work and basic services.

In this way, over the years it has become a social space in which many young people have had the opportunity to develop entrepreneurial, cultural, and entertainment projects and initiatives (e.g. World Music Academy, Music in Crib, XfOTO, Music Room, Ingeniously, La Manta, School of Parkour Niten, Club Fencing "Carlo Alberto Lotti", Faddanza, School of Yoga Padma, XFood Social Restaurant, ExFadda Coffee, Radio ExFadda, YEAHJASI! Brindisi Pop Fest) and acquire professional skills. Currently, ExFadda is a place where anyone can propose an idea and, with its feasibility having been examined collectively, try to start it together with the existing network of the Laboratory.

Among the many activities, some are symbols of this laboratory's philosophy. XFOOD is one of them. It is a social restaurant started from the collaboration between ExFadda and the Consortium of Social Cooperatives Nuvola that employs a staff composed of people with disabilities both in the kitchen and in the dining room. This activity aimed at empowering marginalised groups of people emerged because of cooperation with the Regional Government. Its beginning was supported in training and job coaching by the Apulia Region in 2011 through the Program "Integrated innovative projects for the social inclusion of disadvantaged people". All furnishings are the result of restoration workshops, carpentry and tailor-made by local workers with the participation of XFOOD project's young people and citizens.

The World Music Academy is another experiment. It is a school of ethnic music. It trains professional musicians, basing the teaching on new generation methods applied to ethnic and other instruments. This school of music starts with the reversal of the traditional way of conceiving an organization that provides services: the children of the school are not considered as simple users of the courses but together with their families, as potential allies. Progressively the idea of creating an orchestra co-designed and co-funded by the pupils' families and the school emerges. The presence of about 200 students gives the possibility to create of a "community orchestra" named "Banda larga", which is formed by young musicians and co-managed by families, associations, businesses and local authorities. "Banda larga" is conceived as an activation and participation device in which the responsibility is shared between its protagonists. Primarily the students and their families. The task of teachers is «to facilitate participation, enhance intentions and proposals, guarantee access to all forms of contribution, and design a model of open and democratic governance». Families are involved in the strategy development, in the investment choices, in the concrete organization of events (performances, concerts, short tours etc.), in the quest for economic sustainability for the "Banda larga".

6. Urban Labs and the just city: some ingredients

As we have seen in the previous sections, re-appropriation of public spaces can no longer be strictly associated with autonomous and self-organised processes through which citizens oppose modes of government that favour urban involution. Urban

Labs are a symbol of the ambiguity and ambivalence of such a change that is characterised by the emergence of hybrid forms of self-organisation based on co-production between citizens and public institutions. Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs show some of the well-known structural limits of Urban Labs as providers of public services, but, at the same time, some experiences such as ExFadda, offer some insights to turn those limits into opportunities of re-appropriation of public spaces, be it in a provisional and evolving way.
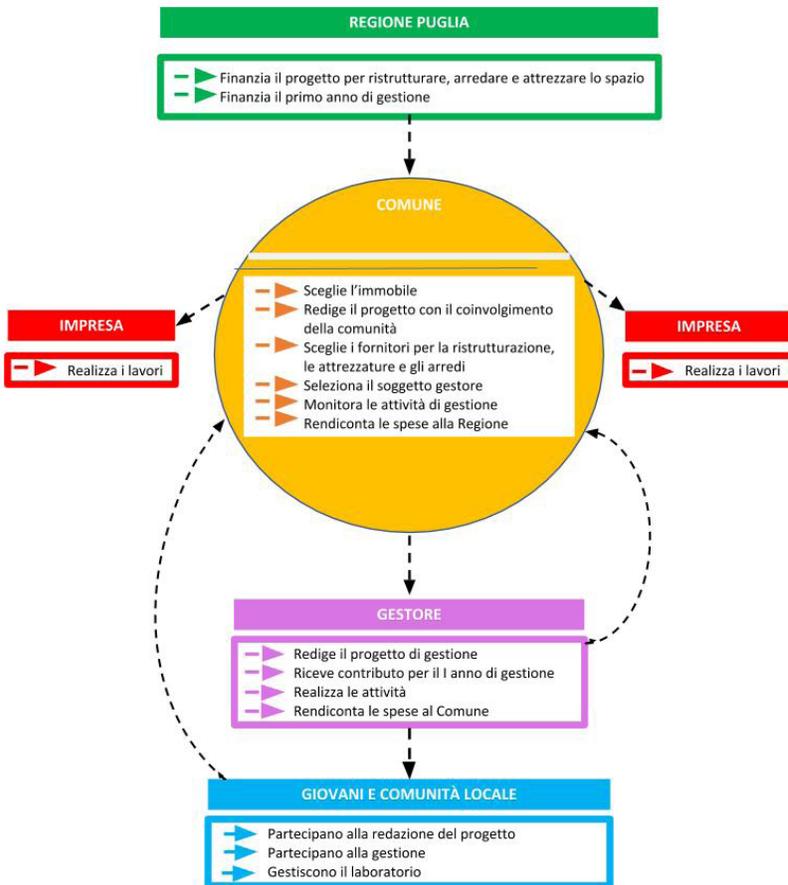

Fig.1- The governance model

Undoubtedly, in Bollenti Spiriti too, Urban Labs have to cope with the neoliberal approach to co-production, which delegates to citizens the provision and management of crucial public services and the burden of their capacity/incapacity of self-organization and innovation. However, the generative perspective on politics that inspires this initiative and its goal to produce community is crucial to avoid the neoliberal drift of Urban Labs. Instead of reproducing the usual coupling between public services and economic growth (Evans and Karvonen, 2014) the idea of Urban Labs as laid out in Bollenti Spiriti and put into practice in ExFadda is led by values of community, sociality and solidarity, and a conception of urban space as a common good.

The ExFadda Urban Lab in San Vito dei Normanni creates job opportunities for young and disadvantaged people. At the same time, it is a site that activates and mobilises ideas that construct a way of inhabiting even a small town, which actively opposes urban involution. Certainly, the need of economic sustainability implies the risk of giving preference to initiatives related to cooking and recreation that lack innovative content and indulge market demands. Yet, being aimed at constructing solidaristic communities, Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs actively contrast fragmentation and social injustice. In the case of ExFadda, the creation of a company also becomes a tool for social inclusion and reduction of inequalities: it offers opportunities for young talents and disabled people, it delivers services that such a small community could not have according to the supply/demand market logic, it creates places that can connect individuals and the local community while remaining open to external inputs.

Although Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs cannot eliminate the often-unjust rules characterising the production of the contemporary city and the labour market, nonetheless, they are interstitial public spaces in which experimenting the construction of alternative community economies and ways of living public spaces. Working in a generative policy framework, the re-appropriation of urban space is not only limited to the occupation of abandoned and degraded physical spaces, which are taken away from a destiny of privatisation, which is giving them away to private buyers in order to replenish increasingly lean state and municipal budgets. Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs subtract spaces from the precariousness of the labour market, break the spatial polarisation dynamics, and offer public spaces to

citizens. ExFadda create new jobs for young and disadvantaged people and actively experiments an "in situ" (Besson, 2018) alternative way of producing the city.

If seen from this point of view, the ExFadda experience also reveals how Urban Labs can become a *third space* (Soja, 1996): a space of emancipation and challenge to injustices. These Labs are a part of a program, which acts in the context of a neoliberal city and tries to change such a city from the inside by promoting a collective construction that is not grounded on a pre-defined idea of public spaces. According to a crucial concept in self-organising systems, the program makes public spaces emerge from collective activities carried out in interstitial sites of the city. Because of this, an Urban Lab is not only a geographical area where a number of functions are given and used, but also a place where people can come together, socialize and give meaning to that place. A place that promotes a sense of belonging and participation in urban life that opposes the different kinds of injustice of the contemporary city. From this point of view, Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs contributes to mitigating spatial polarisation and a use of participation limited to single selected phases of urban development.

Within Bollenti Spiriti Urban Labs and ExFadda the re-appropriation is an everyday experimentation which subtracts space from the precariousness of work, from the land market, breaks the vicious circle of spatial polarisation and offering public spaces in which to relearn the political and social relevance of public services and spaces. From this point of view, Bollenti Spiriti shows that Urban Labs can contribute to contrast the neoliberalization of urban space by revitalising a city's «role as a constitutive element in the web of cooperative social relations among urban inhabitants».

Although in Bollenti Spiriti self-organization does not emerge from antagonism, Urban Labs developed within this initiative can have the same potential as other collective actions aimed at widening citizens' right to the city. Urban Labs do not only include the possibility of accessing the material immaterial resources of a city, occupying a physical place and imagining a different type of urban life. They offer an occasion to construct a different type of urban life and challenge the unjust city in the everyday life.

7. Conclusion

Urban Labs can be part of the roll-out of neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Brenner and Theodore, 2002) or they can create spaces for the social re-appropriation of the city depending on the ideas on which Urban Labs are developed. As the experience of ExFadda shows, the Bollenti Spirit's conceptualisation of Urban Labs can contribute to re-appropriation of public spaces by promoting community economies and enlarging the traditional perspectives on the right to the city.

Regional and local governments can play a part in such a process of re-appropriation of public spaces. Through Urban Labs they can avoid reducing their role in supporting weak populations, lessening social inequalities, and, at the same time, promote the recovery of abandoned and degraded areas in order to create new public spaces in the interstitial 'vacuums', which are (still) useless and unproductive for the neoliberal city.

In Bollenti Spiriti, as required by a generative politics, the role of local governments in the coproduction process is shaped in a way that cannot inhibit self-organising practices of re-appropriation of urban spaces. The structure, openness, and adaptability of the governance system supporting Urban Labs have been designed to limit local governments' power and influence in any Urban Labs. However, interactions between the laboratories and local governments are an important part in their development and in need of further improvements. The creation of tools and devices specifically aimed at developing horizontal relationships between young people is important. So far, it has given them support in the face of local governments when these were against experimentation and innovation, distracted or diverted by their own interests, linked to well-established procedural routines and clientelist practices.

In such a policy framework, the re-appropriation of urban space is not only limited to the occupation of abandoned and degraded physical spaces. Urban Labs subtract spaces from the precariousness of the labour market breaking the spatial polarisation dynamics and offering public spaces to citizens.

If committed to generative politics and coproduced through adaptive governance structure in which local governments function as hubs, Urban Labs can strengthen the right to the city. It enlarge the possibility of access to the material and immaterial resources of a city, help people to imagine and construct a

different type of urban life that challenges the unjust city and break away from the dynamics of involution characterising everyday life in it.

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