

Searching for an “enabling” space. Dialogues and bridges between institutions and self-organization practices for a collaborative territorial planning and management

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This *Tracce Urbane* issue takes inspiration from the International Conference *Cities and Self-Organization*, held on December 2017 in Rome, Italy, in collaboration with Sapienza University of Rome and the AESOP – Association of European Schools of Planning. The seminar aim was to contribute to the debate on the conceptualization and experiences of self-organization in the history of planning theory and in contemporary practices. We introduce here some relevant statements emerging from the debate and some interesting connections between the several contributions, focusing on the central theme, among the urban self-organization debate¹, of what we called a possibility of creating an “enabling space”.

With Francesca Cognetti and Luca Lo Re, we defined the “enabling space” as the “context that allows to ‘make’ and to participate”, an “enabling” character for everyone, because it requires each one to get out of their own frames and routines, to find collective solutions to deal with common problems and satisfy their needs, interests and expectations. Therefore, it has to do with forms of redistribution of power and the creation of a new culture of urban government; working on inclusive processes able to valorise social and institutional capabilities, to reinforce them, but also able to create new ones.

If we search for this concept in the history of planning, we need to understand how ancient forms of self-organization were gradually deleted from the planning practice and theory as well as from the government system. As Lidia Decandia stated in a key speech of the Conference², modernity and rationality in territorial planning avoid to consider local cultural practices, memories, identity, and other ancient knowledge that give populations the autonomy and sovereignty in the govern of their

1 See the general introduction by Carlo Cellamare to the items and debate on “Cities and Self-organization” in this issue.

2 The fourth issue of *Tracce Urbane* journal will be dedicated again to the debate on “Cities and Self-organization”, with several papers focusing on powers and terrains of ambiguity in the field of urban self-organization today. A specific contribution by Lidia Decandia on such items will be published there, too.

commons.

However, after permanent, but silenced critics from different planning schools and planners, like the advocacy planning school with Paul Davidoff, the controversial book of Jane Jacobs, the provocations of John Forester, the European reflections on collaborative planning from Healey and Innes, problems remain still open. And although similar critical movements has been acting in the rest of the world as well, like the Latin America Urban Movements for the right to housing and the right to participate in the transformations of the city, which allowed great programmes on cooperative housing systems or the birth of Participatory Budget. (Goñi Mazzitelli et al., 2013)

It seems necessary to search into the past the reasons that make self-organized practices survive and challenge power structures that oppressed them, as well as understand how rational planning try to annihilate (consciously or unconsciously) cultural practices and the protagonism of the ordinary “man” in the design and management of his environment (Scandurra, 1995).

As Lewis Mumford (2002) stated in his studies on the city in history, at the very beginning human societies had already been developing settlements fully integrating social relations and wills with physical interventions. In order to underline how absurd could be to separate this dimensions, he suggested a question: «What did come before: the social relations and cultural practices as commerce, religion, war, or the buildings created by humans to develop them, markets, temples, walls?» He introduced a clear example with the transformation of trade between populations. For him the materialist theories that consider the city as cause of new ways of economy were not correct. Instead, he proposes that cities allowed improving those self-organized social practises, as trade existing relations, with its physical form and geographical position, reinforcing human actions, which began long ago before cities.

If we observe history in a diachronic way, we can understand that urban revolution and the consolidation of modern forms of Government, take thousands of years, allowing that cultural traditional practices, as Lidia Decandia stated, as traditional parties, rituals, and community actions continue to exist with the most diverse forms of self-organized practises inside cities and towns.

It seems as if, apart from the continuous changes that create structures and super structures in social and economic organization (Lévi-Strauss, 1972), there is a cultural level in which the main components of human behaviour and its relations stay alert, looking for spaces of freedom each time a new organizational and political system has been created. As the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1976) stated, there is a “common wisdom” in self-organization that reject power structures, and be alert about the dangers that power accumulation can create for peaceful and balanced life. This “common wisdom” survived many tragic and violent periods in history, always with the certainty that it is necessary to go beyond social structures and laws when human rights were threatened. After imperialism and colonialism, which gave an unusual acceleration to cities building, the most important breaking point for urban studies and urbanism were without doubt the industrial times. As Patrick Geddes advised, observing the first industrialization process of consumption of natural resources, capitalism produce a new absolutely abnormal phenomenon and break the harmony between life cycles and anthropological action. He warned in 1915, «Unless, we use planning, rooted in identity and memory, incorporating clean technologies in order to preserve nature and natural resources, we could completely destroy our planet» (Geddes, 1915).

Although Geddes was a critical voice in the chore of the time, he proposed that as Stone Age has two periods, Paleolithic and Neolithic, the Industrial Age could also have two periods: Paleotechnic, with a dirty technology as the one use in UK, and Neotechnic, with clean technologies, represented by German movement in planning. At that time, many urban researchers believed the German Movement could take this challenge of a clean and organized urbanism, in order to preserve natural resources. Nevertheless, none of them criticized the vertical and hierarchical way of town planning, as long as they believe, following the modern science models and the capitalism principles, that the condition of human life should improve significantly in cities design and manage by experts, as well as by private investors.

Where have been self-organized movements and practices at that time? As many references in Urban Studies show us, they never disappeared and they never were absolutely co-opted by

the growth of the city. The benefits of economic growth of cities, especially after the industrialization, were not for everybody. At that time, the world was full of social injustice. In Europe, marginal conditions of work, as Peter Hall stated, were creating inner poor neighborhoods that began to develop organization for claim their rights as well as for solving their everyday life problems. In recent times, David Harvey (2012) underline, developing Marx theories, that capitalism have always had economic crisis, and in that moments the consciousness of the exploitation by the proletariat were stronger, creating greater conflicts and reinforcing this movements of self-organized practices.

Nevertheless, as Marie Helene Bacque and Yves Syntomer (2011) stated, the quick institutionalization of social crisis in the last century, by the consolidation of the *Welfare State*, do not allow to think in real new ways of bottom up governance, that means a real structural power turn. Susan Fainstein and Scott Campbell (2003) pointed out how crisis are also the moment in which the majority of population, particularly in cities, claim for more State solutions, reinforcing the centralization of the transformative changes needed to go beyond moments of social vulnerability, in the public institutionalized power.

Nowadays, sophisticated and technocratic procedures in policy making, corruption, and lack of participatory processes, as Lawrence Susskind and Marianella Sclavi (2011) underline, are creating a general mistrust in the whole State system. In the long term, it will take to an end the original “social pact” that in the XIX century made representative democracy emerge as the better, fairly and more equal system to govern the commons.

An autonomous system?

We realized that debates around self-organization seem to describe practices outside the common rules, outside the dominant parameters of action, as well as outside the dominant ways of governing our commons. Does this mean that we need to be outside the Democratic System? Self-organization in relation to whom or what? Shouldn't the democratic system be one of the most advanced in the world, able to act the principles of freedom, equality and represent the diversity in society?

From colonialism to industrialization onwards, a new world geography has been designed by international economic

powers, changing borders among urban, productive, leisure areas in a scale of functional landscapes, leading to a “urban theory without an outside”, in Neil Brenner’s (2014) words. Furthermore, it is a system where this power co-opted, all over the world, the different forms of Public State in a so evident way that there will be not one square meter of land without “value” or “use” any more. In this uneven geography the struggles from people that are completely let outside the system, or even inside but in a weak position, as minorities, are also creating a self-organized system with an agenda that implies to change also the ways in which democracy works currently. Therefore, as the representative democracy system couldn’t be the mainly answer nowadays, the participatory or deliberative democracy, if we need to make a transition phase, could be a bridge, but only – as Francesca Cognetti stated – if they have a required position in order to co- create projects and participate in the management of them.

As Amartya Sen (2004) remembers us, the democratic system was successfully imposed thanks to the fact that many deliberative forms of governance already exist in many parts of the world. The ethnocentrism implicit in Colonialism did not let the local forms of self-organization and socio-political organization all around the world to survive. However, the extraordinary human aptitude to create and re-create self-organized responses to their needs are always present, planners should bring them in the field of territorial studies in order to develop their potentialities for reverse the unjust current conditions.

The enabling space at *Tracce Urbane*

The contributions to this issue of *Tracce Urbane* evidence how difficult could be to study self-organized practices, as long as they are in continuous transformation to not being co-opted by the system, preferring to remain sometimes undefined or to get structured in a limited way. As Sophie Watson remembers us in her opening of the *Focus* section, we have to take into account these fears, because is true that the relation to antagonism is not well managed in the current political system. Furthermore, she states that the role of planning is crucial here. Instead of seeing the city as a clear and rational space to be planned, what is required is a recognition that planning takes place in messy and unpredictable settings that are «complex and contentious,

fluid and uncertain, historically and politically fraught». Forester (1999) calls this “a critical pragmatism”, to draw attention to the issues of difference, privilege, and power which shape city and political engagement.

Therefore, we need to imagine a new democratic politics whose aim is not to eliminate passions or differences through rational debate. It is rather to mobilize these passions towards new forms of democracy. Taking Chantal Mouffe studies, Watson refers to the need of a project of “radical and plural democracy”.

Following these studies, we promoted an exchange about the current situation in contemporary city, where we are witnessing different “practices of re-appropriation of space” and self-organization: participatory planning processes, regeneration of empty buildings, spaces of cultural production, urban gardens, renewed green areas, public spaces re-design through practices of commoning. Beside this, we could also mention experimentations that are activating new social services and welfare spaces, modes of co-existence, housing and service provision, or critical movements that analyse current ways of urban and global economy and propose a critical consumption, a fair trade, and other forms of creating an alternative economic development.

As Francesca Cagnetti stated, building an enabling space could be possible if, on one hand, the “public” recognize, in the design and planning processes, the social skills and leading role that different groups have in their territories, accept innovations in terms of involvement and create permanent changes in the ordinary structures of management of the public policies. It should develop new procedures and techniques. On the other hand, local actors themselves should be able to pursue traditional conflictual but also subsidiary logic, learning to be the protagonists of a shared process of defining the public / collective interest. Collaborative processes have to be considered processes that potentially work both on the “social activation” and on the activation of institutions.

The contributions in this number tackle a wide variety of topics as long as these experimentations are focused on actions that are simultaneously redefining the modes of social conflict as well as the routines and spaces of citizenship. Can these practices shape political capability to build a local democracy with a bottom up approach as well as update institutional habits

and norms?

After Watson's contribution, *Focus* section develops the reflection with Antonio Raciti's article *Counteracting Ingrained Practices of Community Development in the US South. The Case of Klondike/Smokey City in Memphis TN, USA*. We can immediately understand how complex could be to think about these processes just in terms of public policies. The article refers how, starting from top down experiences focused on trying to rebuild declining neighborhoods from the inside, governments create programmes involving neighborhood networks. It follows the

«Special Impact Amendment to the Economic Opportunity Act in 1966 that establish community-based organizations to strengthen, support, and implement projects, especially related to housing and aimed at filling the empty gap left by the private and public sectors in providing affordable options for the most disadvantaged. Over time, those organizations changed their areas of expertise and operation, embracing a more comprehensive approach to neighborhood development and encompassing activities such as job generation, neighborhood infrastructure development, educational program creation, and so on. Maintaining this broader mission, they have been playing a fundamental role in addressing neighborhoods' concerns, supporting and expanding people's self-organization practices, and challenging existing power structures, especially when these have prevented those in need to access the abovementioned resources. Since the 90s, in fact, mechanisms of CDCs' co-optation have strongly characterized the US context deeply transforming the legacy of all of those powerful insurgencies existing in inner city neighborhoods. The erosion over time of the "community alternative" has often disempowered all of the initiatives once robustly carried out by CDCs and similar groups. In this scenario, enabling spaces lost their transformational power being controlled by co-opted entities whose power force has been cannibalized by existing power structures».

A similar situation was experienced in Italy with the Community Development projects that Francesca Leder describes in her article *City and Territory: practises of community self-organization in the Western Sicily. Danilo Dolci and the Study Centre for Employment (1958 - 1968)*. Danilo Dolci practises, which worked well at that time, are inspiring youngsters nowadays, because of the essential messages about the power of self-organized practices, if they are used as a form to get autonomy and make free local cultures and resources from ancient forms of oppression. From Leder's article, a figure came out that was as much interdisciplinary in his approach. He reached a complete

freedom to use anthropological and performance methods to amplify injustice situations lived by fishermen and peasants, as completely rational in his analyses and objectives that implies to acquire essential rights, as work, education and health by the poorest Italian villages of Sicily.

Perhaps if we incorporate more literature as the one of Danilo Dolci in our territorial studies, we can understand how difficult had been to conquest civil rights, as well as how bottom up territorial planning and organization could be possible if we work closely to people in places. The community development practises teach us, as Dolci stated, that «Revolution is right, but could not be at once, the way in which we make it is essential». The practises he developed became an international reference, as long as he broadened the scale by working on what he called organic planning, creating a network of development centres co-managed by local communities and involving large territorial areas and resources. Although it seems a very concrete and individual mission, he created a social movement and he was in touch with planning intellectuals as Carlo Doglio and then Adriano Olivetti and Giancarlo di Carlo. The main conclusion that Dolci's experiences suggested, and that the interesting article of Leder presents, is that only a network of local self-organized communities, could deal with the continuous challenges that an unequal economy and natural disasters (as earthquakes) create in marginalized territories.

The situation changes a lot in the years, as Francesca Cognetti stated during the seminar. Terms such as inclusion, partnership and participation characterize projects and policies in the recent literature of urban transformation and social cohesion. The involvement of inhabitants, local communities and organized committees, as well as a wider network of public and private actors, in the government of the city, seems to be a consolidate step, at least in rhetoric, and it has also influenced in some cases norms and planning tools.

However, learning from experiences from USA or from the community development practises in Italy, it seems increasingly evident the need of clear protocols in the collaborative processes, which have to include ways of interaction among a plurality of actors, giving some warranties that the processes are creating a new political and administrative organization, a new governance, where contractual power of local groups is real and goes beyond

specific programmes and political will. (Lussault, 2013).

Giusy Pappalardo and Filippo Gravagno develop this issue in their article *Beyond dichotomies, in the search for a common path toward social-ecological care: Lessons from the Simeto River Agreement in Sicily, IT*. There are many contexts where communities and institutions do not have a strong background of collaborative practices, due to many factors, isolation and extreme contentiousness, among others. Regardless various phases of conflict, the challenge for territorial planners should be that each process and each partnership find its own path, the most sincerely way to being together, built on a dialogical methodology, which involve gradually institutions at various levels, as well as design new democratic institutions for citizens' participation.

All these reflections are leading us to the search for a new model. Should it be participatory or deliberative democracy, or a completely different one? We need to rethink both the role of the institutions as well as of the citizens, and the relationships between the different actors interacting within the construction of a territory.

As Stefania Ragozino, Andrea Varriale and Gabriella Esposito De Vita propose in their article *Self-organized practices for complex urban transformation. The case of Bagnoli in Naples, Italy*, territories react to global phenomena of crisis and austerity and related policies imposed upon them. In Naples, as in other European cities, the wave of opposition against such phenomena is something that regards not only activism and protest movements, but also the city administration. Whereas it is too soon to say whether this development of urban politics constitutes a trend, the fact that several cities in Europe have embarked on similar ventures at least shows that it is not exceptional.

Following the Brazilian sociologist Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro (Ribeiro in Berenstein Jacques, 2012), we should consider important to appreciate some practices of self-governing being as radical, as they want to be. As long as conflicts should not be seen as a negative issue, because they talk about diversity and the need of arenas, in which their reasons are listened. She propose to be alert in not trying to immediately "translate" and "materialize" the reasons of the conflict, but live the tension in order to understand it, therefore taking the necessary time and

approach to let the intrinsic dynamics of the conflict develop. Otherwise, to ignore or to not open really the space for listening and understanding deeply these reasons, could weak the processes, and allow to one of the most common phenomenon in this fields, which is the instrumentalization of participatory initiatives. As Cognetti stated, many new collaborative processes do not necessarily correspond to higher openness and inclusiveness of weakest populations, minorities, or marginalized groups. The fear to conflict, or to lose the control of the situations are putting under risk the real collaboration, which could change into a 'procedural form' that leads to the loss of its innovative tension. The article by Alice Ranzini, *Too much capable? Reflections over the recognition of local actors capabilities in the urban regeneration processes in marginal contexts*, demonstrates how difficult could be to pass from theory to practices if real processes were not promoted. She states, «The case of Giambellino Lorenteggio redevelopment plan (Milan) shows some critical aspects in terms of opportunistic approach to local actors' enablement, asymmetry of power and approach to urban regeneration». In her words, it has to do with a deeply rooted rational tradition in professionals and politicians inside governments, which use each opportunity to retake the power of decision about who has the right to participate, who are "capable" to decide in planning.

This is one of the paradoxes of a lot of these experiences stated Francesca Cognetti: they could be reduced to 'weak' forms of collaboration, by making a 'selected access' arena in the sense that only those forces (institutional, private, third-sector entities and associations) that have instruments to access to planning and design process are involved. Therefore, there is not a significant redefinition of power relations in the structure of representative democracy. The paradox is that collaboration itself can become a way of exclusion, especially of the weaker actors, who do not have "instruments" in these logics to represent themselves.

However, are we ready? Do we have an awareness about the need of these new figures in planning? Is our education aware of the need to make experimental teaching and learning in the fields of urban and territorial planning? As Alice Ranzini demonstrates, the professionals that work in the Local Government have the opposite idea of the professionals in the field, which work with people.

Thais Tronocoso and Paola Bernstein Jacques give a significant contribute to this discussion on the role of teaching planning and design issues at University. They refer most of all to Latin America, especially Brazil, but something similar happened in many other Planning Schools around the world. Essentially, they underline in their article *Deviations and Thresholds: teaching as a field of experimentation for other practices of urbanism*, the need to

«Think critically about teaching as an expanded field of experimentation, based on a series of other less positivistic, simplifying or homogenizing methodological experiences that may attempt to encompass the multiplicity, heterogeneity and complexity of contemporary cities. It is a proposition that puts at the centre of the teaching (and professional practice) of urbanism the relationship with the practitioners of the city, their experiences, the other rationalities and norms in relation to the hegemonic models, the dynamics of self-production and self-management, and, first and foremost, the disputes they prompt».

In the *Observatory* section we have three important contributes that examine different practises from many countries, mainly in the North, referring to the international debate about how self-organized practices could be consolidated and create gradually new real alternatives in different topics. On one hand, Marianella Sclavi, Agnese Bertello and Stefania Lattuile start from the discussions about how the galaxy of experiences of deliberative democracy can be gradually transformed into a new way in which Democracy is produced and practised. In their article *Consolidating a "constitutional localism" in Italy, a new governance that seems unbelievable*, they remember us that in 2001 the principle of subsidiarity was introduced in the Italian Constitution. This means that a new actor, individual or associate citizens, was recognized in the multilevel governance system, not just for vote in the elections or at referendum, but also for organize and make proposals for the common interest, each time they consider it necessary. They underline the graduality of changes connecting this issue to what happened almost ten years later in Bologna, which signed its first regulation about "Share Administration", that means different forms of "collaboration agreements" allowing citizens to take care of specific items, projects and proposals of their neighbourhoods. However, not all the European contexts are taking ahead these

processes in a transformative way. Chiara Cacciotti and Luca Brignone, in their article *Self-Organization in Rome: a map*, analyse what is happening in the Capital of Italy with self-organized groups that deal with housing, evictions, squatting, social and cultural activities, urban gardens, play yards and edible gardens. They use mapping tools in order to identify where these practises are located in the city, creating a platform able to update a very dynamic situation that changes every year. Their survey identifies spontaneous initiatives, lively spaces related to neighbourhood life and different experiences on informal housing. On one hand, they underline that the majority of these spaces are concentrated in the poorest and more popular neighbourhoods, which also have a strong history in self-organization, from labour parties until today. On the other hand, they raise a topic, which is a central question in self-organized studies, a “let it be” approach from government. It means that, although in Rome there are a conspicuous number of experiences, as the map shows, there are not policies or funds to support them, not even programmes to think in a coordinate new geography of social, cultural and housing innovative projects responding to real social needs. Just a silent consensus to allow their existence that costs great conflicts in the city, as long as they are not recognized at all, not in their problems solution character, nor in the complexity that self-organized practices create in urban environments if they are not think in an integrated manner. For example, the fundamental self-organized solution to housing and marginality processes that represent squats are creating great tensions in neighbourhoods by the lack of planning of their urban impact. This means making that people living there compete with locals for the use of social services as public schools, health or even precarious jobs, without a serious restructuring and update of the welfare system. It is a “liquid” governance, as Carlo Cellamare called this roman style of not getting part to real urban challenges.

On the other hand, we have a growing phenomenon of self-organization cooperative experiences in economy as developed in Daniela Patti and Levente Polyak’s article *Funding the Cooperative City. From knowledge network to local action*. As they underline in their article,

«European cities are conceived more as investment opportunities than as places

to live or to work. The financialised city, buildings are “no longer something to use, but to own (with the hope of increased asset-value, rather than use-value, over time). Becoming targets of speculation, many former sites of welfare and cultural services (hospitals, schools, parks, theatres, cinemas) have become endangered species, calculated as potential buildable square meters instead of potential contributions to life quality. As a result, entire neighbourhoods in cities like London have become completely inaccessible for lower and middle classes, not only due to the rising rents but also because of the disappearing public amenities».

At the basis of their research, they have the question: «Which could be the alternative model to a capitalist economy to avoid what in Europe and all around the world are changing the face of traditional urban centres into just commercial areas?». The article presents a collection of experiences that in recent years have become laboratories of new forms of living, working, learning and collective exchange. These civic spaces face many difficulties in establishing stable economic structures, or lack financial buffers to secure their long-term operations and relative autonomy, however a variety of actors, practices, models, mechanisms and opinions are trying to address these difficulties in order to strength local economies by keeping profits in neighbourhoods and ensuring spaces against public privatization.

How could the State support these alternative practises in order to make their work have a positive impact in the city, without enclose their spontaneous character and their political value? Coming back to Focus section, in their article *Producing the just city: Self-organising Urban Labs for the re-appropriation of public spaces* Valeria Monno and Angela Barbanente present the experience of Urban Laboratories developed in Puglia under the *Bollenti Spiriti* youth program of Puglia Region. They analyse how

«several local governments have created or co-produced urban laboratories [...] to imagine or implement new ways of urban transformation and management both for responding to the quests of the neoliberal city and to contrast 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 policymaking (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 to the myriad of experimental city-making practices, which are spread, and taking 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».

Finally, we need to wonder if we are in front of an articulate alternative to the current system, or just some specific problems in specific areas, for which communities are self-organizing to deal with. The present issue of *Tracce Urbane*, therefore, focuses on this reflection, discussing the characteristics of processes, actions, collaborative interventions looking at what they have generated in terms of new skills, new organizational practices, new ways of interacting, debating if we are in front of new perspectives in the long term period. The answer is still open.

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