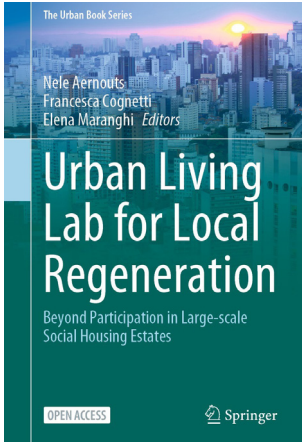


**Urban Living Lab for Local Regeneration
Beyond Participation in Large-scale Social Housing Estates**
**Edited by Nele Aernouts, Francesca Cognetti ed
Elena Maranghi, Springer (2023)**
 Naomi Pedri Stocco



The book collects reflections of different researchers and professionals coming from diverse backgrounds and disciplinary realms (from urban studies to sociology) on the role of Urban Living Labs as alternative and innovative planning tools for urban regeneration processes, in relation to the multiple failures of the so-called 'participatory approaches'. Living Labs are intended as collaborative, hybrid and participative platforms that can open up decision making processes to local actors and citizens, in particular when it comes to

the regeneration of deprived and underprivileged neighbourhoods. The context of the book is the European research project 'SoHoLab' run from 2017 to 2020, that identified Urban Living Labs as a socially innovative approach to the regeneration of large-scale social housing estates in Europe. Indeed, in recent years the Living Lab approach has been widely used within EU programmes as applied and policy-oriented research involving academic research institutions together with different action partners, both private and public entities as well as the civil society. Specifically, 'SoHoLab' has seen the participation of three research units from Brussels, Milan and Paris involved respectively in three living lab experiences: 'Peterbos Park', a Living Lab experiment at the periphery of the Brussels Capital Region in Peterbos neighbourhood; 'Mapping San Siro', a University Lab in San Siro neighbourhood, one of the largest public housing neighbourhoods in Milan; 'ParisLab' with three rehabilitation projects in the Greater Region of Paris. The book has been therefore built on the experiences of action-research in these different contexts. The analysis and reflections compare with both different socio-spatial and institutional dynamics, and

different stages of exploration, being the Milan case an ongoing Living Lab, the Paris case a retrospective study of past existing projects and Brussels case a new living lab project. However, instead of being mainly focused on the three local case-studies, the book goes beyond and provides a wider reflection on Urban Living Labs approach integrating the perspectives of other researchers and professionals encountered by the 'SoHoLab' team during the project. As a matter of fact, as clearly stated in the introduction, the Urban Living Lab should not be comprised as a blueprint to be applied to the regeneration of marginalized areas, rather its potential lies in its relational and transforming character in respect of the characteristics of every single context, the capacities and knowledge of residents and all actors involved.

The book is articulated in 13 contributions, divided into three main parts: the first part focuses on the role and characteristics of ULL approaches as co-design device in planning processes, reflecting on the capacity of citizens' and local actors' engagement in marginalized contexts, exploring the potential of ULLs to promote new forms of governance, and analysing the conditions under which an upscale of ULL methodology from its experimental to a policy dimension is possible. Starting from an anthropological perspective, the second part reflects on the positioning and action-research approach of ULLs as situated spaces and the social relations that are researched and created by researchers with the inhabitants during a long-term stay in the neighbourhood. Finally, the third part discusses physical interventions in large-scale social housing estates, bringing the attention on the types of uses and appropriation of spaces and the need for ethnographic approaches to develop a more careful reading of space in its physical and social dimensions.

Throughout the book the territorial/urban dimension and the social connotation are central. The authors propose a 'socially-oriented approach' to Urban Living Labs intended as spaces of interaction among institutions and local actors, enabling the social dimension of planning, which entails the engagement of people that are often excluded from the political and decisional arena. Living Labs indeed risk being an instrument of exclusion as well if the participatory process involves only actors that are able to enter the discussion because of power, financial resources, time, habits of participation and capacity for self-representation.

Urban Living Labs emerge as multi-disciplinary and multi-actor

platforms that connect different disciplines and multiple actors at different levels and combine the so-called 'expert' knowledge with a locally produced knowledge. Their potential lies in this connective character and enabling role, favouring through action and co-design experiments interactions, even conflictive ones, between institutions, local organizations and citizens. What stands out from the contributions, even more than the action-oriented approach to developing new projects, products and services for the neighbourhood, is the relational character of the Living Lab. In this sense, Urban Living Labs can be considered socially-oriented when they are able to create bridges among different social worlds, mediating between different interests, values and points of view. For this reason, as highlighted by the authors, Urban Living Labs should be open, fluid and incremental contexts capable of welcoming the unplanned and transforming along the process based on the relationships that are constructed daily between the researchers and the users. This type of environment favours mutual learning processes and the production of new knowledge, which is hybrid and contextual as it combines disciplinary expertise, knowledge coming from local organizations, activists and citizens, and knowledge arising from the everyday use of urban space and collected through relational observation. This process of knowledge co-production is valuable not only for the research team involved in the Living Lab from whom an impact on site is expected in terms of policy recommendations and experimentation of pathways to improve regeneration projects, but also for the local actors engaged in the context and for the inhabitants. Urban Living Labs working as «activators of knowledge and competencies» (:71) can enhance local consciousness and mutual recognition. By giving value to the capacities and knowledge brought by local actors and inhabitants, citizenship, meant as the ability to actively take part in urban life, is reinforced. Finally, ULLs can favour processes of institutional learning making local institutions interact with the civil society and testing new forms of governance.

What characterizes Urban Living Labs is a situated approach to planning, that results not only in a physical and permanent presence in the context, but above all in a daily immersion into dwellers' life by inhabiting the place and building relationships with them. This entails a peculiar positioning and role for the researcher who, while conducting research and making available their expertise, takes

care of the lab space, establishes social bonds with the citizens, lives the social and urban dynamics of the place, creates networks and bridges among both local and supralocal actors, and actively carries out collective interventions in the neighbourhood. As revealed by the personal accounts of the researchers, an immersive and situated approach to territories requires 'hybrid' and 'layered' professional figures that are open to be contaminated by the gaze of the people encountered and of other researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds and are able to inhabit research relationships that can bring conflicts as well as failures. By positioning themselves at the margin between the inside and the outside, researchers assume the role of a third party, a 'peripheral actor', and as such are able to take on an enabling role. Indeed, throughout the book a recurring metaphor to depict Urban Living Labs is the one of the 'threshold space', the 'interstitial space'.

The case of Urban Living Labs appears particularly interesting since they are experimenting new approaches to urban regeneration based on multi dimensionality, proximity, and co-creation, that reveal common characteristics with grassroots experiences that are spreading both in Italy and Europe, such as the so-called 'Community Hubs', 'Socio-cultural hybrid centres', 'New Welfare Spaces'. The book therefore is valuable not only for those who want to engage with Urban Living Labs, but it represents an interesting analytical framework to study how the above-mentioned experiences can turn «from a community of practice into a community of planning» (:136), as permanent spaces that are able to trigger co-production processes between institutions, local actors and citizens, at territorial level. Indeed, studies on the experiences of Urban Living Labs stimulate a reflection on new intermediate bodies and their role in planning and policy-making processes. They can act as mediators or 'boundary-spanners' (Acuto *et al.*, 2019) combining different points of view, interests and needs and finding a common ground and language between grassroots practices and institutional dynamics.

Bibliografia

Acuto M., Steenmans K., Iwaszuk E., Ortega Garza L. (2019). «Informing urban governance? Boundary spanning organisations and the ecosystem of urban data». *Area*, 51(1): 94-103. DOI: 10.1111/area.12430.

Naomi Pedri Stocco is PhD student at Università Iuav di Venezia in Urban Planning and Public Policy, her research activity concerns culture-based urban regeneration processes and the relationships between grassroots hybrid cultural spaces and institutions. npedristocco@iuav.it