Building possibilities. Community planning as a critical spatial thinking
A conversation with Kenneth Reardon[1].
edited by Stefania Crobe

Kenneth Reardon has dedicated much of his career to examining the relationship between planning, community development, and social equity, emphasizing the importance of engaging local communities in the planning process to ensure that planning decisions consider the needs and aspirations of all residents, particularly those from marginalized and underserved populations.
Reardon's research explores various aspects of advocacy planning, including participatory action research, community organizing, and University service learning, contributing valuable insights to the field of community planning. Moving from grassroots mobilizations to institutionalization of practices to art as a device of engagement, my conversation with Prof. Kenneth Reardon took place in Boston in February 2023, during the time I spent with him and Prof. Antonio Raciti as a visiting researcher at the School for Environment, in the Department of Urban Planning and Community Development.

Stefania Crobe: Tracce Urbane 13's issue deals with the topic of "practices of urban regeneration and culture", exploring the critical perspectives amongst co-creation, institutionalization, and conflict processes. Many of the contributions tell of grassroots self-organizing practices taking place within communities – often marginalized communities – in order to regenerate spaces to give back to the community itself. Many of these practices challenge the rationalist model of planning, triggering processes of co-creation of the city and sometimes anticipating solutions and visions. In your opinion, how can we read these phenomena, looking at them from the perspective of advocacy, community, and radical planning?

1 The editor Stefania Crobe would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank Prof. Kenneth Reardon and Prof. Antonio Raciti for welcoming her in the Department of Urban Planning and Community Development and for the terrific and inspiring learning period with them.

Kenneth Reardon: The failure of the rationalist model is embodied in the large, centralized planning agencies at the city and metropolitan area levels of government, which seek to develop comprehensive strategies for growth, which tend to undervalue and marginalize – in their policies, plans, and investments – low-income communities (particularly communities of color, immigrant communities, old industrial worker communities). Starting in the late fifties and early sixties throughout the United States, resistance movements emerged that began with opposing inner city highway proposals, large-scale clearance efforts, and massive housing replacement schemes that underappreciated local communities, history, and culture.

Quickly, progressive elements of the planning, architecture, and design communities began to find their way into these neighborhoods where they attempted to undertake research, planning, design, and advocacy activities to support residents' opposition to top-down planning efforts that were creating powerful displacement pressures. These progressive planners and designers were sufficiently successful that you began to see tremendous conflict and controversies emerging at the citywide planning department and commission level in the United States. In this context, in the mid-1960s, Paul Davidoff, a scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, trained as both a lawyer and a planner, writes a powerful article titled «Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning» that offers a devastating critique of the rationalist model of planning that there is a single public interest that can be identified and that there is an objective, value-free planning, claiming that all planning starts with the recognition of the values of the diverse set of actors participating in the process. So, Davidoff provides an intellectual rationale for the notion of multiple plans.

Several scholars begin to put together specific methodologies, training materials, and case studies documenting the rigorous nature of community-based planning, resident-led planning, and over time, in the United States. Their consistent challenge to mainstream planning undertaken on behalf of communities subjected to insensitive planning by centralized agencies has forced a growing number of American cities to adopt much more inclusive planning processes. Gradually, what Davidoff hoped for is slowly being created, which would be a democratic space at

the city level where the claims of a diverse set of stakeholders can be presented and represented by independent planners of the city, with the highest level of empirical support and planning, argumentation, and vision making. Encouraging a much more democratic form of planning.

SC: How broad is the civil society's effort and engagement in creating these alternatives so that a real debate can take place?

KR: In some places, this grassroots work has gone on long enough to create broad-based community-based organizations with planning capacity that have also come together at the city level, working with municipal unions and environmental and good government groups, to promote more inclusive and democratic forms of local planning and policy-making. In those cities, they have been able to not only move the planning process in a more democratic direction. In some cases, this network of forces has run individuals for office and elected their own mayors and, over a period of a decade or two, moved the local state in a much more democratic direction.

Two of the most powerful examples of this phenomenon were Cleveland and Chicago, where progressive forces were able to create a network of grassroots community planning and development organizations and partnerships with public employee unions, environmentalists, and good government interests – often many youth organizations as well, supported by progressive academics – to elect first black mayors on a fundamental reform platform.

Following the earliest failure of the rationalist model in the form of urban renewal, public housing, and highway planning, there has been a growing and persistent backlash with the growth of oppositional groups that operated at the neighborhood level.

Some neighborhood groups have been able to change local political agendas regarding neighborhood reinvestment in areas that had been ignored by forcing citywide policymakers to pursue redistributive policies and participatory planning processes resulting in more balanced and equitable growth patterns.

SC: From practices to policies, they were able to change politics but also awareness.

KR: Because these efforts were multi-scalar, promoting change at the neighborhood, citywide, and regional levels of government,

many lasting changes were made possible. And that's critical. These progressive leaders realized that the patterns of decisions that continually reinforced uneven development patterns were embedded in city, state, and federal policies. And no matter how effective your neighborhood group is and how committed and smart the leaders are, the decisions that either directed or discouraged public and private investments were also made at the state and national levels. So, these leaders began in the late seventies to create these citizen movements that were about building very serious organizations that functioned at the neighborhood, state, regional, and national levels of government. Examples of this kind of organizing were the Citizen Action, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the National People Action, and the Industrial Areas Foundation.

I had the good fortune of being the organizing director of a group in Connecticut, coming out of neighborhood planning and community organizing movements, where I worked with very low-income communities, which had poor housing, lack of sanitation, badly functioning schools, lack of local health clinics, and inadequate public transportation.

We initially organized at the neighborhood scale. But we quickly realized that the resources to address these issues were being made much higher up the political food chain. So, I was very interested, as were lots of other organizers, after five or ten years, seeing the need to create and support the creation of these multi-scalar organizing and advocacy efforts.

These organizations I mentioned were created and grew at the same time. They created platforms where poor and working-class people could significantly impact and sometimes move policy in a fairly dramatic way. Today, those groups are not as effective as they were. Very powerful economic interests made consistent efforts to undermine them.

SC: Looking at the Italian contest, we still have a strong tradition of rational planning that often results in technicalities and bureaucracy. A hierarchical organizational structure with defined roles, responsibilities, and formalized procedures for decision-making often forgets the social dimension of space and the issue of social justice. Moreover, there is no authentic tradition of community planning. There is, however, an important history

of insurgent movements and practices in defense of the "right to the city" that have not always been able to converge in the construction of policies. There still seems to be a gap between policy and practices.

KR: One of the key issues is resources. So interestingly, a lot of these organizations created in the late sixties and early seventies, when this tradition really began, do not accept funding from the governments they are trying to influence. Nor do they accept contracts to provide planning, design, and development services to the government in order to maintain their political independence.
An article by Davidoff - *Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning* - pointed out that there were tremendous opportunities for planners and designers to make a difference by partnering with these organizations. At one point in the early seventies, local activists, architects, and planners created 60 community design centers, nonprofit organizations that mobilize progressive professionals that may be university-based academics and students in architecture and planning or practicing architects and planners committed to building the "just city". They partner with community groups that come to this nonprofit and ask for specific assistance doing a plan. These were typically funded by local foundations or by families with a good deal of wealth.

SC: The U.S. philanthropic tradition has a long and rich history, characterized by a strong history of giving generously to charitable endeavors. For a long time, the Italian philanthropic tradition was represented by the works of charity and assistance promoted by the Catholic Church. In recent decades, new forms of philanthropy have also emerged. They manifest themselves through the creation of foundations, funding social projects, and supporting nonprofit organizations. However, the culture of "giving for a cause", which refers to the collective mindset and values that drive individuals, communities, and societies to support and contribute to causes that have a positive impact on the world around them, is not very well established.

KR: Another thing about the organizing effort. They knew that you needed to organize people and money. So, they also created very interesting grassroots fundraising strategies. There is a book written by Joan Flannigan called *The Grassroots Fundraising*

Guide. Most of the groups that I have been describing, in addition to their organizing staff and their research staff, had what was called the «the canvas», which sent large numbers of energetic youth into neighborhoods looking for supporters to sign a petition in support of an energy campaign, a housing campaign, or some other public interest cause. After seeking a signature on a petition, the ˝canvassers˝ would ask individuals to consider making a modest financial donation to support the ongoing costs of this important door-to-door organizing effort.

These ˝canvassers˝ began to enlist hundreds of thousands of families who believed the work of these groups was very good, and that gave them an independent source of funds.

Over time they cultivated families who would never go to a meeting but like the idea of being connected to and supportive of some significant reforms. So that this sort of social invention – the fundraising canvas, the phone banking, and organizations with 50,000 members giving $15 a year – developed in dozens of states in the US created by groups such as Citizen Action and ACORN.

SC: Little from many. It is a way to deconstruct power and not be dependent on just one form of funding. A way to conserve independency.

KR: Over time, campaign after campaign advancing small reforms at the neighborhood level that then would be complemented by statewide political action enabled people to develop a sense of confidence in these organizations in which they felt a real sense of ownership.

And then they began to raise the question: «Why should we have to lobby people from other political parties each year and turn out dozens of people in an office in areas where the majority of the residents supported their grassroots organizations?». So, they then began to encourage their leaders who were interested in running for office, and they were very effective in electing poor and working-class individuals to local, state, and national offices. By the time of the Obama presidential campaign, these national networks had the ability to significantly determine the election results in critical districts. And so, you found the National Democratic Party, who saw their labor constituency, due to de-industrialization weakening, they began to view the neighborhood-based citizen organizations representing poor

and working and middle-income people as an alternative base of political support, and they were very responsive to them.

SC: You wrote in the introduction of your book *Building Bridges: Community and University Partnerships in East St. Louis*, citing Margaret Mead: «Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world». But my question is, considering that community is a plural, changing, not defined concept, what kind of risks can we encounter in a community engagement process, and what's the role of the conflicts in a community planning process?

KR: The typical community-based reform effort often starts with a call from a single community-based institution whose members are alarmed by an issue. And when you actually go and meet them – maybe a church pastor or a school principal or a local labor leader or a tenant leader – you realize that those institutions have some base of support in a geography that's usually quite small, even be less extensive than it might appear. These institutions end up being the conveners of a broader democratic process, and the kind of issues that are often raised require a substantial amount of citizen power that these institutions may not have it. So, in my work, I've always thanked the person inviting us and then explained that in the world of contested resources, the fight for progressive policies is highly contentious and that they would need a substantial base of support. I explain that no single community-based institution wouldn't be enough to challenge corporate power. So, you must identify who else is in the neighborhood. You identify those individuals and organizations and then convene those leaders to support a broader democratic planning process, but the ultimate leadership is going to come from those folks who are currently living, working, patronizing, and investing in this neighborhood and not from these institutions.

SC: And couldn't the conflict be useful to renegotiate unbalanced processes?

KR: When we start on this road, we are with a sponsoring group, usually the leaders of local institutions. But by asking people to look around the room, we ask them: «How close do those assembled come to reflecting the diversity of the neighborhood?».

And usually, we are a narrow segment of the community. We then show them basic population data that shows the percentage of new immigrants, the percentage of non-whites, and the percentage of youth in the neighborhood in the community. We then ask: «Do we have any of these important and often-overlooked groups represented?». Often the answer is no! So, then the question is through our networks, who we know and how we can effectively reach out to these groups so that we have a leadership of this initial effort that really reflects the diversity of the community as it exists now and as it's changing. And that's an important organizing skill. To determine who's missing.

SC: At the center of your research methodology, we can find the Participatory Action Research. In the experiences narrated in this book [*Building Bridges*], you explain how to use participatory action research methods to produce the plan, actively involving lots of residents and stakeholders. Looking back to your huge, excellent, and inspiring research career and practice, what's the strength of PAR, and what is the weakness? And referring to the citation you did of Patrick Geddes, what do you think about the role of education? It is an issue I'm particularly interested in when meant as maieutic, a capacity building development process, and a critical awareness raising. So, in which way can Participatory Action Research engage people but also create critical thinking?

KR: In several of the projects that I became involved in as a university professor, we were being invited into communities which had recently been the subject of centralized agency plans, which had unleashed programs and policies that these communities felt intensified their marginality and put their communities and its residents at risk, in which the documents/plans produced by the professional planners didn't reflect the unique history, culture, strengths, capacities, and power of their neighborhood. These plans typically described the neighborhood in deficit terms, as a problem, as a loss, as something that needs to be transformed. So, it seemed logical to use PAR to identify members of the community impacted by a public policy change and to bring them to the table so as to ensure that the issues and concerns, the vision, the hopes, the creativity, the energy, the resources of that community will be unleashed and focused on in the plan, and the subsequent political work to implement the "peoples' vision".

If you're working in a low-income community because of years and years and years of disinvestment, bringing them into the planning process as leaders, you can produce a plan that represents an alternative vision. But the question is, do you have sufficient power to secure the attention of those people who control public and private capital? And so, as we did a number of plans using Participatory Action Research that won national awards. We got plaques, we got invited to conferences to give talks, but we were not successfully implementing many of the major initiatives included in our plans because we could not affect the local political decision makers. So, after a couple of years, we quickly realized that PAR was necessary to engage people and their vision, and their creativity, and their ideas, and their program, and their resources, but that the PAR planning process, the research process that we used, would have to be one that would intentionally not just gather information and analysis and vision, but would collect individuals currently not organized and bring them into a broader movement around a crystal clear vision and design in order to basically rebuild a nonpartizan power base to support the change.

And we started doing that. We dropped the term Participatory Action Research, and we started calling our work Empowerment Planning – a capacity-building approach. We're not just collecting ideas and proposals, but we're developing a human resources mobilization function, involving people who could work together to build up the power base of the community. Using this approach, we started having results in the sense that suddenly we could mobilize a substantial number of people who could effectively advocate redistributive plans than could, often, halt and/or reverse processes of disinvestment and decline of institutions. But we realized to have a two-legged stool: PAR and direct-action organizing was not enough because people were largely dependent upon the planner, architect, designer, organizer.

We realized that we needed a critical education piece that talked about creating and supporting the development of critical consciousness. We began developing materials and pedagogy for doing that, influenced by Danilo Dolci, Paulo Freire, and Myles Forton.

So that was the third element that put together first in St.

Louis, then in Memphis and other places, which appears highly suitable for very low-income communities where there's been long term disinvestment, highly centralized power, and long-standing social injustice.

SC: This is an ethic way to embrace planning process. The following step should be the creation of a tool to make research a service learning – as you wrote – in creating a long-term partnership between university, community, and institutions. Is it possible to institutionalize the practice without losing its groundbreaking relevance?

KR: No one in 1987, believed that community leaders and faculty allies could challenge higher education institutions in making this increasingly substantial commitment to equity-oriented planning, starting with one department and then three departments and then six schools and then five colleges over a 40-year period. But that's what happened as a result of our work at the University of Illinoid at Urbana-Champaign.
In Chicago, similarly, with a project called Great Cities Initiative, working with marginalized neighborhoods, UIC (University of Illinois Chicago) is still doing extraordinary work supporting grassroots organizing, providing critical research on issues, doing leadership training. They're training the next generation of participatory planners, designers, anthropologists through long-term partnerships with community-based organizations in underserved areas.
And they're also doing substantial policy papers around the future direction of economic, environmental, social, housing policy-making in the city focused on proposals to expand opportunities for those city residents with the fewest resources and least amount of power.
These are examples of some substantial long-term engagement processes. But the question is, in the period that they were active – supporting residents in achieving substantial improvements in their situations and increasing their voice at the neighborhood, city, and state levels of government where the major decisions are made – to what extent have these projects identified, developed and supported new leadership who are committed to redistribution and participation?
If this kind of "bottom-side ways" development could happen in East Saint Louis, which was at the time the poorest black

city in the US which didn't have a strong progressive or radical tradition, I think fundamental change can happen anywhere.

SC: Just one more question about the topic of the special issue of Tracce Urbane. In your opinion, what's the role of arts and culture in urban regeneration, as a project, as a process, but also as a creative method – I refer to art-based research methodology – within the framework of Participatory Action Research? What role they can play in shaping needs and desires of the city – its «capacity to aspire» – and in creating a more equitable and just city? Looking also at the degeneration forms such as culture-led gentrification with related processes of displacement and social exclusion.

KR: In the case of the East Saint Louis Action Research Project, there would not have been any of that which I described if there had not been at least 20 years of extraordinary community-based arts, education, and production, led by Katherine Dunham, the great dancer, choreographer, civil rights activist, and educator.
After a career unparalleled in American dance, in terms of productivity, creative works, recognition – the first woman of color to have an internationally touring, multiracial dance company performing at the highest-level training – she realized the ability of the arts to lift up folks who are being crushed by inequality and repression. So, throughout her whole life, she supported human liberation and the power of the spirit through choreography, working across differences. She took 10% of all her earnings over 40 years to support two community-based academies, one in Port au Prince (Haiti) and one in New York City to provide at-risk kids with arts as an alternative.
In East Saint Louis, with Buckminster Fuller, she created "The Old Man River Plan", which was an arts-based approach to regenerating the poorest, most violated, most repressed urban community in the Midwest. So, our entire East Saint Louis project came from the fertile ground prepared for 20 years by the remarkable arts, education, and empowerment work undertaken by Katherine Dunham.

SC: So, arts can be a tool in a community planning process. Not a decorative object but a deeply rooted vehicle for triggering a place-based process, a way to critically understand the essence of a place and to mobilize it for social justice and social change.

KR: In order to counter a narrative that describes residents of very low-income communities in a way in which they are no longer human and can be written off, the alternative view of what the city could be based upon its strengths was celebrated by the work Katherine Dunham with the kind of choreography she was producing. She created a sense of possibility by constantly encouraging young people to learn, imagine, and act for transformative change. When we first started working in East St. Louis, we always incorporated into the process of planning art, music, and also dance as the Civil Rights Movement had always done, because there was a very powerful and rich tradition within the African American community to build upon.

SC: You mentioned the sense of possibility; what is the plan, if not the imagination of a possible future?

KR: The experience of people who've been told that they're in a dangerous place with people who are predatory. That's how you deny a community, year after year, participation in the economic and social, and political life of a country that was going on for decades. And all of a sudden, in East St. Louis, you have a wide range of the state and region and a certain portion of the national political leadership of the country under the US Department of Housing and Urban Development sitting there at an evening event where community leaders not only articulately describe their visions for a better city and society, but then they get to watch and hear and feel the extraordinary creative output of young black children from the poorest neighborhoods in the poorest black city in the country. This is an experience that most of these leaders will never forget. And it shatters all of the limits that you want to put on what the possibilities are for the transformation of urban places.

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