

PLANNING AS EVOLUTION: RADICAL PEDAGOGY, CREATIVE METHODS AND URBAN RESEARCH.

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INTRODUCTION

For many years now, there has been critical reflection at international level against excessive specialisation; the phenomenon has been questioned for various reasons and from various points of view. This critical trend prompts us to pursue other paths that go beyond reductionist thought and beyond specialisation. Within a theoretical framework that embraces a complex epistemology, urban planning is undergoing radical change by opening itself up to critical urban theory and practice. This powerful, ongoing transformation in urban planning is well expressed by a large group of intellectuals who recognize the discipline's fragility and have decided to oppose the excessive specialisation of the modern world in order to grasp the vital interconnection between things and the intersection of spaces on disciplinary boundaries where technicism meets concepts, images, symbols, practices and processes. Within this changing paradigm, sensitive approaches and aesthetic rationalities are provoking interest within urban and regional studies.

This paper explores how art-based methods and alternative spaces for learning and knowledge production may help set in motion critical spatial practices and contribute to urban research and planning. It uses the interactive pedagogy of Patrick Geddes, the father of planning, as a starting point. Geddes' pedagogy proposes an engaged planning, capable of setting in motion civically engaging and empowering collective action. The paper also references authors who regard aesthetic experience as a cognitive activity, and is attentive to radical pedagogies which have developed and adopted creative approaches. To explore how we can return to seeing planning as a cultural and creative process that bases itself on community development, I will present my CAP 04015 case study, a three-year long project carried out in the small town of Priverno from 2015 to 2018 which combined art-based methods, radical pedagogy approaches and community planning. At the intersection between art, pedagogy and praxis, this examination of CAP 04015 aspires to highlight how education processes based on artistic and creative methods can help us produce space differently, in a way that is closely connected to citizens' needs and desires.¹

PLANNING BEYOND THE PLAN

In 1970, in his *Urban Revolution*, Henri Lefebvre highlighted how projects are reduced to graphic and technological procedures, in which «imagination can no longer take flight». He said:

The authors of the projects evidently fail to find the connection between these two opposing principles:

a. there is no thought without u-topia, without exploration of the possible, of the elsewhere;

b. there is no thought without reference to a practice (that of living and use).²

Critical urban theory and the framework of radical urban studies which distinguish the post-1968 left tradition brought forward by Lefebvre and others challenge the Cartesian dualism that characterised the production of knowledge and space until the late 60s. The specialisation of knowledge is deeply rooted in Western culture, from Aristotle to Illuminism. It manifests itself most clearly in the 20th century, when disciplines become increasingly disunited and fragmented in the name of defending the orthodoxies of separate fields and it is impossible to find common ground. The critique of this way of thinking questions the hegemony of the scientific method over other modes of the cognitive exploration of reality and the search for truth. It defines an epistemology of multiplicity³ that has deconstructed predefined categories and abandoned notions such as objectivity, cause-effect and determinism for plurality. This means that phenomena themselves emerge, as Bachelard states, as provisional sedimentations of a mesh of relations. A web of relations is identifiable with aesthetics⁴—the sensibility of relations, a connecting force—that opposes hyper-specialisation with hybridisation, restoring cognitive and formative value (the giving of form) to the metaphorical, the symbolic, and to sensitive perception.

In this perspective, art—as a terrain of connection between things—, in its capacity to read the real in a non-linear paradigm, is seen as an epistemological process that explores the zones of existence in which society moves. Art does not simply explore these areas to record and document but to see beyond, as Paul Valéry suggested. This vision of art follows Dewey's theoretical thread and breaks down the dominant analytical rationality. Therefore it sees the aesthetic sensory experience as a cognitive practice.⁵

Within this framework, even urban planning, reduced as it is to a mere regulatory norm without the utopian potential⁶ to imagine better worlds, needs to rethink itself in order to be able to address the complexity of sustainable and equal transformation. This complexity cannot simply be translated by modern tools such as cartographic rationality, technical knowledge and science.⁷ It requires new lenses of exploration and new languages which make sense of it by generating plural narratives. There is a desirable future ahead which aspires to treat planning as a multidisciplinary science of territories that goes beyond dualism. In this future, planning becomes a process of collective empowerment, a critical space of mutual learning through experience in a non-hierarchical production of knowledge. This planning attempts to reveal the plurality of the territory by overcoming the boundaries of individual disciplines and the rigidity of specialisms.

Back to the Future: Planning as Interactive Pedagogy

In the work of Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), a key founder of spatial planning, we find our desirable future. Geddes was the first to develop a sociological approach for the study of urbanisation processes. He believed that social processes and spatial form were intimately connected, and that this awareness could be used to shape environmental transformations that would improve the quality of life for all citizens. In a polemic against the positivistic method and the division of the sciences, Geddes proposed a synoptic approach to reality. This synoptic approach replaces the compartmentalised knowledge characteristic of disciplinary specialisations with a comprehensive and synthetic knowledge. According to Geddes, this latter knowledge is the only one capable of restoring reality's organic nature and vitality. By considering planning as a process, he placed investigation at the centre of his proposal, as a tool for knowledge, understanding reality and planning action. It is at this point that the survey becomes a key part of urban planning theory, since it returns the real to its vitality, to its process of becoming. What's more is that from the survey flow the policies that guide planning action and civic design. Only when we know the places, the activities and the characters of the population as fully as possible and, in their interrelationships, writes Geddes, can we adequately and with some confidence address the planning problem. In this «city as evolution» vision, during his

period spent in Indore in central India from 1914 to 1924, Geddes experiments with an interactive pedagogy because «in order to translate an idea into action, it is necessary to arouse and trigger an emotion, without which no thought, however true, can be transformed into an effective act». Geddes enacted this very process during the Indore Diwali procession.⁸

In this perspective town planning becomes a space of education and inspiration, capable of activating a collective and collaborative process of mutual learning for common civic consciousness and empowerment. As Geddes said, «every place has a real personality [...] which may have long been dormant, but which the planner, as guide and interpreter must awaken».⁹ We find a similar attitude in some experiences of radical pedagogy spread throughout the 60s that look at the role of alternative pedagogy and socially engaged critical spatial practice for city production through various perspectives, considering the aesthetic¹⁰ experience as a cognitive activity. I am making reference to Danilo Dolci's pedagogical actions in Sicily. Dolci considered «planning as a collective gesture»,¹¹ as a process of collective exploration that uses the Maieutic Approach RMA—the experience and intuition of individuals—as its starting point. With *Centro per la Piena Occupazione* and the *Centro di Formazione per la Pianificazione organica* in Trappeto, Dolci used this approach to look at knowledge as a key to self-emancipation from systems of domination through the release of one's own creativity. In *A New World in the Making*, which collects some of Danilo Dolci's writings, special importance and relevance is given to organic development and participatory groups by placing these in direct relation with peace, nonviolence and active conscientious objection when building together the new world. It thus establishes new men, new groups and a new planning.

Within criticism of traditional forms and methods of teaching where education is an act of depositing information, students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor, the paradigm is shifting and increasingly education is being seen as a multidimensional process focused on contexts, communities, social issues and inequalities. Such a radical approach is also apparent in Paulo Freire's proposals for the pedagogy of the oppressed and the pedagogy of autonomy, processes which are attentive to critical thinking and the development of learners' abilities to create and build, rehabilitating the dream and utopia that were cynically erased by neoliberalism. Inspired by Gramsci's organic and transformative intellectual, Freire invites us to think of educational praxis as deeply linked to a political and critical reading of global society, and thus reclaims the emancipatory power of education. A progressive decolonisation of knowledge transmission is looming, and this is also well expressed in Ivan Illich's call for the deschooling of society.¹² In order to get away from the productivity logic of educational institutions, we must also school the imagination to create services instead of values.

A common thread that runs between these theories and reflections is an educational practice that focuses on contexts and embraces concepts such as community engagement, mutual learning, deconstruction of knowledge and political ethics in its actions. This practice also underlines the importance of the social imaginary, critical awareness in relation to collective imaginaries, and collaborative praxis, as well as the importance of processes and people's engagement for the development of new tools and strategies that respond to environmental and social challenges.

It is clear from all of this discussion on planning as interactive pedagogy that there are obvious links between education and planning, and we can consider radical pedagogy actions as critical spatial practice which uses art-based methods and is capable of engaging temporary communities in different kinds of urban-related issues. Both the physical and social space of the city becomes experimental terrain for this radical educational approach and turns education into imaginative reflection. This kind of education is able to rethink space and the environment in a conscious manner and in relational terms. It is also capable of developing an attitude of the gaze,¹³ as well as activating processes of transformation and production. It can do this by starting from a plurality of places through critical community engagement.

Art as a Method: Critical Spatial Practices

Attempts to unveil the territory's plurality are made by socially engaged practices, participatory and collaborative processes that work with the public sphere through art-based and creative methods and configure themselves as critical spatial practice¹⁴ for urban and social transformation.

I am making reference to contemporary public art—also known as socially engaged art, community-based art, social practices, collaborative art, relational art—that is born inside the public sphere to question contemporaneity, acting and relating with it in a constant relationship between individuals and space. This kind of art measures itself with its traditions, its unthoughts, its survivals, and experiments and proposes alternative models which are capable of responding to the issues of the present. With its capacity for suspension,¹⁵ art within the public sphere becomes a potentially transformative device, nurturing a culture of participation and interdisciplinarity.

In the same way as the radical pedagogy experiences mentioned above, public art that works with communities potentially impacts territories by stimulating critical processes of understanding reality, deconstructing stereotyped visions and constructing new imaginaries.

Art found in the public space is transversal to every field of knowledge, a force for the modalities and tools of interaction and exchange that fits into a theoretical framework which combines participatory action research (PAR) and—for the use of visual practical-methodological devices—art-based research (ABR). ABR is «research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, represent and even challenge human action and experience».¹⁶ In the construction of the artistic process through collaboration, participation, relational and immersive experiences, the idea in this kind of action-research is to «create, examine and interpret art in ways that illustrate both process and the impact of arts and issues on peoples' lives».¹⁷ In so doing, the action-research, as a qualitative applied methodology, «provides opportunities to see new portraits of phenomena, diversifies our perspectives, and emancipates the gaze through which we approach the world around us».¹⁸ It thus increases awareness of important social, political or educational issues. Combining multiple forms, art-based research acts to explore, understand, represent and transform reality on a variety of scales. It proposes to do this through processes of individual and collective empowerment and subjectivation, and by activating “micro-transformations”. It also aspires to creating a world that is more aware of the dynamics transforming reality. In these ways it becomes a device for activating new plans and visions.

Cap_04015 (a city) Co-creation Art Project

Through the experience of CAP_04015 we explored how to return to seeing planning as a cultural and creative process based on community participation, empowerment and development. At the intersection between art, pedagogy and praxis, the experience helps us investigate how processes of education through art-based and creative methods can help us know, use, produce and plan space differently.

CAP_04015 was a three-year long project that I carried out from 2015 to 2018 in the small city of Priverno, an inner area in Italy's Lepini Mountains. The project combined art-based methods, radical pedagogy approaches and community planning. In this participatory action-research experience carried out with a group of young 15-16 year old students we focused on the following elements: active exploration of the urban environment and cultural heritage through walking action and art-based processes (to know); active interaction and creative learning between participants and between participants and the urban environment (to foster engagement and empowerment); active interpretation of phenomena (to raise consciousness); and co-creation to imagine new uses of urban space (to stimulate critical and social imagination for planning).

In this project, art is used as an educational device of subjectivation, as a research methodology for the city and as a planning tool. It experiments with a planning approach that uses “illegitimate” language and tries to re-imagine the research and practice of planning as an artistic-cultural planning¹⁹

in which the long and uncertain process of artistic creation complements traditional research, helping to discover the needs, desires and vocations of the city, and setting visions in motion. In particular, the process initiated with CAP_04015 fits into the theoretical framework of art in research²⁰ and adopts art as a methodology, using artistic forms to support qualitative research on the city and its transformation.

The general objectives of the project and workshops with the young people were those of getting to know the territory in another way, activating and co-designing collective processes and projects within the public space and experimenting how art and creativity could be devices for learning, experience and transformation.

CAP_04015 used mixed and multi-method approaches. During the project, we used participatory methods based on visual arts, both as data collection and representation. These methods were characterised by a spirit of play, resistance to binary thinking and a tendency to cross boundaries²¹ and a specific set of practices that involved research participants in the creation of artefacts and the experimentation of relational processes. The practices included performance, photography, drawing, mapping, walking, performance and environmental installation. We added the classical methodologies of qualitative research such as brainstorming, group discussions, storytelling and interviews to these practices, and approached all of them from a symbolic and creative perspective.

Our premise was educational and focused on training and we looked closely at maieutic education, in which each subject is already a bearer of knowledge. Making use of this premise and framework, the project chose urban space as a laboratory for experimentation and co-creation and there developed a path of analysis, critical knowledge of the territory and urban design and planning using artistic methodologies to co-produce research and imagine answers to the needs, desires and vocations identified by the participants.

CONCLUSION: THE CITY AS A CREATIVE COMMUNITY LAB

CAP_04015 and the experience of art in public space as an informal space of learning and action bring us back to Geddes's processual and interactive idea of planning.

The pedagogical attitude is translated into a direct confrontation with the recipients of the social action. Here there are no models that can be applied but there is instead a passionate willingness to set in motion a collective action of civic reconstruction.

The radical pedagogical approach and the artistic device—in the overlapping of planes and meanings—become tools for breaking down crystallised categories so that they can recompose the territory's stratification starting from life stories and experience. Through art as experience and public space as a common ground of learning and planning, we have tried to investigate the deep reasons that bind people to their territories, giving rise to a reflection on the future that starts from the communities involved in the process.

The use of art and informal learning as an open laboratory on the city's phenomena and its evolution allowed us to stimulate civic engagement, public participation and student community empowerment by helping to collectively build critical awareness around the city's production and planning processes; it guaranteed the involvement of citizens who are usually excluded from the decision-making²² surrounding city planning.

In this sense, engaged educational and art-based methodologies may be alternative spaces for learning and knowledge production when it is a critical spatial practice and a radically open process. The methodologies may also bring about the following possibilities: the development of unlearning or learning in a transversal way within collective thinking and acting; the engagement of people in different kinds of urgent issues concerning public space and territory; action and development in relation to urgent social issues, beyond the safe zones of academia or art and educational institutions; the capacity to carefully approach different issues and contexts, adopt alternative perspectives and co-

create strategies and tools for urban and social transformation by looking at the city as collective and collaborative evolution. Within this realm of possibilities, the plan is no longer a container or a programme that is pre-prepared for the community's development: instead it is the result and testimony of a process that the community develops itself through collective action.

NOTES

¹ Derek R Ford, *Education and the Production of Space: Political Pedagogy, Geography, and Urban Revolution* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2016), 1-135.

² Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970).

³ Edgar Morin, *Introduction à une politique de l'homme* (Paris: Seuil, 1965).

⁴ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1972).

⁵ Michel Maffesoli, *Éloge de la raison sensible* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1996); Maurice Merleau Ponty, *The primacy of perception: And other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history, and politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

⁶ David Pinder, "In Defence of Utopian Urbanism: Imagining Cities after the 'End of Utopia'", *Geografiska Annaler, Series B: Human Geography* 84, 3-4(2002): 229-41.

⁷ Leonie Sandercock, *Towards Cosmopolis. Planning for Multicultural Cities* (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1998).

⁸ Patrick Geddes was in India from 1914 to 1924, invited there as an expert in urban planning. In 1917, when a plague epidemic raged in Indore, Geddes had the idea of transforming the procession, from a religious rite with its own sacred path, into a secular rite with a precise objective: to promote public hygiene that would help combat the plague.

⁹ Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics*, (London: Architectural Press, 1915).

¹⁰ Reference is made to the etymology of the word 'Aesthetics', from Gr. αἰσθητικός, 'sensation', 'perception', 'ability to feel', "Aesthetics", *Treccani Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2009 accessed 1/7/2022 <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/estetica/>

¹¹ Dolci, Danilo. *Verso un Mondo Nuovo*. Turin: Einaudi, 1964.

¹² Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Penguin, 1971).

¹³ Giovanni Ferraro, *Rieducazione alla speranza. Patrick Geddes planner in India (1914-1924)* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1998)

¹⁴ Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, I.B. (London: Tauris London, 2006).

¹⁵ Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Survivance des lucioles* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2009).

¹⁶ Qingchun Wang, Sara Coemans, Richard Siegesmund, "Arts-based methods in socially engaged research practice: a classification framework.", *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2/2 (2017): 5-39.

¹⁷ Wang, Coemans, Siegesmund, 5-39.

¹⁸ Tom Barone, Elliot Eisner, *Arts based research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

¹⁹ Tom Borrup, "Just planning: what has kept the arts and urban planning apart?", *Artivate 6/2 Creative Placemaking and Arts Entrepreneurship* (Summer 2017): 46-57.

²⁰ Wang, Coemans, Siegesmund, *in the work cited*, p. 15

²¹ Helene Kara, *Creative research methods in the social sciences. A practical guide* (Policy Press: Bristol, 2015)

²² Qingchun Wang, Sara Coemans, Richard Siegesmund, *in the work cited*

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