

Everyday practices, imagery and urban cultures regarding participatory processes

Knowledge from Experience (Interactive and Design-related)

This contribution intends to address the theme of “savoirs citoyens” in the context of participatory processes, focusing on daily life and urban culture. While in some cases the inhabitants and other subjects involved in the participatory process use knowledge of the technical type, drawing perhaps from their own professional skills, the majority of participants use skills, abilities and understanding derived from direct experience, from personal events and daily life, from inhabiting places and meeting people, etc. The “savoirs citoyens” for me, is above all *experience-based knowledge* (Jedlowski, 1994) and thus *ordinary (or common) knowledge*, interactive and derived from experience, rather than *expert* (of the experts), derived from study and professional skills (Crosta, 1998). It is first and foremost knowledge used “in practice”. For this reason such knowledge is linked not only to rational information but also to practical understanding, to the ways in which we inhabit the city and our specific urban context, often a mixture of personal and collective experience. In addition, such knowledge is loaded with symbolic and affective dimensions, marked by pre-rational aspects which should not be overlooked but, on the contrary, can be of great value from the point of view of urban policy and design.

Furthermore, the issue at hand is not only “understanding” of the technological-scientific sort of rationality, but also practical skills, creative and design capabilities, social and relational, organizational know-how, etc., skills in which body language, communicational and senses play a fundamental role. This is most true in the less-structured, loosely organized participatory processes which are precisely those which, being freer and more accessible, are most interesting when aiming for maximum involvement of inhabitants and other subjects, as well as developing broader and deeper-reaching social processes. More rigidly structured and organized contexts are, in fact, more easily instrumentalized for specific aims. Often this leads to a problematic relationship between expert knowledge and technical knowledge, a subject which we will address later.

Another important dimension derives from the fact that “savoirs citoyens” are above all forms of knowledge which grow and develop in a social, not just individual, context. It is knowledge prevalently--though not exclusively -- resulting from collective interaction, more or less extensive and shared, more or less conflictual although often not intentionally so. For this reason such knowledge is the result of sedimentation that occurs over time, that has its own temporality. We are not, therefore, talking about “*hardened*” knowledge, consolidated beyond the possibility of second thoughts. We are talking, instead, of knowledge that, through slow and non-predictable rates, are subject to evolutionary processes, to adaptation and continuous re-elaboration. Obviously, this subject lies at the edge of the dimension of urban cultures that permeate the city and its inhabitants.

At the end, this is eminently design-related knowledge. In most cases, in fact, the participatory process, whether or not tied to specifically urban issues, tend to set their objectives with respect to policies and interventions yet to be developed (for example, participatory budgets or urban design) and give rise inevitably to behavior informed by design. But it's worth noting that the inhabitants and other city-dwellers often have important, and underestimated, design skills. In fact very often they possess a design capacity with respect to their own living places far stronger

than external professional experts. The culture of modernity as it has emerged since the 19th century has progressively stripped the inhabitants of their design skills, in among other contexts that of city building and urban society, only to substitute the logic of “experts” to whom technical and institutional roles of government administration, as well as specialized knowledge, would be delegated. This is a broad theme that would merit separate study.

The considerations outlined in this paper also derive from concrete experiences, or rather from critical reflections following the involvement in concrete experiences. The research derives from a wide variety of experiences and processes, both institutional (developed as part of institutional processes) and non-institutional (as part of self-organization of social subjects such as residents, local associations and committees, etc.). Such processes consist of both top-down and bottom up ones: participatory budgeting, participatory project design, local networks, neighborhood houses, etc. In particular, I will discuss three experiences. The first is a project of participatory design developed by Rome's 10th municipality together with city government and coordinated by a group of university researchers. Its object was the elaboration of a proposal for a project for the urban area Torrespaccata destined by the new Master Plan to become an “urban centrality”, in other words a hub for metropolitan-scale services and activities, integrated with green space, housing and local services. The process was carried out with ample citizen participation, above and beyond the role of local associations which represent strong lobbies. The design was developed using the format of workshops and laboratories. The proposal, in contrast with the guidelines proposed by the city, was presented as a critical observation regarding the Master Plan and was only partially accepted.

The second experience was tied to the Monti Social Network, a network of local inhabitants (legal residents and others), artisans, local committees and associations, universities, etc. which was born and developed in the context of the Monti neighborhood in Rome's historical center. The Monti Social Network was concerned with urban requalification, local, sustainable transportation, social cohabitation, cultural initiatives, the adaptation and reuse of abandoned buildings, public spaces, and the defense of the neighborhood against the radical transformations taking place in the historical center, evictions, etc.

The third experience was the *Casa della Città* project in the 1st Municipality, Rome's historical center, a sort of town planning laboratory. The *Casa della Città* has various functions other than making available information, documents, design proposals related to urban transformation and urbanistic choices under discussion. It provides qualified personnel to ‘translate’ this information and it solicits from the individuals and civic organizations observations, complaints and proposals. Finally, as a public place devoted to promote and host interaction and debate, it provides logistical support for participatory processes related to various policies in the First Municipality, also dealing with cultural themes.

The importance of referring to concrete experience should not be overlooked, inasmuch as many aspects of the “savoirs citoyens” referred to previously are immaterial, not explicit, unable to be objectified or rationalized. Or else they emerge from an interactive process. For these reasons they can only be understood through a direct involvement in participatory processes and therefore, following a more ethnographic approach, through a *participatory observation*.

Qualified forms of knowledge

“Savoirs citoyens” are first and foremost “qualified” forms of knowledge. I use this term, however, with a double meaning. On the one hand (and this is generally the most accepted use of the term) of the idea of citizen knowledge, it refers to “quality” knowledge, expressing familiarity, evaluations which derive from direct experience, from place-based practice, and which can in many ways have a greater value than the technical knowledge that might be developed by an external subject. In the meantime, these express a strong, clear knowledge, one rooted in locally manifested social needs. But they express an analogous understanding of the daily use of spaces, from the more or less consolidated practices which involve diverse subjects to social functions that take place in certain places. The inhabitants simultaneously inform us of both the meaning and character of a place and the time of life that is lived there, the activities that take place, the needs and problems arising there and the related hopes. Alongside the different uses and different potential use, the residents also reveal the symbolic values that each place has, whether rooted in memory or linked to local identity, whether they are an expression of daily use and activity or rather battles, forms of ownership and conflicts that have passed through those places and structured them as they are. In this sense, knowledge and expertise each have a great importance, which must structure, or “give shape to”, policies and approaches to those specific urban contexts.

“Savoirs citoyens” then express a strong and deep knowledge of the “malleability” of places and people, or the capacity - of places and people - to accept and / or react more or less positively to policies and projects that might be developed for different urban contexts. Places in fact, have a “thickness”; they are an integral part of urban practices and forms of organization of urban communities, have size - even symbolic - that is not easy to capture and view, have a value for the people that goes beyond their features. To intervene on urban space is to intervene on the consolidated social balance, on the practice of everyday life, on social behaviors and lifestyles. This, of course, does not mean that we should not intervene in urban contexts, but that policies and projects should be developed with a strong sensitivity to the places and the implications within participatory social processes.

In this sense, “public knowledge” allows us to evaluate the potential outcomes / effects of policies and projects, their effectiveness, the reactions of people and different social groups, the tendential process of adaptation, resistance or exploitation that it could trigger . [I’m thinking of the issue of sidewalk tables and on social behavior in the design of Via del Boschetto].

Finally, such knowledge can be considered “quality” knowledge because it is concerned with the most effective strategies for political action, in relation to the capacity of the inhabitants and the sensitivity of the territory, but also in relation to the conduct of local politicians. Very often, compared to traditional forms of political pressure, other forms such as grassroots or symbolic actions can be carried out. [again, I’m thinking of the experience of the sidewalk tables at Piazza Madonna de 'Monti]

But “savoirs citoyens” knowledge can also be considered “qualified” in another sense, or rather as knowledge that expresses value assessments, considerations that are often implicit, but which reflect how inhabitants and other people involved assess problems and prospects in relation to their ways of life and coexistence. Above all because, as we have seen, it tells us about the symbolic and intangible valency of place. Secondly, because it is “emotionally charged” knowledge, which express the values of places and practices, what is really important for people's lives, and which also tells us how people are willing to spend and invest their money, and describe the creative, constructive energies which direct their actions.

But even more importantly such knowledge is "qualified" because it expresses an "evaluation" of the situations growing from the idea of a city, from the model of life that are implicit (or explicit) in a certain practice or in a certain policy (or project). This is an extremely important aspect. We must glean from the considerations of people, from project proposals, from practical life, the ideas of the city, forms of cohabitation, patterns of living that are considered the benchmarks and around which are played, either explicitly or implicitly, all participatory processes. From such considerations, therefore, derive the production of "public policies", namely those that are built "in public" and that emerge from the collective.

This assessment is generally implied, but in many cases it may be explicit, especially in more politically "mature" or experienced people with regard to the processes of social interaction. One must note, however, as in participatory process, the level of detail involves a streamlining and the move to express a political and technical level that tends to drive out and exclude the majority of people, and dry up creative thinking.

This "evaluated" knowledge should not be considered *tout court* positive, but rather must be read critically, but it is an "evaluation" fundamental to expert knowledge because it addresses the most important issues, the very value of policies, housing patterns, patterns of development, and the very ideas of the city.

In this regard it should be noted that many conflicts among inhabitants (not to mention those with the Administration) arise as conflicts between imagined (or implied) notions, between different ideas of cities. One emblematic example is that of mobility in the Monti neighborhood, but the same pattern is repeated in all the urban situations. Often the theme of mobility leads to the most heated disagreements. In Monti widely varying proposals were set forward and juxtaposed, often harshly, proposals ranging from complete closure of the neighborhood to cars (with only pedestrians and bicycles), to a strict traffic regulation (zone 30, controlled access, and partial pedestrian-protection, electric shuttle, etc..) with a mixture of transport modes but still a strong pedestrian-advocacy (this is the model that has prevailed), to the complete liberalization of traffic with availability of parking close to housing, and so on.

Ambiguous knowledge

At the same time, far from a kind of romance or infatuation with respect to the ordinary/common knowledge, it must be said that this is knowledge can conceal some ambiguity and thus should be read critically. In this case, as well, various aspects must be considered.

The knowledge of experience, as related to practices of everyday life, is also influenced by the *habitus*, in the sense given by Bourdieu (1972, 1980). It is related to consolidated behavior that is, "embedded" in individuals and their routine, and it is socially conditioned. Daily life and the experiences that we carry out regularly are, in fact, a mixture of routine behaviors that give security and make up a consolidated response to the problems we encounter every day, and innovative practices, which - through adjustments, tests or recombination of normal behavior -- introduce new ways of dealing with situations that arise, especially those that are most unknown (Jedlowski, 2005).

More generally, this is a knowledge related to social imagination, and through them, models of cities that can be defined elsewhere, a way of life that can be sustained without the possibility of a critical reading. Our cities in fact, both through policies that are developed, and through their own structural and functional organization, induce or impose patterns of living that become, by

implication, our models of natural life. They define models of coexistence and the prevailing ideas of the city. Very often people find it difficult to think otherwise, to imagine a different city. They are often models of modernization, the models propagated by the mass media and political rhetoric or by real estate marketing. They are also often models that implicitly or explicitly define hierarchies between ideas and models of city living, the top-tier city versus second-tier cities. They can also generate aspirations towards models of development and cities, including highly problematic ones, on the part of people and groups who - often unaware - live in urban and social contexts which may be far richer, in terms of such as quality of places and social relations. Various situations exist, well known to those who engage in participatory processes, such as the case of the Saxa Rubra in the area north of Rome near the RAI (the seat of radio and public television stations), where people aim towards defined elsewhere and promoted models of cities, the models of modernization (heavy equipment and infrastructure at wider-area level, however, tend to make the alienate the context of urban life). These people run the risk of sacrificing, unconsciously, the quality of life where they are and of which are not aware (in particular, the strong fabric of neighborhood relations and an urban dimension of life). Similar problems were encountered with regard to relations with immigrants and security policies.

Finally, we must not forget the pressure of the various interests at stake, be they heavily economic or banally ideological, that is linked to the situations and conditions in which various citizens or the various communities find themselves: accessibility, availability of services in the vicinity, various conveniences, situations of welfare and positional advantage, etc.. Beyond the problems related to economic interests, in fact, knowledge may be conditioned by a specific number of inhabitants and their practices, from the point of view from which problems are viewed. Many people, in fact, see only their own practices, separate from an overall view of the functioning of the city or the urban context, removed from the ways of life of an established community. There is a sort of excessive localism, a partial view of the city, in which it is very difficult to find a more broadly shared balance. In Monti, a large group of residents of one street (via Baccina) were avid promoters of the pedestrianization of their own street, in view of its use, traffic problems and living conditions, a fundamentally very interesting idea, and one in contrast with the prevailing culture of the car at any cost. But quite simply it would have almost completely paralyzed the rest of the quarter, due to the characteristics of the urban setting.

“Interactive” knowledge and the “common good”

Having pointed out the ambiguities and weaknesses of “savoirs citoyens”, we should instead emphasize another aspect, namely the factors arising from interaction. The “savoirs citoyens” that are at play within the products and processes are not merely a wealth of individual knowledge (which are shared by the people involved), but it is for the most part collectively produced knowledge, the outcome of interaction itself. They have a purely interactive, although this does not necessarily mean shared, character.

This allows, first, to develop a richer and more thorough common knowledge because, being socially and interactively produced, it enables one to address more issues and to explore the different aspects and different implications.

Second, it allows one to read critically the different positions of the people or groups of people involved, highlighting the different needs, the different situations that everyone lives, including those with respect to the social structures, the organization of daily life, accumulated experience, the multiplicity of customs and practices that affect a specific place, etc. For this the construction of a multi-dimensional space is fundamental, starting from that “place of multiple points of view” formed out of interaction. It is worth noting that the rationale offered for the game are

not objective, technical-scientific ones, but rather rational discourse, based on more the interweaving of "life stories" that give rise to a sort of "collective narrative". And it is precisely this kind of knowledge that allows us to show the complexity of places, their symbolic values and intangible dimensions, otherwise anesthetized and flattened by a purely rational or instrumental knowledge. One should not be intimidated by this kind of rationality; in fact it is important to grasp the potential not only in terms of communication, but also in terms of the ability to understand the phenomena and situations.

Furthermore, this interaction gives light to common objectives, more complex and more widely shared, and for this reason, even stronger. Considering the different facets of the problems and different points of view, the possible strategies to follow can become more complex and incisive. In the context of the "Casa della Città" project by Rome's 1st Municipality, for example, where people from varying social and institutional backgrounds, but also from different urban places with very different issues, met around the same table, there was no room for narrowly focused issues (the so-called issue of "streetside trash bins") because it was necessary to address larger issues, shared by all. Moreover, a given issue could have one value in a certain neighborhood but a completely different value in another. This drives us to examine the issues in greater depth, and to seek more complex solutions to meet the different needs and situations of different players and different places. Precisely this has happened, for example, in the debate around the issue of commerce and the use of public space. In some quarters it is suffocating, while in others - such as the Esquilino neighborhood- instead its development and requalification would be a desirable. Another important outcome of participants working around the same table was to understand the problems of others, making it clear that individual issues were part of a general context shared by all.

This can be a jumping off point allowing us to now highlight not only the cognitive aspects, but also more specifically interactive ones. The "savoirs citoyens", seen as collective production and as a result of an interactive process, are of greater value not only because they develop a more complex (and problematic) form of knowledge, but also because they are the result of a collaborative, collective working process. They form a "common good", so much so that the groups that produce them are rarely willing to backtrack and open for new discussion issues they have resolved. Such solutions form a common heritage to which people are willing to commit. They become a form of appropriation of knowledge among the population, the result of a process that may have carried a price in terms of conflict and personal relations, but for these very reasons is more symbolically and emotionally charged.

The relationship with the technical knowledge

The relationship with the technical knowledge and interaction with technicians are of a problematic nature. Technical knowledge, while apparently more qualified, is simultaneously both highly respected and considered the most authoritative, but also perceived as distant and alien. Technical knowledge is "colder" but not necessarily be more qualified - as we have seen - if not in a few particularly technical aspects. This means that it is not always accepted, and generally within the participatory processes it works to inhibit or deviate from the path of collective production. From this point of view it is almost cheaper to develop a parallel process to ensure that technical knowledge is also developed and distributed.

Positions that support the development of contexts in which technical and non-technical knowledge can interact, have to deal with this kind of dynamic situation in which the two types of

knowledge are placed at two different levels, interacting with great difficulty requiring highly specific forms of mediation.

Technical knowledge is more easily accepted and is more fertile when it comes from a member of the community, or where it comes from an expert who has been included in the group. For example, the contribution to the Monti Social Network of a non-resident university professor offered personally (rather than through the university as an institution) was accepted and very often required, unlike that of a university research group that participated in such activities explicitly as representatives of a university. This led to an appreciation, but also to a difficulty in the long term which has turned into distrust and hostility, considered by many to be one of the reasons for the failure of the Network.

The presence of a technician or the use of technical-scientific knowledge determines an imbalance and a hierarchy. Possession of technical and scientific skills puts one in a position of power. This also happens with other skills, such as the rhetorical ability, but the imbalance brought about by technical knowledge is more insidious, because it is difficult to call into question or understand critically. In some processes in Rome, for example, especially those of an institutional nature, the role of the engineer or scientist has been ambiguous not only in political relations, but also for the cultural techniques it brought into play. Science, as we know, is never neutral, and some scientific and technical options determined some guidelines in the policies of intervention. Among other things there are also different interpretations by experts and researchers regarding participation and this has major implications on the processes and culture of participation.

Citizen knowledge as design action and process. The cultural dimension of participatory process.

The social production of “savoirs citoyens”, which also involves visions of transformation, of ideas of the city, patterns of living, etc.. is in itself a creative design process. The capacity to produce knowledge through participatory processes is a political action. The idea that understanding and design are two separate (and indeed consequential) stages must be superceded, to make way for a more comprehensive strategy for transformation. The social production of design-related knowledge is already a form of design project, and one of the most radical. Participatory processes have often been read and interpreted primarily as processes leading to a decision. Occurring most frequently as a process of participatory democracy, the dimension considered most often is the “political-logical” one. But alongside the dimension, however important it might be, lies another no less important one, that is the cultural dimension. In my opinion, the participatory processes are first and foremost shared and socially widespread cultural processes, essential for the development of urban policies but which, aside from their often instrumental objectives, often play an important role in the production of urban culture.

Rethinking the concept of the project

The culture of modernity has taught us that the project is essentially the production of a technical report that lays down, in a timeless manner, the definition of a controlled future state in its various parts and apparently also in its implied social components. It is therefore a technical document that in defining the physical configuration, implicitly defines the ways of life and living of its users. This development, the result of an essentially technical and scientific rationality, is

the product of a specific expertise which tends to be removed from the processes of social life of cities and urban practices.

The ideas that we have examined so far, beginning with the “savoirs citoyens” as used in participatory processes, lead us to reevaluate this idea of the project. The urban practices include a strong planning and innovative element (Bourdieu, 1972, 1980; de Certeau, 1990), along with powerful routine behaviors (to be re-read critically in the social imagery with which they are often associated). The “savoirs citoyens” have a strong design valence and show a widespread creative capacity. The rationale that are brought into play in participatory processes are of a discursive nature, practical and aesthetic, drawing on interpersonal communication and practical skills. They are often expressed concretely, through direct action. Many people are involved in the processes of transformation of the city as soon as they occur, when it comes to implementing the measures. If the technical and formal language, focused on the difficult processes of city construction, is beyond the comprehension of the residents, they at the same time have a capacity and a feeling of how the changes relate to the conditions of daily life and the life of places, expressing an equally complex knowledge, and one accessible to people. This leads us to even think about the timeframes and methods of transformation of the city, and the character of some estranging processes (Piano, 2005). The project, instead, has a profound temporality and places are not reduced to a Euclidean geometry on which we can operate freely. The project is a complex process that develops over time, its methods including the direct actions and practices of the inhabitants, the processes of adaptation. It is a process that involves many dimensions and many rationalities, including those not exactly technical (but obviously no less important). Indeed, a project (understood here also in the sense of a “political process”; Crosta, 1998) should seek to mediate and facilitate the material, but also cultural and symbolic, appropriation on the part of the people. This, experience teaches us, usually leads to a higher quality of life and and stronger social values.

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