



Urbanistica n. 123

January-April 2004

Distribution by www.planum.net

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Defensive communities or laboratories for social innovation?

Giovan Francesco Lanzara

The research materials presented in the Milan workshop point to the existence of fragile forms of self-organised, collective action with variable goals, nevertheless always oriented towards the construction, recovery or safeguard of a collective asset or resource. The ongoing processes that can be observed are very ambiguous. Individual agents engage in transactions, become associates and start to operate. They constitute themselves as temporary identities or rather as 'hypotheses' of new identities, but the profiles of the identities and the forms of action are as yet unclear. Indeed, the first question concerns the identity of the agents: who are they and how can we 'call them'? As observers we certainly recognise intentions in the organised activity of the actors, but we cannot say with precision what they are and what they want. We can see a large number of highly localised agencies spread throughout the community. They are cultural, social and economic agencies. Some of them are antagonistic towards the institutions and to the city authorities. Some are even born in illegal forms. But others do in fact seek to and succeed in developing co-operative transactions with official institutions, from which they expect to receive a reliable supply of material but also symbolic resources. Others are simply 'a-institutional', unaffected by the institutional situation. Seen as a whole, this landscape is very varied: the new entities pose different questions, have different interests and above all

express different values. What strikes is the extremely strong motivation to acquire an identity as revealed by the statements of the protagonists. This suggests that the motivation behind action and commitment may arise from a need even though temporary to escape from a previous condition of rootlessness and emargination or in any case of substantial poverty. Within these enclosures the city is sort of reconstructed from the inside, with the pieces available from the surrounding city. Consequently what starts from a deficit of meaning and organisation, if not of suffering and emargination, can suggest examples for others to follow. What is innovative in these forms of action? The phenomenon is intrinsically ambivalent. On the one hand we see emergent microstructures that manage to survive locally and could constitute the germs of new forms of social organisation (Weick 1993). They could be the expression of a design potential, available but not exploited in individuals, that is activated by a push to social innovation. On the other hand the research done brings to attention only extremely circumscribed initiatives, very limited practices, intrinsically unstable identities that are still being formed, while the city in which they live remain in the background. The phenomena that we observe in this scenario could therefore be interpreted as symptoms of the falling apart of the city's social fabric, as a loss of urban form. The city breaks into small local communities, into micro-agencies that do not necessarily make a healthy whole. Agencies remain ephemeral and isolated, hardly able to communicate with one other. A patchwork

of pieces, one next to the other, is all that remains of the original fabric of the city. Problems arise in comparing local worlds, in communicating experiences and translating values. The picture of a patchwork-city where a-centric tendencies prevail is certainly interesting. However it also raises some questions. Channels of communication, local knowledge and idiosyncratic jargons take on critical importance in a loosely integrated assembly of local worlds that are not ordered by uniform and unifying principles (an archipelago?). Will micro worlds be able to understand one other? Can they recognise and accept each other? In the absence of criteria of relevance that order and co-ordinate all these micro-worlds, they and their values must all be considered as potentially different but in principle all equally acceptable, and therefore all intrinsically valid and worth within the urban melting pot. These micro worlds retain their own rules (at times true and genuine micro-constitutions) and odd languages and interactive rituals. Those who live in them gain a specific identity in that world and those simply 'visiting' them must learn the rules, exactly like Alice in Wonderland when she is projected into contexts with different rules and idiosyncrasies that leave her surprised and displaced. The effect is a sort of continuous cognitive *déplacement*, a sort of virtualisation of reality and of urban life (Lanzara 1993). It is not difficult to imagine that the institutions and organisations responsible for governing the cities, which are already experiencing a general 'governance' crisis, find it difficult to respond to the pressure of the new urban actors in their search for recognition, identity and

legitimacy. The mixed luck of social centres indicate that many management and communication problems arise not just from the unpredictability of the new social actors, but also from the institutions' cognitive inadequacy, which curbs their capability of making sense of the 'strange' new actors. The encounter between government and micro-agencies can be characterised by either cooperation or conflict, but it is always a delicate question. The opening of a communication channel is un-doubtedly necessary, but the urgency to normalize and control the new agencies, even when recognition and legitimation is granted, can turn into a suffocating embrace. Curiously enough, annihilation of these forms of action sometimes happens as a consequence of recognition and normalization. Whatever we might want to frame the phenomenon, we are in the presence of private, individualistic initiatives that do not conform to the traditional frame of public action. Yet they produce public goods, for example making a public park useable again after a long period of blight. The agencies observed fall half way between the private and the domain. It is difficult to tell, as things stand, whether they constitute forms of social learning, whether they have the potential to evolve and whether they are a prelude to more stable and permanent social organisations. It is also difficult to say whether they are producing new knowledge and whether this knowledge is being diffused in a broader urban context. Like all emerging phenomena, they conserve an enigmatic aura. However, since they make themselves visible, they invite investigation and

interpretation. In general terms we can say that these practices are responses to the growing individual and collective perception of social uncertainty. For many of the actors involved these agencies represent a place to stop and recognise themselves, a home in which to find some shelter and protect themselves, an activity that helps to produce meaning. All societies are faced with endemic uncertainty, but the responses to uncertainty may differ depending on the cognitive, moral and economic resources available to a society and on their social distribution. Social organisations are not always able to respond by taking the challenge of impending problems. They can only accept the challenge if their collective cognitive capabilities are large enough to meet the difficulty of the problems. When the gap between capabilities and complexity cannot reasonably be filled to deal with the problems, then the prevailing responses may be oriented towards formulating and learning rules of conduct which selectively exclude the chances of certain events occurring. By limiting the range of possible behaviours some reliability is assured (Heiner 1983). The response is therefore one of closure self-exclusion from experiences that are too risky to be allowed. Defensive communities emerge as a shelter or a refuge against the brutality of the outside world. However, it does not necessarily be always like that: civilising and entrepreneurial communities that are able to 'inseminate' the outside world with their values and practices also exist. There are also laboratory-like communities that experiment and carry on new practices and forms of association which it would be impossible to

develop in environments that are too uncertain and risky.

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