

Regenerating community places through collective action: the role of the University in community planning

Elisa Caruso*

Abstract

Recent experiments in collective management of a territory, generated by innovative processes of social learning are the precondition for building an organised community and the formulation of alternative models of territorial development. The focus of this article is the empowerment process of a group of citizens engaged in promoting a local project with the University. The aim is to propose a reflection on the role of the actors involved and of the University as an engaged university and on the capacity of an organised community to create strong and weak connections inside planning processes.

Keywords

Community; University engagement; Social learning; Bottom up

*University of Florence - Department of Architecture DIDA, Italy

Introduction: a new time for social involvement

In 1980, Giancarlo De Carlo wrote that the term ‘participation’ had different meanings and suspicious intentions. A few years later, Giancarlo Paba defined participation as an indefinite term but with a basic principle: ‘the simple and elementary conviction that the collective products of human settlement in space (cities, villages, districts, neighbourhoods, landscapes, territories and environments) are built (or should be built) with the mobilisation of individual and collective energies, by putting in the pipeline the creativeness and innovation of the inhabitants and communities in all possible forms (Paba 1998b:33).

The term ‘participation’, in its 20 years of use in the field of planning, had a wide range of definitions. A rich vocabulary was in fact created describing all individual approaches and numerous application tools have been tested. The proposals and experiments of deliberative democracy used a range of different practices and generated numerous types of citizen engagement such as participatory budgeting, town meetings, Open Space Technology, action planning and scenario workshops.

The season of democratic participation in Italy showed a strong public and social commitment and an important civic maturation (Cellamare 2019): however, it has increasingly become a form of mediation between representative and direct democracy.

The current geography of participation shows an articulated scenario: on the one hand, we are witnessing an institutionalisation of top-down processes, which have often become a purely-theoretical exercise to complete urban planning (Paba, Pecoriello, Perrone and Rispoli 2009; Morisi and Perrone 2013); on the other hand, a significant

number of citizen communities are experiencing new forms of grass-roots democracy.

This paper intends to propose a reflection on those active citizenship practices that are encouraging a radical political and cultural change (Magnaghi 2015) and the construction of new forms of community that can represent an innovative territorial government model. Through the proposed case study, this contribution tries to shed light on the features of the existing innovative transformation practices which are separately cooperating to achieve a long-term renewal of democracy (Ginsborg 2006).

What are the features that define these innovative practices? How can these practices influence other groups of active citizens and create an organised movement of democratic transformation?

To answer these questions, this paper aims to highlight the innovative features that characterise such practices. Each one of them, in fact, takes a step back from the most consolidated participation patterns and seems to reflect certain features of others. These practices can be summarised in three attitudes: the ability to create a community, the growth of knowledge and the production of relations.

The investigation focuses on two issues: the role of the actors involved in the collective action and their ability to produce increasingly positive developments (Della Porta and Diani 1998) and the role of the University as part of the 'ingaggio territoriale' [territorial engagement] (Saija 2016), reflecting on the development opportunities of the partnership between university and community within the Italian processes of collaborative research.

The proposed argument moves along two parallel multi-issue paths: the second section deals with the theme of community as a resource and discusses the issue of a

community's collective learning in a process of empowerment; the third section deals with the role of the University in promoting collective learning and engaging the community. The University is not an agent providing learning activities to communities in its consolidated functions (teaching and research). This paper refers to the so-called "third mission".

From this point of view, the University is not only concerned with teaching, but can learn and engage to deliver knowledge to the whole community. Besides, the community is engaged in collective learning and shared knowledge.

The fourth section, considering the outcomes of the previous sections, discusses the experience of re-appropriation of a place promoted by four 'returning' families (De Matteis 2017). This experience refers to the community project of Sant'Angelo Vico l'Abate which was co-built in partnership with the Department of Architecture² of the University of Florence, the Istituto Diocesano per il Sostentamento del Clero (IDSC), as owner and partner, and the Parish of Gesù Buon Pastore in Casellina.

The final section tries to create a tension between these two topics by defining a proximity direction in which the leading actors of a community-construction process, in partnership with the University, can experiment innovative construction practices for new democratic models.

The community as a resource

The top-down practices, which have been tested to date, are included in localised solutions, with poor propulsive and

² The research team is composed of the Regional Design Lab (ReDLab) and DarMed Lab

generative force. Some examples of these practices include the participatory processes conceived to support planning decisions that fail to generate ongoing processes and long-term groups of active citizens once the planning work is completed. The groups of active citizens which operate within the territory, on the contrary, are aggregated and built from the grassroots in search of a 'desire for community' (Bauman 2003).

These considerations require a necessary rereading of several over-used and generalised concepts like the concept of "community" which risks losing the fullness of its meaning. The importance of the concept of community (Olivetti 1956; Dewey 1971; Friedman 1979), which has overshadowed the concept of a society with individual rights and characterised the theory and practice of representative and deliberative democracy, triggers the reflection proposed in this paper.

Adriano Olivetti theorised a 'tangible community' which aims at building a community model which is structured as a network of democratic cells (Olivetti 1956) and based on the use and sharing of knowledge as a common good (Hess and Ostrom 2009). In the proposal of the tangible community we can find strong evocative features, such as the desire to reclaim citizenship and sovereignty from the bottom up. However, we are still stuck with the concept of community (Heskin 1991) related to the idea of proximity without considering the simultaneity dimension (Bonomi, Revelli and Magnaghi 2015) in which we live nowadays.

One point worth focusing on is the role that the community may have in renewing a conscious civil society that is capable of democratising democracy and starting a new path, in line with the 'third way' (Giddens 1998), based on principles of equality, inclusion and cooperation between government and civil society.

It is essential, therefore, to rethink the concept of community, understood herein as an aggregation of individuals who identify with the same values and are involved in a process that affects land government.

Starting from this interpretation, the study focuses on the role that each individual plays within the community and on how these individuals are capable of starting a process of mutual learning which leads the community to evolve.

Every individual who takes part in an empowerment process of a group of actors plays a pivotal role in the formation of 'local knowledge' (Paba 2003:31) and in the creation of a collective feeling closely related to the place. Each individual shares knowledge, values and ideas with the other members of the group, thus generating knowledge and collective memory. The added value is due to the interactions and relationships created between individuals and between groups that enrich individual learning.

The process hinges on the concept of collective learning and on the sharing of the generated knowledge with the broader community (Dewey 1938). The political project of Dewey, which aims to harmonise society through a community vision, introduces a theory where the individual shares values and knowledge by actively participating in the community life and taking part in more than one group, and thus strengthens the integrated personality of each individual (Dewey 1971).

The similar theory about the individual, who acquires an active role in mutual learning experiences, is proposed in Friedman's model of structured organisation of a society 'at the transition to action, so that social learning becomes possible. In social learning the results of action are examined in the light of expectation or altogether new discoveries' (Friedman 1979:69).

In collective action, the actor is a group that is held together by ties of dialogue among its members, but we come now to the crucial question of the size of the Good Society. 'Knowledge, action, learning: they are incarnated in the Good Society, each of whose members, forming part of the whole, also contains the whole and yet is separable and individual' (Friedman 1979:70).

The innovation proposed by Friedman's thinking, which lies in the integration of the collective learning approach with planning, identifies the hierarchical structure and size as the collective knowledge dissemination model. Such knowledge is generated by a collective process divided into several levels (Argyris and Shon 1978): on the first, individual knowledge is shared at the group level, and, on the second, the knowledge of the group is shared among multiple groups which, interacting together, create, define and institutionalise new collective knowledge and therefore a common heritage. The formation of a community awareness is a long process in which the community, therefore, becomes part of the action.

Recent experiments in collective management of the territory, generated by innovative processes of social learning, are the precondition for building an organised community (Alinsky 1917; Friedman 1979) and the formulation of alternative models of territorial development. The reading of the concept of community as a form of social dynamism, as proposed in this paper, may be the interpretive key to the construction of a conscious model of organised community which operates within the territory and creates a generative democracy (Minervini 2016).

The role of University in territorial engagement

A theme that is rarely present in Italian journals on planning and architecture is that of the university's third mission (Martinelli and Savino 2012; Cognetti 2013; Saija 2016) related to the British and American debate on university engagement (Votruba 1992; Boyer 1996).

In recent decades, the Third Stream activities in English-speaking countries and the Third Mission activities in countries on the European continent, have become part of university strategies, been the subject of evaluation and have attracted the attention of several research groups supported by the European Commission.

In Italy, the attention to the issue has grown thanks to the evaluation and classification work carried out by ANVUR and the monitoring of the technological transfer process inside Italian universities and in public research institutions conducted by NETVAL, i.e. the research enhancement network.

In the guidelines on compiling the annual single report on the Third Mission (TM) and the social impact of the university, 'public engagement' is inserted among the evaluation criteria in the ANVUR 2018 version³, defined as 'the set of activities institutionally organised by the university or by its non-profit structures which have an educational, cultural and development value for society and that are aimed at a non-academic audience'. The 2018 report emphasises even more the institutional aspect that must

³ANVUR - Valutazione Terza Missione /Impatto sociale Università [Third Mission Evaluation/University Social Impact] – Guidelines SUA – TM/IS - 2018 version, see <https://www.anvur.it/rapporto-biennale/rapporto-biennale-2018/> last accessed June 2020

characterise initiatives and adds an explicit reference to the non-academic target, even though the wording ‘other institutional initiatives: policy-making, children university, participatory democracy, and knowledge co-production initiatives’ remains unchanged in the evaluation of activities. The TM concerns a new relationship between universities (Boyer 1990). However, the focus of this paper is the field of ‘public engagement’ that takes on new social responsibilities and produces knowledge and learning environments (Cognetti 2013) thanks to the contribution from students and lecturers.

The image provided by the research (Ramella, Perulli, Rostan and Semenza 2018) presented on “La terza missione degli accademici italiani [The third mission of Italian academics]”, is different from the normally accredited one; it is not in fact about closed universities but about lecturers and researchers who have an active relationship with their territories. The activities of *Public Engagement* by Italian academics are similar to those recorded in the UK (Ramella, Perulli, Rostan and Semenza 2018).

The territory can be a key resource for the university in terms of cultural *milieu* that is favourable to innovation, but also as an ‘action factor’ (Martinelli and Savino 2012), which is why Italian universities should move towards the dimension of territorial engagement (Saija 2016). A dimension much closer to the ‘University militant’ (Geddes 1917, Paba 2010) and to the territorialised university vision as a factor for the development of local territorial systems and producer of relations between ‘codified scientific knowledge and common contextual knowledge’ (Magnaghi 2006:17).

In the recent experiments on ‘engaged’ activities and in their social role, the TM appears to be more and more integrated with the other two missions in pursuing institutional purposes. We are witnessing a process of “combination” of

the three missions and a shift in focus from the “third” mission to the societal impact that any academic activity may have (Ramella, Perulli, Rostan and Semenza 2018:205).

As demonstrated by the British and American debate and by the timid discussions in Italy, universities play a role of engagement and network activation, and in addition are also an integral part of a process of collective learning and mutual exchange of knowledge and resources. Reciprocity means transforming the process in an exchange where university members and local collaborators share knowledge with each other in an open dialogue that includes mutual respect.

It is a change of approach to learning and knowledge. This shift in approach offers university-trained members (students, scholars) the opportunity to deepen understanding of the world by allowing their taken-for-granted assumptions, related to their world, to be challenged by the experience of others (Reardon 2006).

University can and must become an instrument of growth, so that the community can be influenced by the University and vice versa, an instrument strongly integrated with the territory that generates processes of (co-) production of knowledge and tangible impacts on society.

Sant’Angelo Vico l’Abate, a community project

The Italian context is full of bottom-up practices that can be substantially related to three major areas of action: forms of self-organisation, innovative production institutes that are connected to the self-enhancement of common heritage assets and bottom up planning tools.

These practices of re-appropriation of places using self-organisation forms, usually described by a rich literature related to the city (Paba 1998a; Cellamare 2019), also find

significant interest in low-density areas and inland areas, where they are used for the creation of social and economic alternatives and for network weaving. In Tuscany, to name one among many, the “Mondeggi Bene Comune” [The Mondeggi farm. A common good] (Comitato Mondeggi Bene Commune 2014). The Mondeggi farm fought in a self-organisation format for the common good farmand chose collective agriculture to save the farm from being abandoned.

The paper summarises the path of empowerment of a group of individuals in the countryside around the Metropolitan City of Florence who jointly endured issues regarding public water supply and formed a consortium (Consorzio Idrico Sant'Angelo), deciding to create a new connection with the public water supply.

Following the experience of the self-construction of the aqueduct, the group began to ‘inter-act’ (Saija 2016:114), recognising their own heritage value in a historic settlement. By claiming the public’s right of use of the Church, the group decided to take care of the countryside and the places of agricultural, social and religious life that once revolved around the series of buildings around the church called “Chiesa di San Michele Arcangelo”.

Four families of young entrepreneurs decided to ‘go back to the land’ (Dematteis and Magnaghi 2018) and take care of it by investing in innovative forms of agriculture and proposing the project “Sant’Angelo ritorno alle origini” [Sant’Angelo, a return to the origins].

The University’s research group became part of the process when the group of farmers presented the project for the redevelopment of the complex to its owners, proposing the creation of a corporate network for managing the entire complex.

Although relations always remained calm, a dichotomy started between the two parties in question; the proponents believed that the project was of great interest and attraction for new networks while the owners thought the project was not very practical nor viable because of the lack of available resources and the significant number of parties that were directly and indirectly involved.

The strong sense of belonging to the place, determined by the historical roots of the families involved, on the one hand represents the strength of the group's aggregation and on the other, represents a disadvantage for the process in action. The sense of belonging to a community and the sense of redemption of the life places that are now lost, can determine actions that are hardly inclined towards dialogue. When the project was presented, in fact, there was no constructive dialogue with the owners, instead they had a defensive attitude with respect to the common good.

However, the university researchers, through the involvement of students and the use of collaborative practices, managed to establish a relationship or mutual trust between the parties and to activate a dialogue between the actors involved.

Through dialogue on a multidisciplinary level which involved the members of the associations, the community of Sant'Angelo, the researchers, lecturers and students of the University, public administrators, the IDSC and the priest of the neighbouring parish, an active and collective process of mutual learning was activated, in which all the players involved shared the common goals of regenerating their community and of taking care of and enhancing the value of the property.

This path starts with a seminar. The program of seminar has been articulated in multiple formative activities: lessons, visits, design workshop and final presentation of the projects

with different stakeholder: property, socio-economic agents, local community, politicians and technicians of the Municipality of San Casciano Val di Pesa.

The first visit was attended by the Mayor who presented the territory, the owners who presented the mission of the project and the members of the community who presented their project "Sant'Angelo ritorno alle origini" and expressed their needs in a sort of lesson about the place and its history. The first brainstorming activity, which involved students and inhabitants in identifying a keyword for Sant'Angelo, clearly shows the strong belonging the places and the strong sense perceived of community. During the workshops the students were involved in activity of learning-by-doing process of post-it clustering, reflection on the concept of community and place.

The parties felt part of the process and co-designed, together with students and researchers, the best solutions to recover the complex and give life to their projects.

In addition, the activity was characterised by recreational and convivial moments in order to create solid relationships among all actors.

The "on-field" activity of the University was carried out on two parallel levels: the first was in action with the actors of the process, the second one with the students of DIDA⁴

⁴ The students from the Department of Architecture involved in the thematic seminar called "*Rigenerazione e ritorno alle origini. Un progetto di comunità per Sant'Angelo Vico l'Abate*" [*Regeneration and return to origins. A community project for Sant'Angelo Vico l'Abate*]. The seminar programme was divided into multiple training activities: lessons, inspections, project workshops and final presentation of the projects with the various stakeholders (owners, social and economic parties, local community, Administrators and technicians from the Municipality of San Casciano in Val di Pesa).

through the experimentation of innovative collective planning practices and new didactic approaches such as service-learning (Reardon 1998) (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – The brainstorming activity with students and inhabitants

The research team reasoned on the sense of regeneration which was therefore understood as a re-construction, in the broadest sense, and on the belonging to a place, a history and a community. Belonging to a place and a community is not the effort of a civil “being together”, or a random group of people. It means creating a ‘caring community’ (Bonomi, Revelli and Magnaghi 2015), starting from the recognition of a common destiny and from the place that generates memory and rediscovers the conscience of place (Becattini and Magnaghi 2015).

The complex of Sant'Angelo Vico l'Abate became a place of proximity and experimentation: a laboratory of ideas of community, of sharing space and knowledge in which each one among the inhabitants, priests, administrators, students, researchers and lecturers shared their experiences and co-produced innovative ideas (Figure 2).



Figure 2 - Sant'Angelo Vico l'Abate. A laboratory of ideas of community

The promotional activities and the organised workshops revealed a strong sense of belonging with respect to the places, the community formed by a group of families with a choral vision of rebirth.

The construction process of the community of Sant'Angelo started with the constitution of the water consortium and evolved with the establishment of a cultural association⁵ which marked the structured beginning of an organised community (Rathke 2011) with a strong leadership and a capacity for voicing its opinions.

The organised community has been able to build strong and weak relations (Granovetter 1973), which have increased local cohesion and created a climate of collaboration among the actors. The strong relational ties have facilitated trust, motivation and commitment of the members, while the weak ones have expanded learning, skills and access to information.

A strong leadership was established, represented by the oldest person in the group, the one who holds the knowledge and historical memory of the places and the real-life stories and who successfully shared his values with the others.

Mr. Serafino, the community leader, engaged all the actors in the process in an emotional dialogue in which the narrative

⁵ The Sant'Angelo APS Association is made up of small entrepreneurs from neighbouring farms, who have implemented short chain production and pay attention to environmental issues. In this sense, a significant role is played by the SlowFlowers Italy association, a branch of the international network with the same name, which supports the community and is responsible for producing indigenous flowers and floral arrangements in a sustainable way. In fact, the Association has undertaken training activities, using agriculture as a means of promoting training, educational, therapeutic, rehabilitative and socio-occupational inclusion actions.

(Ganz 2011) 'is not talking "about" values; rather, the narrative actually embodies and communicates those values. It is through the shared experience of our values that we can engage with others'.

Conclusion: what are the perspectives for the future?

The aim of the paper is to identify reading paths onto which we can build a multidisciplinary debate geared to proposing a new proximity direction where innovative practices, which are co-operating separately within the territory, can find common work grounds.

The three attitudes that have been identified as innovative characters represent a first attempt to identify three preparatory fields for critical reflection.

It is not sufficient to activate bottom up practices or to feel part of a community because one may share the same living spaces, it is rather about creating a fibrous structure of organised community groups capable of powering innovative practices and their ability for generation. Organising a community takes time, effort and resources on the part of all actors, including the leader, and energy to fuel the process in order to create a conscious civic base and give the right role of power to the community.

The case of Sant'Angelo Vico L'Abate therefore includes all three attitudes highlighted in the paper: the ability to create an organized community, the growth of knowledge and the generation of relationships.

In the described experience, the University played a role of engagement and network activator, but was also an integral part of a process of collective learning and mutual exchange of resources.

Small places like Sant'Angelo Vico l'Abate are often perceived as pulverised centres at the edge of the metropolitan city which are related to non-urban areas, and are characterised by depopulation, lack of access to major urban polarities and discontinuous and poor presence of basic services. Acting in these communities means understanding, above all, the significance of the settlement that characterises such areas and their issues, not only in relation to the metropolitan sphere (accessibility, services and localisation of jobs) but also in relation to the construction of new “caring” communities.

The partnership with the University allowed us to draw a road map on how ideas could be turned into tangible results in a unanimous vision at the metropolitan scale. Having successfully affected the decision-making tools of the metropolitan government is definitely one of the tangible results of the collaborative approach and the partnership with the University, which was rooted at an institutional level thanks to the effective mission of territorial engagement. The community project was taken as a pilot case and included in the metropolitan strategic lines⁶ for the definition of an action model for the construction of policies aimed at developing new economies and new lifestyles related to the management and collective care of local heritage, by activating innovative forms of social action and wealth production.

⁶ The project was included in the metropolitan strategic lines in the drafting of the Metropolitan Strategic Plan (PSM) of the Metropolitan City of Florence, among the forecasts and actions aimed at encouraging new forms of living for internal areas.

The experiences of engaged universities have two responsibilities: an internal one and an external one. The first is towards the lecturers, who experiment new forms of knowledge production; the second is towards society, which experiences new forms of usability (Cognetti 2013).

As regards the students, two main topics can be addressed: the first one is related to the teaching sphere and the second one to the civic sphere.

Teaching activities in the field can and should be strengthened. The Department of Architecture, for example, has thematic seminars which offer students the opportunity to work practically and in the research field, and also involves students in a learning-by-doing process by stimulating learning in action through experience. In addition, the University can be the conveyor of themes about democracy and issues regarding individual and collective sense of citizenship.

By introducing this reflection on the third mission we hope that the theme of the Territorialized University may have greater importance in the university-community partnership debate, becoming part of the strategies of Italian universities and being seen as a growth opportunity in the Italian collaborative research paths.

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