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Document Version
Final published version

Citation (APA)
Muñoz Aparici, M., & Domingo-Calabuig, D. (2023). Local variables identification in participatory urbanism: recent case studies in Valencia. In F. Saverio Fera (Ed.), *La maieutica della città: Contributi sul progetto urbano e architettonico* (pp. 141-146). AION Edizioni.

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"Materiali di architettura"
collana diretta da
Massimo Fagioli

comitato scientifico
Richard A. Etlin, Marco Mannino, Bruno Messina, Carlo Moccia, Uwe Schroeder, Angelo Torricelli

Volume realizzato con i fondi assegnati nell'ambito dell'iniziativa MIUR Dipartimenti di Eccellenza 2018 - 2022
al Dipartimento di Architettura dell'Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna Campus di Cesena

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ISBN 979-12-80723-13-0

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Local variables identification in participatory urbanism: recent case studies in Valencia

Maieutic is the Socratic method by which new knowledge is created by formulating a series of questions followed by thoughtful responses. It is a kind of birthing through a process. First, questioning will lead to the awareness of ignorance. Secondly – and consequently – the desire to repair this lack of knowledge will be awakened and; therefore, the individual is better braced for learning.

If we transfer this way of doing to urban design and planning, and we understand the polis as the place where citizens come together, we can imagine the maieutic of the city as a great debate, in which each of the inhabitants would raise questions leading to collective reflections: How can the city be safer? How can we live in a healthier environment? How can we coexist all? Following the analogy with the Socratic method, the answers would be diverse and make the cities' deficiencies evident. Subsequently, and above all, the tools should be mediated to reach a proposed solution of consensus.

Those mentioned above are, nonetheless, the fundamental traces of participatory urbanism: A way of making a city now thoroughly studied and profusely put into practice, with its origin in European urbanism in the second half of the 20th century. Thus, participatory urbanism, placemaking or tactical urbanism can be considered the contemporary materialisation of a maieutic process that allows new knowledge to emerge collectively.

As in the Socratic method, the process is critical in participatory urbanism since the actual social construction of knowledge resides in it. The previous questions by a hypothetical citizen could be asked in entirely separate locations; they will be answered in a certain way, incorporating local, cultural, and social traits to determine the result.

Thus, this text aims to highlight the local variables that have recently shaped three case studies in Valencia. It is about identifying the factors that link the proposal to its context, in whose results the specific and global challenges are combined.

The contemporary city and urban processes

The contemporary city cannot be described without alluding to the modern urban model. It had to be reconsidered in the second half of the 20th century for various reasons, but among others, the failure of radical functionalism, the lack of variables typical of the cultural and technological identities, the recovery of tradition and memory, and consequently the revision of its formal language[1]. The contemporary city has become complex in opposition to the orthodoxy of previous decades, thus incorporating compactness and diversity. The urban planners of the 1920s and 1930s who attended the CIAM listened to a functionalist discourse, while the ones who, three decades later, listened to the members of Team 10 started observing and designing the city incorporating social and cultural traits that define the specificity of urban space.

Another variable adding complexity to the contemporary city in late modernity is reflexivity[2]. Beyond a mere ludic citizen engagement, knowledge, action, and responsibility characterise reflexive modernisation, making city maieutic a necessary tool in constructing urban environments. The active role of citizens in the search and reshaping of modern definitions demanded the implementation of social and cultural variables in urban design. To do so, design processes used participatory tools, placemaking, or tactical urbanism to reflect on space collectively. The early definitions of participation in the late 60s already insisted on a collective action dimension[3]. Grading participation as non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power, they push city maieutic towards active maieutic to a point where words turn into actions. Participation should then aim to build lasting vigorous collective action instead of being used as an occasional measuring of



Figure 2 – El Botànic es mou: "Move around" workshop, 2016
Source: https://www.facebook.com/elbotanicesmou/



Figure 3 – Prototyping at the Plaza de La Ermita during Sembra Orriols, 2015
Source: https://carpe.studio/portfolio_page/sembra-orriols/

citizens' opinions. In the Spanish context, the implementation of social and cultural variables in urban space design started with the democratic transition in the early 1980s. Promoted by the appearance of citizen movements committed to improving the quality of urban space, the model of city design timidly began to incorporate dialogue with citizens. Through opinion columns in the newspapers, project exhibitions, demonstrations or posters, the collective debate began to take shape and inform the political and spatial decisions of the city[4].

Recent actions on the Spanish Mediterranean coast

The city of Valencia is not a unique case regarding the changes that have taken place in the management of public resources. Many other European cities have incorporated participatory processes into their urban design policies[5]. However, the leading role of the citizen was possible thanks to a new form of governance that came with a political change in the Valencia City Council in 2015 and produced a certain effervescence in the participatory dimension.

Some authors have labelled this boom in the direct participation of citizens in the creation and management of public space in Valencia as "participatory reactivation" and conclude that it is a complex, heterogeneous phenomenon whose results play a fundamental role as a catalyst for public administration[6].

a. El botànic es mou.
Diversity and Consensus around a Public Square

In October 2016, the group of urban planners and landscape architects "La paisatgeria" took charge of coordinating a work in which the residents of the Botànic neighbourhood of Valencia, the local administration, and the coordinating technicians participated[7]. The objective was to develop a participative public space and mobility strategy in an area that was still nestled in a historical and privileged urban environment that had a problem with a possibility for improvement.

Given the scarce participatory culture then present in the city of Valencia, the process paid extra attention to the methodologies used: activities and tools that would pique the interest of a wide variety of residents, alternating digital and face-to face media. The children and young people had specific activities as well as the older population.

The work contained five phases: definition of the map of actors, protest launching party (Figure 1), participatory self-diagnosis, lines of action preparation, and drafting of final urban strategies document.

The actions undertaken included four open workshops (Recognise the Botànic: tour with a critical view; Move around the Botànic: work on the movement habits of neighbours (Figure 2); Imagine the Botànic: debates, proposals, consensus; Re-



Figure 4 – Design by E. Quintana based on the participative process, 2018
Source: https://elisabet.quintanasegui.com/projectes/jardi-de-ermita-de-sant-jeroni/



Figure 5 – Walk approaching the Tinglado from the surrounding areas, 2020
Source: https://www.facebook.com/La-Remor-1124197903122 85/

make the Botànic: results and presentation of lines of action), three working group meetings, an information office open for four months in the market and the neighbourhood library, surveys, work sessions in schools and personalised interviews with interest groups.

The participatory process highlighted a strong civic will to change the mobility and public space use model (more vegetation, better cleanliness, more meeting spaces). Above all, it was valuable to find a consensus regarding the environment of the municipal market (until now used as a vehicle parking esplanade). In addition, thanks to the experience, new initiatives were born, such as re-purposing vacant lots as urban gardens. In addition, it showed that the citizens' desires did not necessarily demand heavily invested actions.

b. Sembra Orriols.
Collaborative design and shared authorship

The financial crisis of 2008 in Spain forced the appearance of new urban design models and built-environment practice methods. After the urban construction fervour that extinguished the urban dialogue, young architects adopted new ways of city making, fed by citizen intelligence and collective knowledge[8].

In the period 2015 to 2019, Carpe Studio developed a three-phase project in the neighbourhood of Orriols (Valencia): Activa, Sembra and Crea (Activate, Seed, and Create). In 2015, during the Sembra Orriols phase, the "Plaza de la Ermita" case presented a significant example of how civic conversations can culminate in spatial implementation. In a 2015 "bottom-up" project initiated by local agents, the young Carpe Estudio collected citizens' visions for the underused space around a historical chapel during multiple conferences and participatory events. In these conversations, they made sure that the maieutic also incorporated the social and political agents of the neighbourhood to increase its impact (Figure 3).

In addition to common tools used in previous decades to build public debate (professional forums, general discussions, press articles), they developed others such as co-design workshops supported by architectural prototyping, installations in public spaces or festive cultural activities. Bringing citizens closer to the ways of doing reserved for experts helped to bridge the tacit gap and to incorporate the views of a broader population sample. Finally, due to the general acceptance of the collective proposal, the city council decided to incorporate it into a new public space construction in the demanded location (Figure 4).



Figure 6 – Collage image of the Tinglado and pieces of Joaquin Sorolla's paintings, 2019
Source: https://www.facebook.com/La-Remor-112419790312285/

c. Shed 2 of la Marina de València.
Re-inventing port infrastructure

The transformation of maritime fronts is currently one of the most relevant issues in port cities. Recent changes in the functioning of port activity have facilitated the contact of public space with water, leading to vast urban redevelopments in port cities.

In Valencia, after the completion in 2007 of the America's Cup, the port's marina surroundings fell into disuse; the sheds built for the sporting event were abandoned and access to public space became limited. Following a change in political perspective in 2015, a new management entity in the marina decided to open the waterfront space to citizens through spatial improvements.

The culmination of this process was the recovery and improvement of the port's historic sheds. These open structures, traditionally used as temporary warehouses, have been used spontaneously in recent decades as shaded spaces for diverse civic activities. However, its connection with the urban fabric is weak, given the lack of design in the adjoining public spaces.

In 2019, the "Ideas competition for the design and coordination of the placemaking process for the humanisation of the environment of Tinglado no 2, in la Marina de València" was a declaration of intent on understanding urban renewal. The contest called for a multidisciplinary team that would incorporate the dialogue between technical and social professions to build a collective narrative with citizens, culminating in an execution project to improve the square.

Although the project is unfinished, the co-design phase carried out by Grupo Aranea and El Fabricante de Espheras produced an exciting perspective on how to converse between the historical past of a place and its urban future (Figure 5). Due to the dynamic nature of the enclave, citizen conversations were performed through spatial drifts from the nearby neighbourhoods. Instead of focusing only on the object (building), the project focuses on the human experience when spatially and narratively approaching the building. The stories collected during the oral and graphic conversation sessions included looking back – the seafronts of Joaquín Sorolla, elderly stories, waterfront historical pictures – with children's drawing workshops or modern media interviews by teenagers (Figure 6). Combining words and images in maieutic processes shows a not-so-evident methodology to collectively make the city draw on citizens' reflections and natural abilities.

Conclusions

The previous examples of urban space design incorporating citizen participation show the perspective present on the Spanish Mediterranean coast. It is a perspective that tries to improve public space from the collective construction of meaning and stories, and that uses co-designed tools anchored in public life conversations guided by technicians who take a role that is close to activism.

The cases in this article highlight approaches to common Mediterranean urban questions on the urban and regional city scales. In El botanic, public squares and markets become the ground on which consensus within a diverse context is reached. Citizens of the same neighbourhood discuss and reach conclusions to a shared concern. The case of Orriols also works on the neighbourhood scale and incorporates the notion of "dissolved" authorship: several architectural practices coordinated the participative process; citizens conformed to the program requirements, and a landscape designer collected the previous work and realised their collective aspirations into a square. The case of the Tinglado in la Marina represents a collectively reinvented infrastructure affecting the regional scale. It combines maieutic through citizen interaction with scale, movement and representation, showing how participation can also support great urban challenges.

These cases show similarities with other contexts in southern Europe that have had similar challenges: democratic transitions, a significant tourism increase, financial crises, or transformation of maritime fronts. Sharing and comparing the diverse ways of deploying maieutic in the Mediterranean city can strengthen the construction of a collective urban space narrative in southern Europe within the European perspective.

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Abstract

La popolarità dell'urbanistica partecipativa negli ultimi decenni è aumentata notevolmente nell'Europa meridionale. Somiglianze geografiche, politiche e finanziarie hanno portato allo sviluppo di una variabile locale che nasce dalla maieutica nello spazio pubblico. È logico pensare che i modi di abitare lo spazio determinino i processi di costruzione collettiva. Accanto a questo, c'è un modo particolare di immaginare lo spazio, discuterlo e concordarlo. In Spagna, i processi partecipativi sono stati inseriti nell'agenda urbana con un certo ritardo rispetto ai paesi dell'Europa centrale e settentrionale. In effetti, fino a buona parte degli anni '80, la pianificazione urbana partecipata dai cittadini era di carattere rivendicativo. In questo articolo vengono presentati tre recenti esempi di progettazione urbana a Valencia attraverso la riflessione collettiva. Il caso del quartiere El Botànic è una delle prime esperienze con una scala di quartiere promossa dall'amministrazione locale. Ha messo in evidenza la capacità di consenso emersa da una popolazione diversificata. Il caso di "Plaza de la Ermita" nel quartiere di Orriols illustra le strategie che sono nate in reazione alla crisi finanziaria del 2008. Infine, il concorso di idee per il placemaking di Tinglado nº 2 della Marina de València presenta riflessione istituzionale sulla trasformazione dei fronti marittimi. Il confronto di questi tre casi permette di tracciare una storia su come l'urbanistica partecipativa ha risposto alle caratteristiche socio-culturali del contesto dell'Europa meridionale. Dimostrano come l'adattamento dei metodi e delle azioni ai fini e ai risultati renda la cultura locale compatibile con le metodologie partecipative.

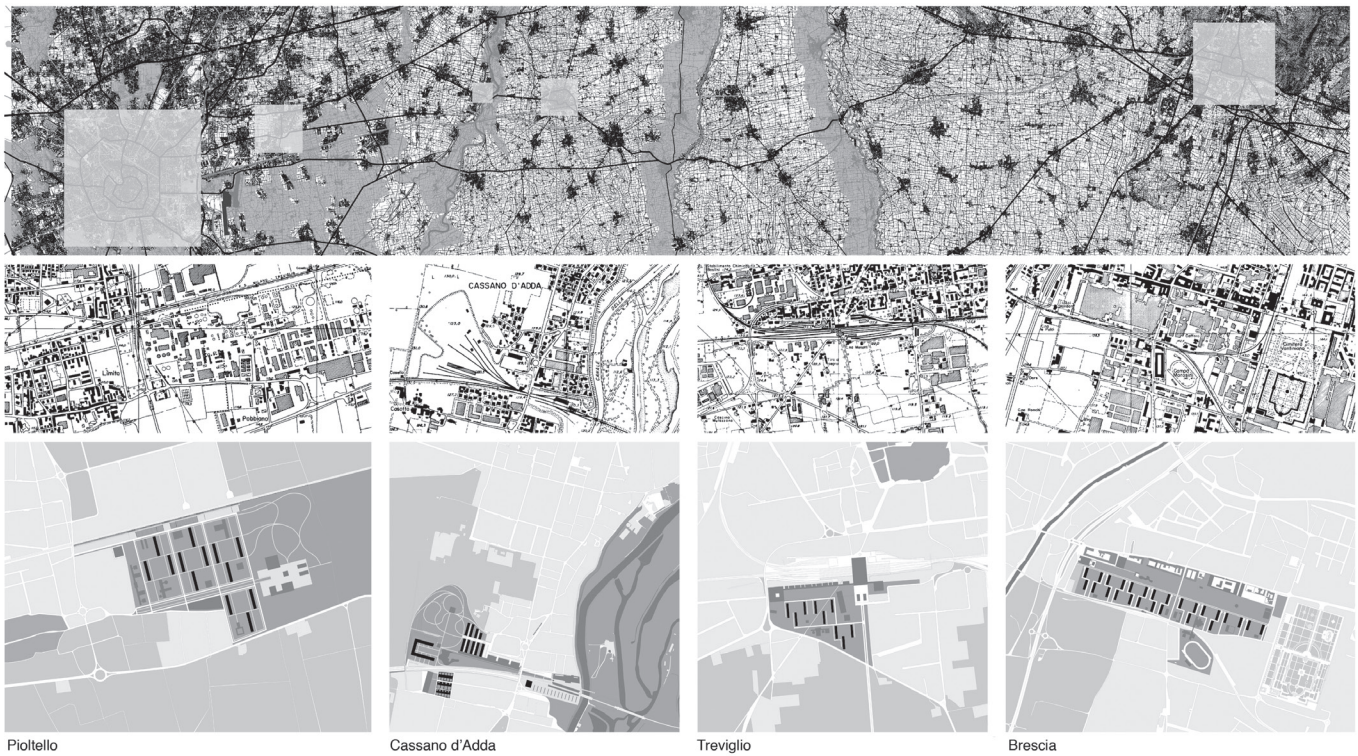


Figura 1 – La città nel verde: progetti per la città-regione lombarda da Milano a Brescia

Le tesi di laurea di seguito sinteticamente illustrate affrontano il tema della ridestinazione e della riconfigurazione di alcune grandi aree dismesse collocate lungo la storica linea ferroviaria Milano-Brescia, parallela alle consolidate direttrici stradali che conducono verso est.
La recente alta velocità Milano-Brescia e, soprattutto, la linea ferroviaria regionale cadenzata fra Milano e Treviglio avvicinano le due città capoluogo e i poli di secondo ordine situati lungo il percorso, dove si attestano le stazioni di Pioltello, di Cassano d'Adda e di Treviglio.
In questi centri si trovano ampie aree libere, la cui conversione consentirebbe di rafforzare il loro ruolo e la loro identità per la costruzione di una città policentrica che comprenda un territorio esteso ma ben collegato, costituito dall'alternarsi di centri consolidati, di elementi naturali e di una campagna ancora ricca e produttiva.
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