

Training Young Planners as Experts in Participatory Processes: Thoughts and Experiences from Palermo, Italy

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Abstract: The following reflections are based on an innovative planning education model inspired by the cooperation of the Department of Architecture with public and private stakeholders. The model is based on two topics that are widely debated in urban studies, but apparently unconnected: the dissemination of participatory practices and cooperation between public and private actors, and the scientific and professional training to provide for new generations of urban planners. We argue that preparing students engaged in urban studies to the management of participatory practices is an inescapable need in today's Italian and international context. To address the issue of public-private cooperation in Italy, as a new approach to contemporary governance, we must consider that participation is increasingly becoming a subject of discussion. In the educational path we propose, qualitative techniques have been used mainly, but not exclusively. Thanks to the comparison of the points of view of the social actors involved in these processes, planning students have acquired professional skills that are producing significant professionalizing effects, including the birth of some associations of young graduates engaged in cooperation processes with the municipal administration. We therefore believe the experience of Palermo can be significant beyond the unique local context.

Keywords: participation; teaching methods; education; governance

A combination of participation, research and education

The relationship between participation and research has been extensively investigated in recent decades, up to the theoretical elaboration of the Participatory Action Research (PAR): several scholars (see for example Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007 for the English-speaking context; in Italy see Sclavi, 2007; Cellamare, 2012; Morisi and Perrone, 2013) have highlighted how the forms of participation are excellent tests for field research. On the other hand, the link between participation and educational practices is also a well consolidated approach that urban scholars have been investigating in the last few decades (Howard, 2010).

However, books and articles that try to connect the three fields mentioned above (participation, research and education) in a single theoretical framework prove to be less widespread and acknowledged. A few essays (McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck and Fitzgerald, 2015) point in this direction, highlighting the potential for systemic change that the synthesis of those three fields has, but there are likely several steps forward that need to be taken. The effects of such a theoretical advancement could be significant, for example,



in terms of the repercussions on the occupational sphere of young jobseekers, as Stenberg and Fryk (2012) have pointed out.

In the light of these considerations, the present work proposes the task of investigating an experience in Palermo, which has been going on for 6 years and which has involved a large number of various social actors, in order to think precisely about the relationship between participation, research and education. As the conclusions of this paper will show, reasoning simultaneously on these three areas can produce concrete effects that have an impact not just on the territory, but also on the careers of young graduates in urban studies.

Participation as an unavoidable horizon for urban studies

To date, we cannot but recognise that participatory practices have become an indispensable element in tackling the issue of contemporary governance. Even Italy, albeit several years late, is facing the need – or even the legal obligation, as we will soon describe – to increasingly include participatory instruments in its urban policies.

Over the last fifteen years, in fact, we have witnessed a multiplication of studies on participation in Italy, both with the circulation of ‘practical guides’ for users and administrators (see, for example, Bobbio, 2004 and Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2009; also, Arena and Iaione, 2015 discuss a topic which is very close to participatory practices: urban commons and their management), and, sometimes, thanks to theoretical frameworks that can support the use of participatory practices (Ciaffi and Mela, 2006; Bignante, Dansero and Scarpocchi, 2008; Sartori, 2011; Cellamare, 2012; Picone, 2012; Burini, 2013; Morisi and Perrone, 2013; Celata, 2014).

As already mentioned a few lines ago, today in Italy participation is increasingly becoming a legal obligation (Banini and Picone, 2018). Several Regions have enacted laws that provide for the use of participatory processes (Table 1): the presence among these Regions of Emilia-Romagna, Umbria and Tuscany it is not surprising (Vizioli, 2014), considering the facts that these have always been ruled by progressive local governments; however, other Regions are joining the first ones, although they do not have as many previous experiences as those of the three Regions mentioned above. There are also cases of particular importance, such as the very recent case of Apulia: in this context, the national State considers that the Region is advocating to itself, with Regional Law no. 28 July 13, 2017, competences that do not belong to it; see the news ANSA published on http://www.ansa.it/puglia/notizie/2017/09/08/governono-a-legge-partecipazione-puglia_2b42399c-ef76-47a0-ac04-0cbac9ae7dbf.html, date of access: 12/05/2019.

Region	Regional Law	Web Site
Emilia-Romagna	Legge Regionale 3 (July 9, 2010)	http://partecipazione.regione.emilia-romagna.it/tecnico-di-garanzia/legge-regionale-n-3-2010
Umbria	Legge Regionale 14 (February 16, 2010)	http://leggi.crumbria.it/mostra_atto.php?id=47211&
Tuscany	Legge Regionale 46 (August 2, 2013)	http://www.regione.toscana.it/-/legge-sulla-partecipazione
Piedmont	Legge Regionale 10 (May 16, 2016)	http://www.regione.piemonte.it/governo/bollettino/abbonati/2016/20/attach/l201610_polsoc.pdf
Basilicata	Legge Statutaria Regionale 1 (November 17, 2016)	http://www.consiglio.basilicata.it/consiglioweb/site/consiglio/detail.jsp?sec=107173&otype=1150&id=3376636&anno=2016
Apulia	Legge Regionale 28 (July 13, 2017)	http://partecipazione.regione.puglia.it/
Campania	Legge Regionale 23 (July 28, 2017)	http://burc.regione.campania.it/eBurcWeb/directServlet?DOCUMENT_ID=108008&ATTACH_ID=160507
Abruzzo	Under discussion	https://urp.regione.abruzzo.it/images/ppt/PresPartecipazione.pdf

Table 1: Regional Laws on participation in Italy, in chronological order.

At the municipal level, several cities are also increasingly carrying out experiments on the subject of citizen participation. Among these, Turin (Sclavi, 2014) and Bologna (Arena, Iaione, 2015) have a long and well-known history of NGOs and associations that have long been dealing with this issue; less frequent are for the moment the participatory experiences in Southern Italy, although with some notable exceptions, such as the case of Palermo which is described in this paper. Suffice it to say that more or less effective participatory experiences have been carried out in Palermo for years (see Schiavo, 2003; Trapani, 2012; Picone and Lo Piccolo, 2014; Picone and Schilleci, 2016; also see the website <https://www.comune.palermo.it/partecipa.php>, date of access: 12/05/2018).

Despite the mediatic and political interest in the topic of participation, however, many notions are still vague and easily exploitable, probably because participation is not part of the traditional Italian normative and regulatory tradition (Sclavi, 2014; Arena and Iaione, 2015). This shows that it is essential to multiply not only the practical experiences, but also the theoretical reflections on participatory practices, if we want to avoid the risks – or, even worse, the attempts – of manipulation that, among others, Arnstein (1969) and Habermas (1981) have been explaining and describing over the last decades.

The *Panormus* Project

In 2013, the event ‘*Panormus*: The School adopts a monument’ had already reached its twentieth edition in Palermo. During that same year, the University of Palermo, and in particular the Department of Architecture, started a collaboration with the Department of School of the Municipality of Palermo and with several schools ranging, from primary schools to high schools. The Department of Architecture has identified the authors of this paper as the scientific directors of a memorandum of understanding that was signed in 2013. For some years now, in fact, the authors have been coordinating a research group that has initiated specific studies, clearly reflected in the didactics, on the topic of the neighbourhood as a physical element in the design of the city but also as a place of resistance to the crisis of public spaces (Picone and Schilleci, 2012).

The *Panormus* project (Panormus being the ancient Latin name given to the city of Palermo) was structured in such a way that the many actors who, directly or indirectly, act on the transformations of the city could synergistically initiate participatory processes aimed at the knowledge and design of urban space (Picone and Schilleci, 2016).

The motivations that led to seek this collaboration between institutions and citizens find their initial input in the precise will of the authors of this paper to 1) provide the students of planning and urban studies with an educational offer that is not only theoretical but also practical, and 2) to strengthen the planning approach in urban studies, no longer considering it just a technical approach to the analysis and subsequent design of cities, but an approach based on the constant exchange between two disciplinary areas: urban planning and social sciences, which can be considered two sides of the same coin, fruitfully communicating with each other (Phelps and Tewdwr-Jones, 2008).

The students who attended these courses were invited to tear down the mental barriers according to which urban analysis can be either purely technical or purely social, and adopt the neighbourhood itself as the scale of research, within an action-research framework.



The project involves the ‘adoption’ of the neighbourhoods in which the schools are located, and in the first phase of the collaboration it produced – through classroom work, but above all through field experiences – several ‘neighbourhood guides’ that helped the residents (both the younger and the adults) to observe the area in which they live through different lenses, recovering the concept of neighbourhood as commons, beyond the individualism that characterizes today’s society. One of the first goals of the project, therefore, was to create students-citizens aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the territory in which they live, to encourage actions of change from below and participatory planning of neighbourhoods from multiple points of view.

A significant step forward was taken after the second year of collaboration, when the designing aspect was added to the name, transforming the title into ‘The School adopts [and designs] the neighbourhood’ (*La scuola adotta [e progetta] il quartiere*; see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Poster for the fifth edition of the *Panormus* project.

The project is grounded on the idea that no single building (be it a school, a church or any other historic monument, or even any single residential building) is an island, isolated from the context. Therefore, on the one hand the general interest was no longer addressed to a single element but to the complexity of the urban system that hosts it, while on the other hand this approach led to re-design the context itself through a shared methodology.

This evolution will lead to a real and complete process of participation, which will go through both the knowledge and the design phases.

In a process of continuous verification, planning students have coordinated not only the pupils of the schools involved in the work, but also the inhabitants and institutions, approaching the work as real professionals. In

fact, the actual regeneration projects that stemmed from the generic *Panormus* project, besides being shared and therefore certainly more effective, were based on another essential element: that of feasibility. The final dossiers written by the students, therefore, provided not only for the list of all the actors who will have to play a specific role in the process, but also the possible sources of funding that the administration could draw on for the implementation of the project.

The overall evaluation of the work done so far has been very positive, having met with a high degree of satisfaction from schools and citizens and having started a dialogue process, which is still in progress, with the municipal administration. The latter has recognized the value of the method and results, so as to start discussion tables with the Department of Urban Planning of the Municipality of Palermo, which is drafting the new planning tool (a masterplan) for the city (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The urban regeneration project drafted with the help of students and residents from the 6th municipality ('circoscrizione') of Palermo. The authors of the project are four students of the Urban Planning curriculum of the University of Palermo: Vittoria Attardi, Renato Collisani, Uma Damico and Giulia di Fisco.

Methodology and Professional Repercussions

The path that the students of the Urban Planning curriculum have followed, and that in some cases they continue to follow, has led to the acquisition of a greater awareness of the profession they are going to undertake, producing significant professionalizing effects, even if at the moment the process is still ongoing.

Certainly the awareness of the role of the planner as the main actor in the planning process is a great step forward, which has led the students to reflect on the skills and on how to create professional associations that, based on the experience conducted and increasingly deepening the methods of participatory planning, can make us think again of the city project as a shared project which is never imposed as top-down, but rather discussed and enacted in a framework that is focused on governance as collaboration between public and private stakeholders.

Some initial results have already arrived. The launch of some of these associations has already borne fruit, through forms of cooperation with the municipal administration.

Based on these first experiences, today we are working on the creation of an academic spin-off, which can create job opportunities for young professionals, by developing those methodologies that the students have been practicing and by bearing in mind that the city, along with its project, is not a series of lines drawn on a map, but is a bustle of people living together, is the set of multiple heterogeneous spaces but in relation to each other.

The experience of Palermo, if related to others that are starting to grow over different cities all over Europe, can be significant, even beyond the local context, for a relaunch of the project of urban regeneration.

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