

The role of activist researchers in urban and regional planning. Analysing and comparing international case studies of social change.

Federica Scaffidi¹, Monica Lopez Franco², Lara Mottee³, Megan Sharkey⁴

¹ *Leibniz University of Hannover, scaffidi@staedtebau.uni-hannover.de*

² *University College London, monica.franco.15@ucl.ac.uk*

³ *University of Groningen, l.k.mottee@rug.nl*

⁴ *University of Westminster, m.sharkey@my.westminster.ac.uk*

Abstract: Activist researchers in urban planning place an emphasis on facilitating social change through innovation and empowerment. The research explores the definitions of action research, how these different dimensions of activism in urban planning can be identified and redesigned as new situations and challenges arise. In defining action research, the paper also introduces the roles that activist researchers play in contributing to practice and theory through their research. Considering the research carried out by the authors, the paper compares the different approaches adopted by the researchers analysing international cases of social change. The authors argue that the research activist positions in urban and regional planning can affect the long-term change of a place by contributing in theory and practice, defining new models and procedures. Through these examples, the research affirms that the methods applied in action research, can be constructive or critical of existing urban planning processes and can contribute to the production of knowledge for both theory and practice. However, the main concern for activist researchers will always remain the long-term impact of their research and its benefit to society.

Keywords: action research; activist researchers; social change; urban and regional development.

1. Introduction

The paper is focused on the analysis of the use of action research in urban and regional planning, and the roles and positions of the researchers. The paper contributes case studies to contemporary literature by providing an analyse on the different positions taken on by the authors in their own research investigations. The concept of action research is connected to other theories and themes (Figure 1) regarding social change, community involvement, social benefits assessment etc. For example, the concept of bottom-up processes as inclusive methods necessary to create an open spatial planning; or collaborative economy as innovative life-style based on sharing and cooperation (Botsam & Rogers, 2010; Gruszka, 2016). A related topic, social impact assessment (SIA), is used to verify the consequences of the processes in the social dimension or the social innovation theory that aims to create new solutions in order to affect the socio-economic fields and create a social change fixed over time (Moulaert et al., 2005; Phills et al., 2008; Caulier-Grice et. al., 2012). The aim of this paper is to analyse the meaning and the definitions discussed about action research, and to compare methods adopted and the different positions and roles undertook by the activist researchers in urban and regional development¹. It will form an epistemological basis for using action research in infrastructure, institutions, housing, grassroots movements and re-cycling processes.

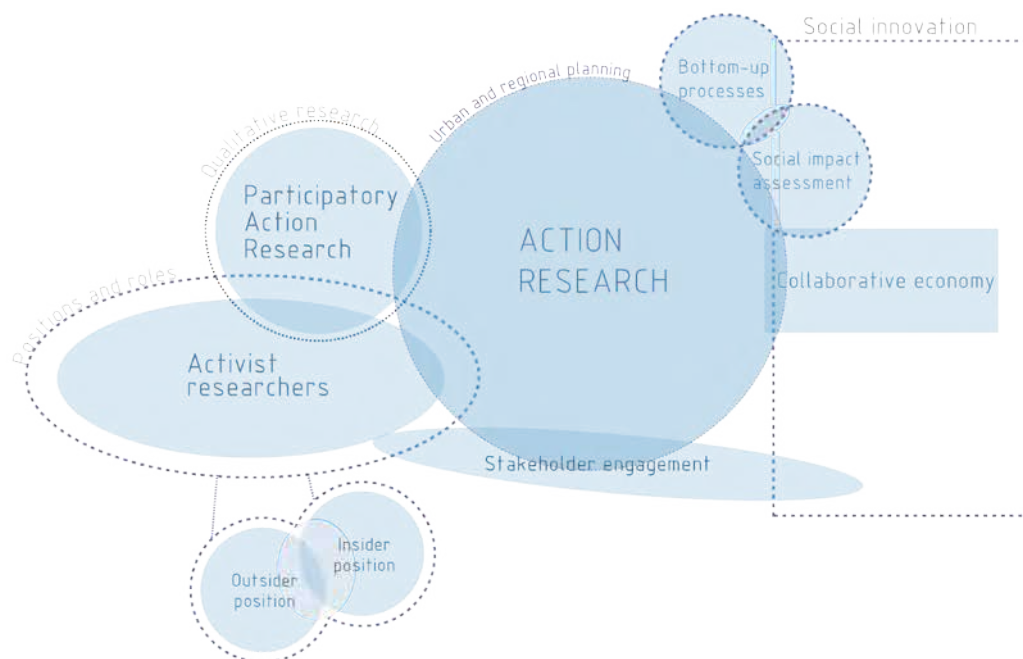


Figure 1. Themes scheme. Graphic elaboration by Federica Scaffidi.

¹ The paper analyses the authors positions and roles in their research.

2. Methodology

The paper is developed using a critical, qualitative, and structured approach. The main objective is to analyse in a critical way the researcher positioning in scientific investigations and understand the resulting consequences for theory and practice. Therefore, the methodology allows for analysing the theoretical and empirical scenario with reference to action research and researchers' positions.

In summary, the methodology was developed in the following steps (Figure 2):

1. **Literature review** – with the main intention to study and classify the different lines of thought about action research, the literature review is dedicated to the analysis of the state-of-the-art focusing on the analysis of action research, the roles and positions of researchers, and their relation to the spatial and social transformation. This part, therefore, is focused on the identification of specific models of action research.
2. **Empirical analysis** – description of the empirical activities developed in international case studies of social initiatives in urban and regional development. The researches mainly adopt a qualitative approach. This analysis shows the different roles of activist researchers and their implementation of specific models/procedures for the empirical scenario.
3. **Data analysis and comparison** – considering the different data and examples analysed, a comparison among the lines of thoughts and international cases is developed through tables and matrix.
4. **Identification of researchers' positions** – considering the identified activist researchers' positions described by the theoretical framework, an identification process was adopted to verify and select the activist researchers' positions used by the researchers in the empirical framework.
5. **Identification of researchers' roles** – description of the roles of activist researchers and how they affect and influence urban and regional development processes in theory and practice.

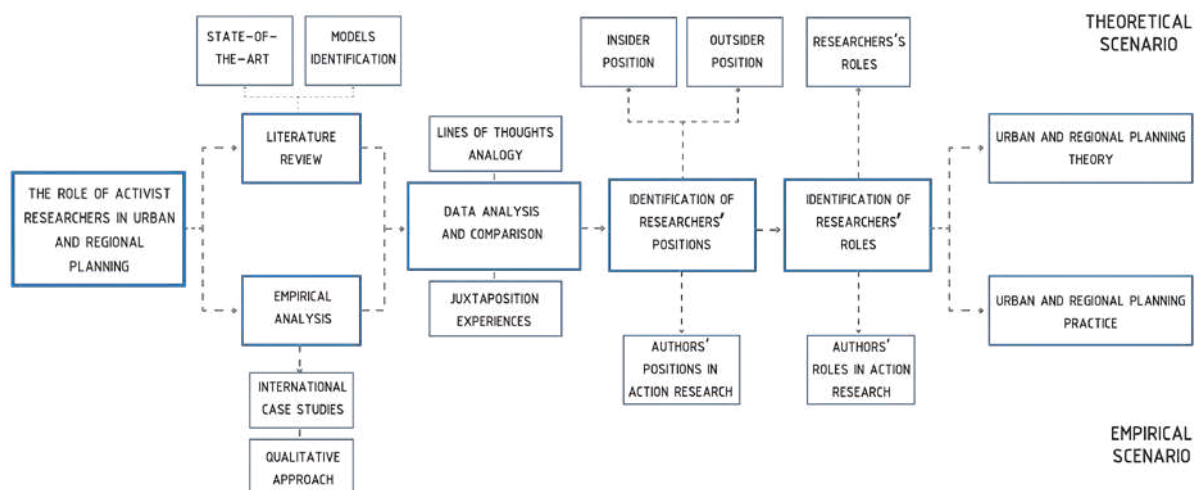


Figure 2. Methodological structure. Graphic elaboration by Federica Scaffidi.

The action research is analysed from two main points of view in order to understand its meaning and the role of activist researchers in urban and regional planning processes. The paper is developed in a structured way based on the two main following parts:

- the theoretical scenario;
- the empirical scenario.

The first scenario is focused on the analysis of contemporary literature and the definition of main researcher's positionality in action research. The method used to study the concept of activist research was oriented to discover the meaning and definitions presented in the state-of-the-art and classify the different theories and scientific positions developed. This part is necessary to understand the main theoretical lines of thought regarding action research and analyse more in depth the elaborated models. The theoretical analysis is also oriented to the examination of the different positions and roles that activist researchers can undertake during their scientific investigation. This step is focused on the evaluation of the typology of relations and connections that the researchers use to interface with the place. Therefore, according to Herr and Anderson (2005), the analysis is oriented around two main positions (insider and outsider) in relation to the entity of collaboration developed. The second scenario is focused on the analysis of the research activities developed by the authors in order to understand the real connection with the action research. This analysis, furthermore, is oriented to the assessment of the typology of action research and the analysis of the methodology adopted. Starting from the researches developed, the paper is concentrated into the evaluation of the characteristic of researches' positions and their role in action research.

2.1 Action research and participatory action research: meaning and definitions

Action research has a varied history within its academic applications tracing back to the 1940's researching the effects social democracy and organization change. However participatory forms of enquiry have existed throughout human history (Reason and Bradbury, 2003). Therefore, action research can be seen less as a methodology and more as an approach to research that utilizes multiple methodologies to achieve its participatory nature, being called 'promiscuous in its sources of theoretical inspiration' (Reason and Bradbury, 2003; Herr and Anderson, 2005). Education and health research fields have been the primary users of action research to understand how practices can be improved, and to a lesser extent how theory could be enhanced by action research's approach. Activist researchers are morally committed and are considered participants (Dick, 2015; McNiff, 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Action research proponents note the need to be free from theory, be apolitical, and allow participants to guide research (Adelman, 1993; K. Lewin, 1946; Foote Whyte et al., 1991). However action research is inherently political (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016). Action research's political orientation stems from its understanding of power and hierarchies within society inherent in capitalism and urban planning (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016). Burawoy constructive critique highlights the need for a theory to allow interpretation of the world outside of your AR site (Burawoy, 2013). Action research methodology aims to be disciplined, systematic process that includes a reflexive process that occurs in cycles, see figure 3 (McNiff, 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, 2011; Foote Whyte et al., 1991). Action research process steps:

1. Observe, take stock of what is going on
2. Identify a concern, issue
3. Think of a possible way forward, develop actions around this way forward
4. Try it out, perform the action steps developed
5. Monitor the action by gathering data to show what is happening
6. Evaluate progress by establishing procedures for making judgements about what is happening
7. Reflect on those learnings personally, in relation to theory, and with the group
8. Test the validity of these reflections
9. Modify practice in the light of the evaluation
10. Repeat steps 1 - 9

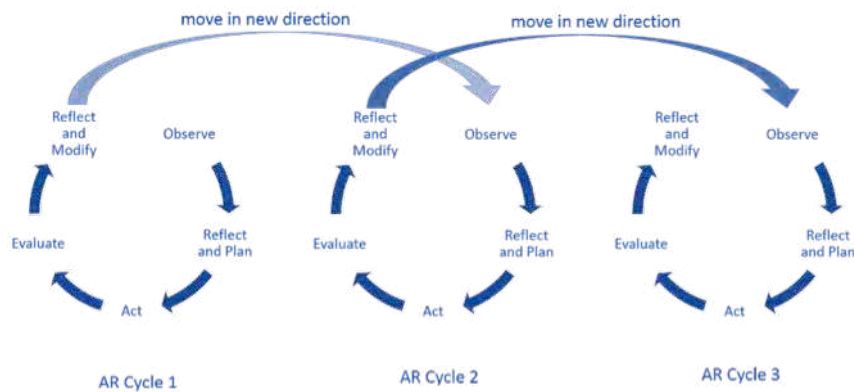


Figure 3. Action Research Cycles (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, 2011).

Participatory action research (PAR) varies slightly. PAR provides greater control between practitioners and researchers and makes no claims that thoughts about an action must be felt prior to that action (Foote Whyte, 1991). A critique is that participatory action research is too ‘common-sense’ which can cause dismissal by mainstream social sciences (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016), and relying too much on the case studies with too specific findings that ‘do not lead to defensible generalisation’ (Miller & Brewer, 2003). Critiques of participatory action research note that the co-option by neoliberalism (and governance institutions) masks true unbiased participation; or only provides a value-add to that institution rather than effecting real social change (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016; Foote Whyte et al., 1991). Issues can also arise in the reporting of research about power relationships between the researchers and participants (McNiff, 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, 2011; Foote Whyte et al., 1991). Power relations can be addressed through a few ways. In particular the idea of “I” and “we”. In much action research the objective of enquiry is the “I” (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). This can be problematic in the relationship with the ‘we’ (the participants or partners), but the ‘we’ and ‘I’ can reduce this by being bonded in values or goals (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Being bonded in values and goals, whereby it is not a co-opting of a process, but an equal alignment between researcher and participant.

There are two ultimate goals as they relate to practice and theory of action research, urban cities, and systemic change. In practice, the goal of activist research is transformation of practice towards sustainable and resilient urban planning. For example, focus on the outcomes of social impact in housing, infrastructures, grassroots movement and brownfields re-cycling. In theory, it links the learnings of the activist research with relevant field theories, thus taking Burawoy’s criticism of need to maintain an understanding of the outside influences on your action research site. Action research’s ability to drive real change could break free of theory and critical analysis if it deals with the underpinning epistemological issues discussed. What is real? It is in the use of methods to drive action research or activist research where it has the potential to grow and combine theory and practice (Gustavsen, 2003). Under the action research paradigm, activist research engages with the immediate struggles of grassroots movements challenging institutions power and organization (Choudry & Kuyek, 2012; Jordan & Kapoor, 2016).

2.2 Activist researchers: roles and positions

Two main types of action researcher exists, the insider (or practitioner) action researcher and the external action researcher. The insider works within the company, as a member of that specific field (for example, a nurse working with patients or teacher working with students) or organisation they are performing the action research on (Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff, 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, 2011). The outsider collaborates with the organization studying its insiders or supporting them as equal partners. There is a continuum and implications of the insider to outsider researcher whether the insider is studying its own self or the outsider studying the insider without collaboration (Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Drawing on practices of participatory action research, the outsider collaboration with insider can contribute to knowledge base, organization transformation and radical change within communities (Day, 2016; Herr & Anderson, 2005). The research participation mode will not be co-opted where by the relationship of research and action to the local people is on them, compliance whereby the relation of the research and action to the local people is for them, or collective action whereby the local people set agenda and carry out research without the researcher, e.g. it is by them and I am only an observer (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Other modes of participation include consultation whereby it is a for/with relationship, cooperation where it is a with relationship, or co-learning where it is a with/by relationship (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In contrast to participatory action research, the activist researcher is interested in co-creation. Co-creation is key for driving transformations and real time learning about transitions in the moment. In non-academia, communicative planning theory and smart technology of both practitioners and institutions is changing the way they engage communities on a wider scale (Head, 2007). Though the effects of this type engagement are still seen in many cases as superficial and ticking of the box, the main issue may be the expectations of engagement (Legacy et al., 2017; McAndrews & Marcus, 2015; Silverman et al., 2008). The grassroots movement and the institutions may have different expectations regarding the outcomes of engagement. Combining citizen participation with action research principles can enhance community involvement with the planning process and develop new approaches to community driven planning by being reflexive throughout the process (Silverman et al., 2008). Barriers to citizenship participation even with the use of action research remained primarily because of expectations. This included not setting up the contract with the client (local government) to ensure that more action researcher principles were able to be achieved, for example the attendance of meetings by the community (Silverman et al., 2008). The researcher becomes an activist researcher engages with the groups studied in order to improve the area and achieve a social change.

3. Discussion

This section of the paper is focused on the analysis, description and comparison of the researches developed by the authors (Table 1). The different thematic fields analysed are related to the urban and regional development through social initiatives.

The main topics analysed are the following:

1. Railway infrastructures and urban development;
2. Urban sustainability and grassroots movements;
3. Socially innovative re-cycling and spatial development;



4. Housing regeneration in historic centres.

The authors' researches are oriented on the analysis of social benefits, the evaluation of stakeholder involvement processes and social impact assessment. The international cases here exposed are different in typology and geographic location. The international framework of the case studies is very huge. It is related to Australian and Dutch examples of public participation in infrastructure development, the bottom-up-community-led grassroots movement in London, the social reactivation of brownfields in Italy, Spain and Germany, and the housing strategies in Mexican historical centres regeneration. The wide empirical scenarios analysed have in common a qualitative research approach with exploratory and dialogic surveys and qualitative interviews (structured, semi-structured and unstructured). All these researchers had the ambition to be active, to involve different kind of stakeholders and local actors, and to promote a social and spatial development of the place. The purpose of the paper is the analysis of these many developed experiences as action research and the positions and roles of researchers.

Cases	1	2	3	4
Research topics	Public participation in high impact projects	Bottom-up-community-led movement	Social innovation in re-cycling processes	Housing regeneration
Research objects	Railway infrastructures	Grassroots	Neglected resources (brownfields)	Historic centers
Location	Australia The Netherlands	United Kingdom (London)	Italy Spain Germany	Mexico
Research approach	Qualitative research	Qualitative and quantitative research	Qualitative and quantitative research	Qualitative research
Methods	Exploratory surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups	Dialogic surveys, semi-structured interviews, strategy development workshops.	Demographic analysis, exploratory and dialogic surveys, structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews	Exploratory surveys, semi-structured interviews
Stakeholders	Local institutions and community	Local institutions, volunteers, associations	Public administrations, social enterprises, local community, experts	Local institutions and community
Objectives	Social impact assessment and management processes for regional development	Bottom-up processes for sustainable urban development	Socially innovative re-cycling procedures for urban and regional development	Assess method to assist urban development of historic centers

Table 1. Action researches matrix. Graphic elaboration by Federica Scaffidi.

3.1. Railway infrastructure in Australia and the Netherlands

This research focuses on the implementation of social impact assessment and management processes in railway infrastructure projects. The research aims to contribute theory in the discipline of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and strengthen its role in urban transport planning (Vanclay, 2003; Esteves & Vanclay, 2012; Vanclay et al. 2015). A key aim is to contribute towards improved positive social change outcomes from rail infrastructure projects.

The empirical part of the research focuses on some specific international case studies of infrastructure projects. In particular, the three case studies selected are:

1. Parramatta Rail Link in Sydney (Australia);
2. South-West Rail Link in Sydney (Australia);
3. North-South Metro Line in Amsterdam (the Netherlands).

The research adopts a multi-method qualitative approach to share lessons learned in practice from three case studies, as well as, Impact Assessment (IA) practitioners and academic experts internationally. The methods adopted included: grey and academic literature review, field investigations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with varied stakeholders involved in decision-making processes for transport planning. The primary methods of semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to obtain in-depth knowledge about the inclusion of social considerations in project implementation processes, including. This knowledge includes experiences by participants (project managers, construction personnel, IA practitioners, government staff, politicians, alderman) as key elements to understand fundamental lessons from each case.

The research highlights the need for greater accountability in urban governance and raises awareness of the value of SIA practice in decision-making result in significant positive consequences for the project's delivery (Mottee & Howitt, 2018). It contributes to existing SIA theory through an improved understanding of the assessment and management of social impacts in the making of urban transport projects in both Amsterdam and Sydney. This also demonstrates a practical contribution value of SIA by including social impacts in decision making in practice. Through implementing improved processes in SIA, including good practice public participation, the potential for long-term positive social change is facilitated.

The researcher is an outsider with access to inside understandings and processes to produce an assessment which will in turn inform future understandings and processes. Thus, the researcher here participates in two ways. First, as an observant and critic of the development of processes which in this case entail the implementation of practitioner knowledge into existing urban structures. Second, as a passive insider with sufficient knowledge to assess and potentially change future practice decision-making processes. The activist role of the researcher in this study is constructive as it aims to contribute both with theoretical and practical knowledge to existing practice but also critical as it proves current practice decision making processes fail to deliver consistent positive results.

3.2. Urban Sustainability Transitions and Grassroots movements

The research focuses on the bottom-up community-led grassroots movement's role in urban sustainable transition processes. The research objective is to understand barriers to grassroots movements promoting urban infrastructure changes to attain more resilient and sustainable cities.

In order to examine these connections, an action research framework has been used that fully embeds the author within cycling movements within London (three local grassroots' volunteer cycling groups and a regional charity, London Cycling Campaign). The partnership is over a 12 to 18 month period (beginning in August 2018 and April 2018 respectively). The community groups goals are the initial focal point of the transitions analysis and influence the qualitative and quantitative research methods used.

The researcher provided a template to groups which linked systems thinking and socio-technical analysis approaches (Turnheim 2015). It used a variety of methods for observation and engagement. These methods included local council meetings with the groups, discussions, qualitative interviews, strategy development workshops, etc, seeing interactions of groups, meetings with the local institutions, policy documents and other materials that are related to these processes. Working alongside the grassroots movements can provide resources and additional information with which to make decisions. This is most similar to initiative based learning such as co-design (Turnheim 2015). They are building knowledge capacity whilst the researcher is learning. It is a reflexive process whereby they can utilise the research information in the action research process and understand if those projections will positively create tipping points. It links quantitative and qualitative analysis through a socio-technical analysis examining the regime and landscape with qualitative data. Quantitative data is used to analyse the costs, time, and distance factors to examine rates of change.

The researcher functions as an insider that is also producing outsider-oriented knowledge. Following this methodology, which entails doing action research with a grassroots group (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), the researcher becomes an active member of the change. The changes are also analysed and assessed through the research, a process and product that happens outside grassroots developments. It may be considered that both roles at once are adopted through this bridging method, which are iterative and add to the outlook of the research results. It is because of this, that the researcher here acquires the position of activist in practice, with input placed as a constructive method that draws from critical thinking processes.

3.3. Socially innovative re-cycling of brownfields in Italy, Germany and Spain

The research focuses on the analysis of contemporary literature about social innovation and re-cycling processes with the main intention to understand the impact on urban and regional development. It critically analyses and interprets the re-cycle theory developed by the Italian Research "Re-cycle Italy" (PRIN) focusing on its social innovative aspects. Starting from the definition of re-cycling as the operation of reactivation of new life cycles that generate new economies and self-feed its own development (Marini and Bocchi 2014; Carta 2014). The research illustrates its relations to the social innovation concept. This is considered as a novel solution to a social problem that brings measurable improvements for the local community (Phills et al., 2008; Caulier-Grice et. al., 2012) and includes many stakeholders (associations, public and private institutions, and local community) in order to create new social values (Maiolini, 2015; Moulaert et. al., 2005). The connection of these two dimensions fosters the local development processes affecting socio-economic and spatial development. The research, therefore, aims to understand in which ways socially innovative re-cycling initiatives can interfere in the planning policies (Scaffidi, 2018). To answer to this question eleven

empirical references² have been selected from the European scenario (Italy, Germany and Spain) in which the research activity has been carried out.

These international experiences have been analysed and compared in a matrix. A quantitative and a qualitative approach has been adopted with demographic analysis, explorative and dialogic inspections, semi-structured, and structured and unstructured interviews to some social actors and privileged observers (Corbetta, 1999). All these examples are socially innovative experiences that have defined positive effects to the local site, promoting cultural initiatives, social involvement, urban regeneration processes and new economic, demographic and touristic flows. During the action research, the author developed quantitative analysis to understand the demographic trend and interviewed many local actors, inhabitants, social enterprises and local institutions in order to analyse the context in depth and to assess the effects of the social change.

The research focus is the investigation of social and spatial change in empirical references of brownfield re-cycling. In the ones analysed, the theoretical characteristics of the concept of activism were highlighted, combining the community involvement with the principles of action research (Silverman et al., 2008). All the examples analysed are activating socially inclusive processes that define positive effects to the local area. A relevant role in the social change is taken on by the social enterprise, that encourages the creation of cultural initiatives, creating the conditions for urban regeneration processes and new territorial flows. This is the case of the social enterprise of the former silk factory of Perosa Argentina, which has generated new cultural and tourist itineraries on the municipality, encouraging the enhancement of the industrial heritage of the area, the participation of the local community and the creation of new socio-cultural activities. This is the case of the association of the Arnao coalmine or Periferica in Mazara del Vallo, which periodically contribute to the redevelopment of some urban areas and the development of initiatives based on cooperation. Another example is the Fundación Valle Salado in Salinas de Añana in Spain, where thanks to the social enterprise and the recognized value of the resource, it has given rise to an economic and tourist development of the town. The reactivation process lead the local institutions to draw up the Plan de Embellecimiento and the Plan de Ordenación Urbana to guarantee a parallel development between the productive landscape and the urban landscape. In other cases, social enterprises took place within brownfield reactivation initiatives and urban planning processes promoted by local governments, thanks to which the resource revives over time (e.g. Matadero of Madrid, Cantieri Culturali della Zisa of Palermo, ExFadda of San Vito dei Normanni or ZecheZollverein).

The research focuses on the promotion of locally developed processes of knowledge and practice through evidence of social benefits effects that enable positive urban development. The aim of this

² The selected cases are the following: Spinnerei cotton mill of Leipzig (Germany); Cantieri Culturali della Zisa of Palermo (Italy); Perosa Argentina silk factory (Italy); ExFadda of San Vito dei Normanni (Italy); Manifatture Knos of Lecce (Italy); Matadero of Madrid (Spain); the coalmine of Arnao (Spain); Periferica of Mazara del Vallo (Italy); the asbestos mine of Balangero (Italia); the saltworks of Salinas de Añana (Spain); ZecheZollverein of Essen (Germany).

research is to affirm the influence of social innovative practices in urban and regional development processes. It argues that active interaction between local institutions, residents and social enterprises of an area can define and create new local development strategies for social and territorial development. The research contributes to contemporary discussion about reactivation of neglected and disused resources analysing the social benefits and the local development. The theoretical and empirical contributions of this research are the socially innovative re-cycling theoretical model and new empirical guidelines for local community, social enterprises and local administrations. In this research, the researcher functions as an outsider with wide access to observe, understand, assess and disseminate a wide array of spatial development process experiences through the analysis of socially re-cycling initiatives. Ultimately participating in two ways as well. In the first, as an insider with access to insider information to develop well-informed understanding of contextual-based experiences. In the second, as an outsider who observes and assesses socio-economic change within and throughout the urban processes to produce information that will bring light to practices which should or should not be replicated in similar initiatives. The activist role of the researcher is constructive as it seeks to build on existing academic knowledge and practice-based processes. It is also critical as it provides in-depth portrayal of elements which can hinder or enhance projects of this nature.

3.4. Housing in regeneration of historic centres in Mexico

This research focuses on developing an assessment of housing regulations and strategies in regeneration approaches for Mexican historic centres of Guadalajara and Mexico City. Acknowledging international influence (UNESCO, UN-Habitat) in the conception and implementation of national and local planning for conservation and housing.

The aim of this research is to assess current housing planning regulations and strategies within historic centres' conservation and urban development strategies. It is being done to develop an assessment and produce knowledge to assist change in the different aspects relating to social justice in the conservation and housing development in the regeneration of historic centres. It is based on an explorative qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews with official bodies, academic sector and community representatives to assess local processes of urban development. One of the preliminary findings of this research relates to the processes of appropriation of the urban environment by local groups, effectively putting pressure on projects' strategies and development. This research contributes to existing literature on urban regeneration as well as to conservation and housing literature and policy. This research, ongoing until 2020, hopes to provide an assessment method to assist urban development processes in historic centres and other inner areas under regeneration schemes. Looking to position this research beyond its case studies to contribute to wider ongoing discussions on the role of housing in heritage conservation and urban regeneration processes.

The researcher here functions as an outsider with access to inside conceptual and practical construction processes to both observe and understand development and implementation processes. Additionally, the researcher here participates in two ways that relate to her inherent position as an outsider. In the first, the researcher will be an outsider with temporary and partial insider access, as she connects with actors who will direct to other actors through a snow-balling process. In the second, she is as an outsider who will understand and assess processes of which she is not an active part in creating or receiving. The activist's role of this researcher is constructive as it aims to provide relevant assessment of use in the future to local communities and policy makers. Yet, it is also inherently

critical as she objectively gains knowledge of and evaluates processes from which to identify gaps that help or hinder key aspects which are partially or not contemplated by these processes.

4. Results

This section is focused on the analysis of the research results and the identification of researchers' roles and positions according to the theoretical framework analysed. It aims to assess which kind of position is adopted by the researchers in their own investigations' (between insider and outsider positions) and their roles for the theoretical and empirical improvement in the urban and regional development field. According to Dick (2015) and McNiff (2013) who affirm that action research is primarily value-laden and researchers are participants in the investigations, thus cases here are examples of action research. From the action researches analysis is possible to observe two main positions undertaken by the researchers. It has been chosen to evaluate the degree of involvement into the research considering a range that consists in low, average and high level. The image below (Figure 4) shows the researchers' positions as insider and outsider in the three ranges selected. The "case 1_railway infrastructure in Australia and the Netherlands" mainly adopts a high outsider position with a low insider approach. The "case 2_urban sustainability transitions and grassroots movements in UK", on the contrary, adopts primarily a high insider approach, forming research from an active insider point of view. The "case 3_socially innovative re-cycling of brownfields in Italy, Germany and Spain" adopts a mixed position, with a mainly outsider approach based on the analysis of theory and empiric examples, and an insider position undertaken in qualitative analysis. The "case 4_Housing in regeneration of historic centres in Mexico" primarily adopts a high outsider position in collaboration with insider activists of Mexican context and a medium insider position during the field survey and qualitative researches.

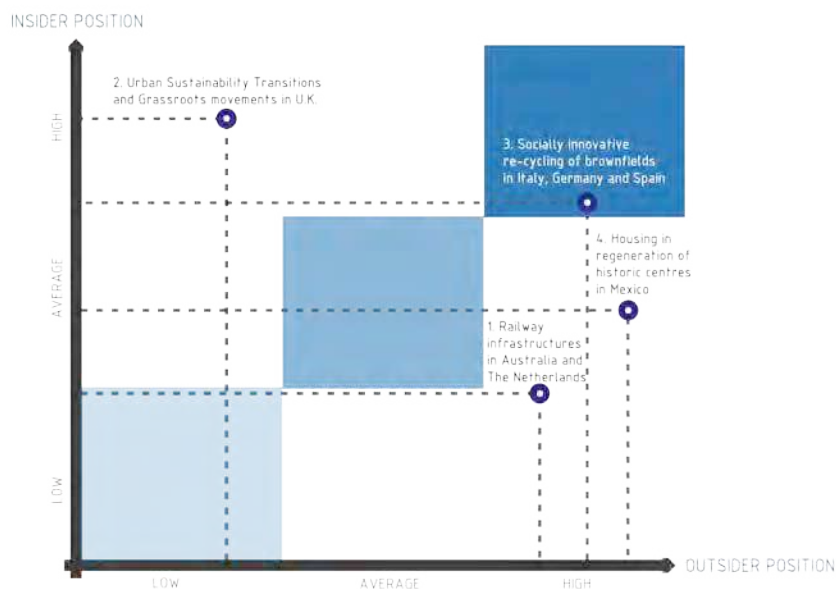


Figure 4. Activist researches positions. Graphic elaboration by Federica Scaffidi.

The graph above illustrates a research approach in the field of urban and regional planning more active and highly connected to the area of investigation - whether as insider or outsider - with the objective to interact with the place and study it in-depth. The findings show a changing role of the urban planner,

strictly related to the local site, its social transformations, economic and cultural effects of the urban interventions. This led to the need to define a novel theoretical and empirical approach aimed at assessing the action research implications on urban and regional development. This paper represents the starting phase of this approach. These contributions aim to produce specific models and procedures in urban and regional development, based on the themes, problems and thesis argued in the specific research fields. The following graph (Figure 5) illustrates the activist research outcomes. Case 1 aims to develop improved social impact assessment and management practices, which includes good practice of public participation. Therefore, its contribution is highly related to the elaboration of a model of social participation for the regional development by local infrastructures. Case 2 focuses on grassroots movements, a bottom-up approach for socio-technical transitions. Case 3 contributes in theory processing a specific socially innovative model and in practice by defining new guidelines for local administrations, social enterprises and local community. Case 4 contributes in theory and practice by elaborating an operative tool to reduce social inequality in housing policies.

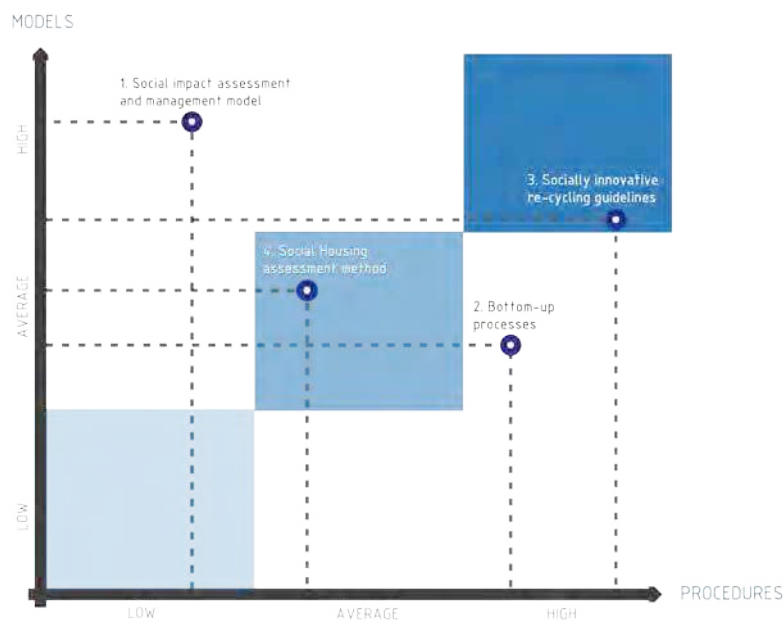


Figure 5. Activist researches outcomes. Graphic elaboration by Federica Scaffidi.

Considering the personal active research contributions, the paper focuses on the comparison of these approaches aiming to collect several experiences and define future proposals and new perspectives of active research in urban and regional planning.

4.1. Comparing action research approaches in urban planning theory and practice

This section is focused on the analysis of the action research approaches used within the framework of urban and regional planning in theory and practice. Figure 6 shows the four dimensions and the roles adopted by the authors in their own researches. This can be seen more easily in the graph which showcases the four dimensions and the positions of each researcher. In the 'x' axis the theoretical and practical roles are placed, while in the 'y' axis the contribution levels are added. Here the constructive or critical contribution to theory and practice are separated, positioning the different levels and scopes of each research's assessed contribution.

The image shows different approaches for what concern the practice dimension, it is possible to observe that case 4 is located in a low position and in the quarter of “constructive approach”. This case is represented by the creation of a specific model of social housing assessment for distance centres regeneration. On the contrary, in the same position but in the quarter of critical approach it is possible to observe case 1, where the author’s role is more critical in practice than in theory promoting methodologies for equitable social participation in urban projects. With regard to cases 2 and 3, the graph illustrates a high-level position in practice with high constructive approaches represented by the objective to be constructive in the empirical context by creating models and procedures (Image 4) for urban development. Case 3, furthermore, adopts a medium-high critical approach in theoretical analysis by observing in a critical way the social innovation and re-cycling theories. On the contrary, case 4 adopts a low approach as critical theory analysing the concept of social housing and contributing with operative tools to reduce social inequality. Case 2 is the only case that adopts a constructive approach promoting new methodologies in socio-technical transition. The literature discussed may imply that there is only one type of activist researcher role and that this role can be compartmentalised. Such as, the researcher is only truly critical if a participatory action research approach is adopted and for the researcher to be constructive, then they can no longer function as an activist researcher. However, the authors argue that the collective experience shows there is no single understanding of an activist researcher. Contending that many roles can be adopted from within (as an insider) or external to practice and process, to effectively gather information and enable participation towards generating positive social change. However, in making a contribution to theory and practice, there lies a challenge in moving from research findings, from our examples, to recommendations for positive and practical changes for implementation. The investigations here exposed to understand existing environments, plans, programs and contexts, and in drawing lessons from cases, empowers researchers with knowledge and experience to make informed recommendations. However, how does this influence extend beyond authors’ researches? How can researches turn into real social change? The researchers adopted a critical approach to analysing theory and processes, then provide constructive and practical feedback in order to facilitate change. To answer these questions the researchers’ aimed to produce specific models and procedures (Figure 6) to make a positive impact into the urban and regional development processes. These are questions and challenges that the urban planning discipline must consider for the activist researcher’s recommendations to have a positive long-lasting influence on society.

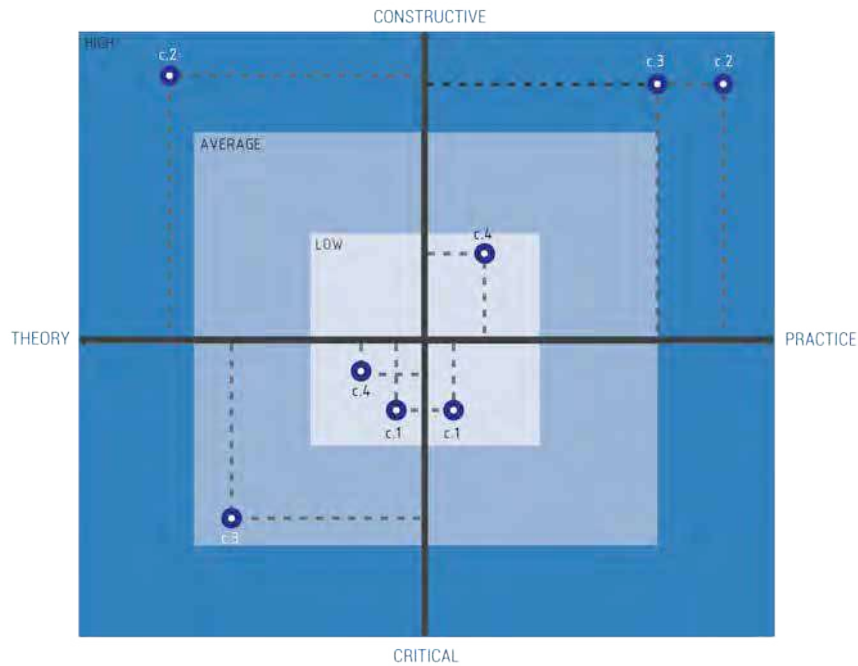


Figure 6. Activist researches approaches. Graphic elaboration by Megan Sharkey.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, starting from the contemporary literature analysis, this paper illustrates the meaning and definitions of action research and activist researchers by doing an in-depth analysis on the current research. Description and comparison of the international cases of social change focused on the analysis of the researchers' positions to show different opportunities for engagement with other people (insider and outsider). The examples analysed activist researcher roles contributing in theory and practice in urban and regional planning.

This paper aimed to present positive and practical changes in social, economic and cultural development in contemporary territories (Figure 7). This analysis is made by an activist point of view, with an insider or outsider position, through qualitative methods from interviews, collaborations with local actors to workshops. We argue against the criticism that action research lacks the methodological rigour and technical validity that is the gold standard of much academic research (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). The authors argue that the researcher activist positions are necessary, relevant and required. For this reason, the researcher's role is to elaborate new models and procedures in order to facilitate that change and improve the urban and regional development creating social benefits and a positive social impact to the area.

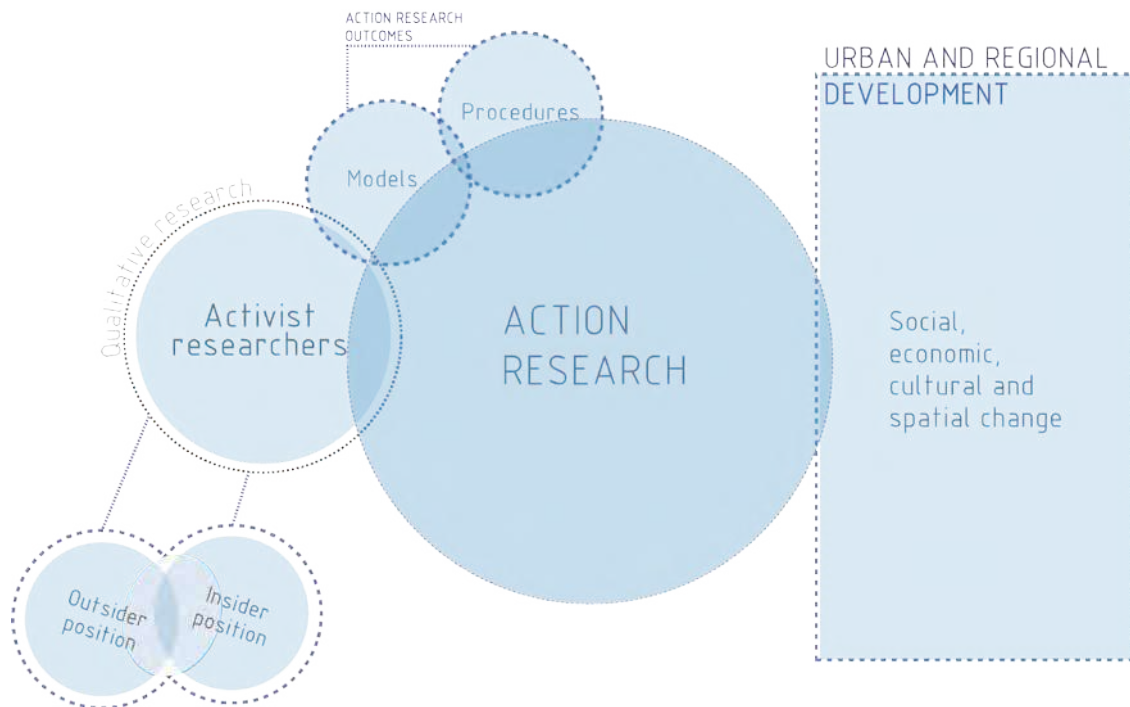


Figure 7. Action research role in urban and regional development. Graphic elaboration by Federica Scaffidi.

Acknowledgment

Within the unitary work, the first author, Federica Scaffidi, developed the following paragraphs: “1. Introduction”, “2. Methodology”, “3. Discussion”, “3.3 Socially innovative re-cycling of brownfields in Italy, Germany and Spain” and “4. Results”). The second author, Monica Lopez Franco, developed the following paragraphs: “3.4 Housing in regeneration of historic centre in Mexico”, “2.2 Activist researches: roles and positions” and “5. Conclusions”. The third author, Laura Mottee developed the following paragraphs: “3.1 railway infrastructures in Australia and the Netherlands” and “4.1. Action research approaches in urban planning theory and practice”. The final author, Megan Sharkey developed the following paragraphs “2.1 Action research and participatory action research: meaning and definition” and “3.2 Urban sustainability Transition and Grassroots movements”. All authors contributed to the editing of the paper.

References

- Adelman, M. A., 1993, *The Economics of Petroleum Supply* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press).
- Bocchi R., Marini S. 2015, *Re-cycle Italy. In search of new life-cycles for the territories of waste and abandonment. *Techne*, 10, Firenze University Press, 16–18.*
- Botsam R., Rogers R., 2010, *What’s mine is yours. How collaborative consumption is changing the way we live. HEC Report, Paris.*

- Burawoy M., 2013, Action research in the field of human rights. Papers, University of California, Berkeley.
- Bradbury H., Reason P., 2003, Editorial. *Action Research*, 1(2), 131–132.
- Bradbury & Reason, 2001, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd).
- Carta M., 2014, Re-cycling urbanism: indizi e orizzonti. In: *Re-cycle. Op_Positions II*, edited by Marini S., Roselli S. C., (Roma: Aracne Editrice Roma), pp. 1-12.
- Caulier-Grice J., Davies A., Patrick R., Norman W., 2012, Defining Social Innovation. *TEPSIE report*.
- Choudry, A., & Kuyek, D., 2012, Activist Research: Mapping Power Relations, Informing Struggles. In: *In Organize! Building the Local for Global Justice*, edited by A. Choudry, J. Hanley, & E. Shragge, (Oakland, CA: PM Press), pp. 23–35.
- Corbetta P., 1999, *Metodologie e tecniche della ricerca sociale* (Bologna, IT: Il Mulino).
- Day, S. J., 2016, Managing water locally: an inquiry into community-based water Resources management in fragile states. Thesis. Cranfield University.
- Dick, 2015, Reflections on Action Research and what it says about action research and its methodologies. *Action Research*, 13(4), 431–444.
- Esteves, A. M., Franks, D., & Vanclay, F., 2012, Social impact assessment: the state of the art. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 30(1), 34–42.
- Greenwood, Davydd J. and Levin, Morton, 1998, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications).
- Gruszka K. 2016, Framing the collaborative economy —Voices of contestation. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 1–13.
- Gustavsen, B. 2003, New forms of knowledge production and the role of action research. *Action Research*, 1(2), 153–164.
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L., 2005, *The Action Research Dissertation: Guide for Students and Faculty* (Oakland, CA: Sage Publications).
- Jordan, S., & Kapoor, D., 2016, Re-politicizing participatory action research: unmasking neoliberalism and the illusions of participation. *Educational Action Research*, 24(1), 134–149.
- K. Lewin, 1946, Action Research and Minority Problems. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(4), 34-46.
- Legacy, C., Curtis, C., & Scheurer, J., 2017, Planning transport infrastructure: examining the politics of transport planning in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. *Urban Policy and Research*, 35(1), 44–60.
- Maiolini R., 2015, Lo stato dell'arte della letteratura sull'innovazione sociale. In: *Modelli ed esperienze di innovazione sociale in Italia*, edited by Caroli M., *Secondo rapporto sull'innovazione sociale* (Milano: Franco Angeli), pp. 23–37.
- McAndrews C., Marcus J., 2015, The politics of collective public participation in transportation decision-making. *Transportation Research Part A*, 78, 537–550.
- McNiff, J., 2013, *Action Research: Principles and Practice* (Oxon: Routledge).
- McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J., 2011, *All You Need to Know About Action Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd).
- McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J., 2010, *Doing and Writing Action Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd).

- Miller, R. L., & Brewer, J. D., 2003, *The A - Z of Social Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd).
- Mottee, L. K., & Howitt, R., 2018, Follow-up and social impact assessment (SIA) in urban transport-infrastructure projects: insights from the Parramatta rail link. *Australian Planner*, 55(1), 1–11.
- Moulaert, F., Martinelli, F., Swyngedouw, E., e Gonzalez, S., 2005, Towards Alternative Model(s) of Local Innovation. *Urban Studies*, 42(11), 1969–1990.
- Phills, J.A., Deiglmeier, K., e Miller, D. T., 2008, Rediscovering social innovation. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 6(4), 34–43.
- Scaffidi F., 2018, Territorial creativity in peripheral context. Urban and regional effects of the re-cycle of Añana saltworks. In: *Dynamics of periphery*, edited by Schröder J., Carta M., Ferretti M., Lino B. (Berlin: Jovis Verlag), pp. 282–289.
- Silverman, R. M., Taylor, H. L., & Crawford, C., 2008, The role of citizen participation and action research principles in Main Street revitalization an analysis of a local planning project. *Action Research*, 6(1), 69–93.
- Turnheim, B., Berkhout, F., Geels, F., Hof, A., McMeekin, A., Nykvist, B., & van Vuuren, D., 2015, Evaluating sustainability transitions pathways: Bridging analytical approaches to address governance challenges. *Global Environmental Change*, 35, 239–253.
- Vanclay, F., 2003, International principles for social impact assessment. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 21(1), 5–12.