

**Italian Research Network TU – TRACCE URBANE**  
**AESOP TG PS-UC, Thematic Group “Public Space and Urban Cultures”**  
**Sapienza University of Rome**

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**  
**“CITIES AND SELF-ORGANIZATION”**  
**Rome, 2017 December 11th-13th**

**GENERAL THEME**

In the contemporary city we are today more and more witnessing different “practices of re-appropriation of space”: regeneration of empty buildings, spaces of cultural production, urban gardens, green areas given renewed significance and re-shaped public spaces; beside this, we could also mention experimentations that are activating new social services and welfare spaces, and finally squatting projects which are defining different modes of co-existence, housing and service provision.

This is a vast field of activity and experience, with the widespread involvement and the leading role of the inhabitants, organized or not in committees or associations, and other local actors, experiences which are both illegal and legal, and which questions the relationship and the very meaning of the institutions.

We should consider in particular micro-practices that are able to broaden and transform the city from the bottom up, alongside more stable forms of social production. A specific kind of “city making” built upon a mix of practices, social relations and modes of local activation.

As a consequence, the way we are looking at the city is radically changing: questioning the relationship between the State and the citizens, these processes of re-appropriation are re-configuring both the mechanism of place making as well as the organization of social relations and local services, thus questioning the very concept of “public” and “publicness” in the city.

These practices of re-appropriation are representing different modes of city organization as well as different cultures of action/policy making in the contemporary city. They are also representing different modes of what “public” means in the city: some practices of re-appropriation are acting as collective actions that take into consideration the mechanism of social inclusion, while others are acting in a way which could be described more as private, or specific to some groups only, rather than designing public/collective actions.

Among these practices, many of them are re-opening spaces or re-activating some specific territories/neighbourhoods benefiting from very localized creativity and capitalizing on social relations that are fully embedded in local societies.

We should also critically consider that practices of re-appropriation are often substituting the role of local policies and in some case promoting actions that are illegal/informal in a context where institutions are losing financial capacity as well as accountability.

These experimentations are so focused on action that are simultaneously redefining the modes of social conflict as well as the routines and spaces of citizenship participation. These practices can be considered sites where to experiment and shape political capacity, thus questioning the very functioning of local democracy.

This wide range of issues is fully in focus on the theme “Unstable Geographies - Dislocated Publics” developed by the AESOP Thematic Group on Public Spaces and Urban Cultures.

This context gives us the possibility to critically analyse the processes of re-appropriation that are changing the contemporary city, not only in big cities but also in small localities. We should be attentive to possible points of strength but also to ambiguities and challenges linked to these experimental processes.

First of all, considering the tension between the possibility to define different models of local activation and cultural/political production and, at the same time, the problematic erosion of the capacity of institutions in answering local needs. We should consider whether practices of re-appropriation are de facto substituting the role of institutions as well as weakening the transformative impact of traditional social conflict.

Some cities like Rome are strongly shaped by these practices and this condition is being mirrored all around Italy and Europe. If we consider the Global South, some of these practices have historically played a relevant role in the production of local economies as well as in shaping parts of the city. This pushes us to consider the role of more structural dimensions in the critical analysis of re-appropriation practices.

In the current climate of weakening welfare states, we should consider whether and how these practices of re-appropriation are substituting the important role of institutions, thus reinforcing neoliberalism, and, as a consequence, an unequal distribution of disadvantage.

## **SESSIONS AND CALL FOR PAPER**

The general theme will be articulated into three main focuses developed in three different sessions, illustrated by the following call for papers:

### **1. Historical and cultural roots of self-organization in the city.**

Planners have often confused reality with its representation, mistaking the city for the map that represents it. They have not thought at the city as a dynamic set of places produced by the visible and invisible relations that people establish with their living environments, but as a combination of forms and signs, situated in a space they imagined as continuous and homogeneous. By separating form from life, they conceived the city not as a process, not as the result of complex practices and social relationships, but as a drawing, as a mental product, designed in a laboratory or in a cabinet, and then projected, all at once and imperiously, on a territory they imagine empty, lacking life and history. On the contrary, the history of the city and of the territories themselves are crucial to understand how, if we focus on the moment when the city emerges as a coherent spatial agglomeration, we frequently underestimate what Soja (2000) calls «dynamic processes associated with the spatiality of social life and the social construction of human geographies». From the polis of ancient Greece to medieval cities, but also from the different uses of territory in the Italian and international context, it is evident how processes of self-organization and self-management have a founding role in the shaping of different forms of territoriality. These processes cannot be reduced to classical dichotomies such as public/private; instead, they are connected with different forms of association, aimed at the production of common goods. They are specific forms of production of urban and territorial space, that have been produced by different historical processes, intimately linked with the cultural and environmental nature of the various geographic contexts. They have been called into question and marginalized by the establishment of modern nation states, or of colonial empires. In Southern America, for example, colonization superimposed on deeply rooted cultural traditions, resulting in the erasure of these forms, that now appear as difficult elements to integrate in the ordinary management of the city.

It is crucial to investigate the rationality – we might think it as a collective intelligence – that directs these experiences. It can be understood starting from the relation with the environment and with the territorial context, a founding element that constitutes specific cultures, abilities, competences, forms of relationship. Different situations lead to different forms of identity. By comparing different situations, we can reach a wider understanding of the complexity and richness of processes and cultures that took roots in them.

This panel investigates this huge set of problems, and aims to bring back the attention on the historic and cultural roots of self-organization, on its diversity, and on the organic and participative approaches to planning that try to highlight not only the dynamics of production of space, but also the different forms that the right to the city can take.

## **2. Searching for an "enabling" space. Dialogues and bridges between institutions and self-organization practices for a collaborative territorial planning and management.**

In recent years, collaborative practices between different subjects in urban planning have changed following the transition from the rational paradigm to complexity.

The involvement of inhabitants, local communities and organized committees, as well as a wider network of public and private actors, in the government of the city, seems to be a consolidated passage, at least in rhetoric, and it has also influenced in some cases norms and planning tools. This new collaborative perspective, which the seminar intends to underline and problematize, sees pressure for experimentation and consolidation by the institutions, but also by the inhabitants and other actors. In some cases, some of these "coalitions", for example in certain urban suburbs or internal areas, have gained long experience of mutualism and collaboration in the management of common territorial goods.

There is a wide interest not only in terms of policies, but also in terms of building co-research areas, where knowledge is the result of a multiplicity of practices and knowledge. An emerging interdisciplinary approach includes not only town planning, but also social sciences (anthropology, sociology, community psychology, etc.) and local economics, which have been involved in the understanding and inclusion of self-organization practices in territorial planning for years.

From this point of view, which opens to the search for a new model of representative democracy or deliberative democracy, it is to rethink both the role of the institutions as well as of the citizens, and the relationships between the different actors interacting with the construction of a territory. On the one hand, the public subject should wonder how to enhance the capabilities, the design, the skills and the social leading role, which territories express. On the other hand, local actors themselves should be able to pursue traditional conflictual but also subsidiary logic, learning to be the protagonists of a shared process of defining the public / collective interest. All actors, beyond the features and roles, have to start a path, specific to context and dynamics, which has a "enabling" character for everyone, because it requires each one to get out of the own frames and routines, to build new ones.

Developing these paths can also give rise to indications (and eventually rules and norms) that are a trace that can remain for successive experiences and processes, to protect "common goods" or "participation" rules that are often overturned.

The session therefore focuses on this reflection, discussing the characteristics of processes, actions, collaborative interventions looking at what they have generated in terms of new skills, new organizational practices, new ways of interacting. So what is this "enabling" character? Is it necessary to develop an epistemological advance, and which one, that will overcome the state-

private-community dichotomy? What achievements have reached the urban and territorial self-organizing movements in Italy and in the world? What practices has the public actor introduced, through which changes in the structure of public administration and management? Can we still talk about the right to participate and the utility of open forms of conflict? What critical assessment can we make of international and Italian experiences that have worked with participation tools (e.g. neighborhood contracts, urban centers, regional laws, river contracts, neighborhood house, public debates, community enterprise, etc.)?

### **3. Powers and terrains of ambiguity in the field of urban self-organization today.**

Self-organization processes have always been part of the city's construction, of the "city making". And they have always presented ambiguous situations, as a field of comparison between different subjects, with different intentions and interests, even in conflict between them. Even more this complicates in relation with existing institutions (up to the modern state) and with socio-economic dynamics.

Starting from the critical reading of the practices and processes in progress today, the session seeks to capture the problematic nodes of today's ambiguity.

Today, these ambiguous terrains intertwine with some structural factors. First, with a radical change in the State organization and policies, which involve a backwardness of the *welfare state* and an ambiguous support to neoliberal dynamics (so self-organization processes risk to be a beneficial factor to such a retreat and even a cushion to social conflict). Second, with the evolution of economic forces in a neoliberal sense that aim to "put to work" social and even vital social relations (see questions linked to biopolitics), commodifying them and extracting wealth (see, for example, questions about the "popular economy", etc.).

The question is therefore how do self-organization practices and processes create spaces of autonomy within these dynamics and how they relate to them, whether they subordinate or express innovative pathways, whether they are structural and construct a city from below or be functionalized by patterns of hetero-direct development, etc.

Secondly, the interest is to investigate whether these forms of autonomy are capable of creating "new institutions" that might be able to change the way in which to think and offer urban services.

Finally, we want to investigate whether and how such processes are helping to create unprecedented forms of social inclusion, especially in increasingly diverse cities, or if they are creating benefits for closed communities in a general backwardness of public accountability.

To do this, it is probably also necessary to refine or redefine the interpretative tools and elaborate at the same time specific survey methodologies. What information, in terms of research methodologies, can offer ongoing studies and research?

### **ORGANIZATION OF THE CONFERENCE**

The conference will be held over three days, with three morning sessions (one for each day) on the following topics:

- 1) Historical and cultural roots of self-organization in the city;
- 2) Searching for an "enabling" space;
- 3) Powers and terrains of ambiguity in the field of urban self-organization today.

In the afternoon, fieldtrips and workshops will be managed by scholars, activists and local stakeholders. Video exhibitions and other non-academic events will be provided in the evening sessions.

The three thematic sessions will be introduced by keynote speakers and the other speakers will be selected through a call for paper.

A selection of the best papers will be published in a scientific journal.

#### **DEADLINES**

**September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017** - Deadline for the abstracts (max 4.000 characters)

**October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017**- Conclusion of abstract selection and communication to selected authors

**December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017** – Deadline for final papers (max 30.000 characters)

Abstracts and papers will be in English.

Please, send the abstracts and the final papers to [conference2017@tracceurbane.org](mailto:conference2017@tracceurbane.org)

#### **PLACE AND DATE**

The conference is a joint event of the Italian research network “Tracce Urbane / Urban Traces” and Association of European School of Planning (AESOP) Thematic Group Public Spaces and Urban Cultures hosted by Sapienza University of Rome.

The conference will be held on December 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>, 2017, at the Faculty of Engineering, Sapienza University of Rome, v. Eudossiana 18, Rome, in the centre of the city, near the Coliseum and the church of St. Peter in Vincola.

The conference will be free access.