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Density and material culture in the urban context of Mediterranean Europe

For a city as a diffused fab-lab

Abstract

Pasquale Napolitano explores the emergence and significance of the fab-lab phenomenon, beginning in the neighbourhoods of Naples and meandering through other urban communities and phenomena. He considers how these co-working spaces have become the building blocks of what he describes as a 'third industrial revolution'. He leaves us with a vision of a creative community, described by Italian sociologist Aldo Bonomi as 'smart land'.

"The present is not what we are, but rather what we become, what we are becoming, or the other, our becoming-other"

(Foucault, 1985)

> Context - The cities within the city

The starting point of this reflection is the observation of the popular neighbourhoods of a big city in Mediterranean Europe, Naples. In fact, in absolute density and housing complexity and meaning, neighbourhoods like Montesanto or Spanish Quarters, which present many similarities with the neighborhoods of other great cities of the Mediterranean (Barcelona, Istanbul) despite the structural

lack of services and infrastructure networks of European standard - or, paradoxically, precisely because of that - have been preserved intact over the years, their connotation of the city - understood in the sense of a continuous and constant staging of the gamble on the neighbour, "the other" with whom you share, often not by choice, urban space, betting that this other's proximity proves something positive for your own existence. As affirmed by Richard Sennett: "Human beings are more favoured in the development as much as they can hoard the stimuli that come from those who are different; therefore, we have to invent creative coexistence solutions", the urban body as composed of flesh and stones, as still writes Sennett (1994), by those stones of the cities that seem to tell stories at every

step.

So we are talking about a part of city that seems to have miraculously kept intact the elasticity of pre-industrial city, where, in the atavistic absence of an administrative city project, residents can (and should) do by themselves, a solution that sometimes is much more effective from the point of view of the answer to the needs and the quality of life (Turner 1976).

This malleability allows the neighbourhood to be a place of “local economy”, crafts, and old and new knowledge, a place that, not surprisingly, puts at the centre of its life the “market”¹: the market as the place on which you can dialectically rely to renegotiate human relations (Khan 1996) and which can interpret the need to give back to the city the role of a dialectical place of staging between individuals, crowds and ethnic groups, leading to a possible coexistence despite differences: the market as a place of exchange and the workshop as a place of production as an antidote to an elsewhere unstoppable process, the process of culture impoverishment of the bodies in the city streets over the past two decades. A process that has many causes (La Cecla) and that is displacing in fact the streets as the nerve centre of all activity; a process that sometimes appears unstoppable, especially in heavily monumental contexts, easily subject to museification or gentrification.

All the trends described above, however, seem to have scraped only the surface tissue of popular neighbourhoods like Montesanto or Porta Capuana.

Of course, unfortunately, this centrality of productive and creative activities, aimed at the production of new urbanity, is not a phenomenon we can see all over the urban fabric. On the contrary, it presents many pockets of gentrification (a thing that anyway is certainly less aggressive than in other contexts), in particular as a result of a renewed tourist attractiveness that some areas of the old town present, with a succession of shops of alleged authenticity, pizzerias and B&Bs, and also unique examples, such as San Gregorio

Armeno, the street of nativity scene makers².

At the same time, other critical elements of popular neighbourhoods can undoubtedly be found in the conflict caused by the private colonisation of public space, with its lack of commons, spaces where the community can express certain aspects of social life, such as parks, gyms, etc. Probably the massive presence of neighbourhood associations is specifically intended to compensate for these deficits through the introduction of social mutuality as a partial antidote to the lack of places where life can find room for civic use. Despite the administrative obstacles, and by virtue of the incessant transformation that involves the social and cultural capital of these neighbourhoods that is reshaping itself through always new expressiveness, that compose a dense network of weak ties, and that see their own strength channeled through new urban regeneration stories - active in volunteering, protection of heritage, and finally in the workshops. In fact, a piece of the city transforms the manufacturing base in a vector of social cohesion, diffusion and exchange of knowledge.

Expanding on this point of view, the question should be seen as a general loss of ability to interpret reality through canonical tools of both architectural and strategic planning. In an age when you are forced to stop the urban sprawl, and where the only possibility seems to be to transform what the modern city has bequeathed to us, says Robin Evans (1982): “The cumulative effect of architecture during the last two centuries has been like that of a general lobotomy performed on society at large [...] It is employed more and more as a preventative measure; an agency for peace, security and segregation, which by its very nature, limits the horizon of experience - reducing noise-transmission, differentiating movement patterns, suppressing smells, stemming vandalism, cutting down the accumulation of dirt, impeding the spread of disease, veiling embarrassment, closeting indecency and abolishing the unnecessary; incidentally reducing daily life to a private shadow-play”. . While the Western world

is cursed by such decennial phenomena, in neighbourhoods like Montesanto there is an explosion of life.

> Why a diffused fab-lab?

All this is inextricably linked to the themes of smart specialisation and creative industries, seen as a lever for urban regeneration by virtue of the strong concentration of activities on the territory and the importance of face-to-face relationships that bind the economic activities together (Storper 2013); as well as to the theme of making and the practice of digital manufacturing as a contemporary and resilient form of cultural production.

This cultural industry segment has been ignored for years, and has only become the object of studies in recent years. So particular attention should be paid to craftsmanship and its new developments, making a new semantic placement necessary in the new urban policies as a form of material culture, a non-verbal knowledge as a new connecting interface between the relationship - otherwise cut in the current division of labour - between hands and head and heart (Sennett 2008): the use of hands in the cultural industry in its various fields, even in those universes that by now were completely thought of as a prerogative of industrial mass production.

In this territorial and anthropic context, it is necessary that the productive fabric of the city's popular districts changes, enhancing its density, that must not stop just at population density but has to also become production density to generate public space and new community, introducing, together with skills and craftsmanship, new "dynamic capabilities" that focus on new technologies, to work alongside the "normal" capability, so as to create networking and knowledge sharing³, crucial questions of artisan knowledge, but through a leap on an urban scale.

In the contemporary production system, in fact, the production of knowledge benefits from forms of collaboration and sharing, leading us into a new phase that could be

called relational capitalism, as if this kind of already socially very heterogeneous reality has devoted itself to this kind of approach: a kind of diffused fab-lab, a co-working space customised for the neighbourhood: from being together in the fab-lab to staying together in the fab-lab-neighbourhood⁴.

Richard Florida affirms that a favourable environment for creativity and development of innovation requires the presence of three elements: individual talent (training, skills, experience); a tolerant (and multicultural) environment; and the necessary technological infrastructure. Godoe broadens the perspective by redefining the economic benefit that is to the basis of many models of the innovation dynamics, highlighting as key elements: aesthetic factors (defined as "pleasure and attraction associated with beauty"); creativity; and serendipity - all features that do not seem to be missing in historic centres like in Naples and in many other Mediterranean cities.

The fab-lab phenomenon is the focus of attention here as a potential driving force for new business opportunities in the cultural and creative sectors. The economy of these new actors, following the guidelines of the knowledge economy, follows the network's laws (search for advantages through collaborative efforts), but also the cultural routes of the land from which they come and, last but not least, the attraction forces of local scientific and technological centres. An example of a network is the organisation of these makers' networks structured in "fab-labs": creative workshops, small shops that produce objects thanks to new digital technologies, practically what the Economist has called the "Third Industrial Revolution", a new way to produce digitally and with non-standard tools, open spaces that are created to bring digital fabrication and the open source culture into a physical location, where machines, ideas, people and new approaches can freely mingle. The most significant aspect of the fab-lab movement is its systemic potential to differ from traditional production, starting from innovative concepts, such as open source, local production, bottom-up funding, in contexts characterised by

strong interdisciplinarity: artists, engineers, designers, programmers and artisans who work together experimenting with creative paths of future development; moreover, in this kind of scenario the research/development and the training/disclosure activities will be particularly sensitive to urban ecology, co-production and advanced craftsmanship, linking together the scientific community, the local institutions and the community. Insisting precisely on the most significant aspect of experimental and workshop practice of fab-lab, the co-working: working together in a horizontal way you can guide the value of innovation and of typical technologies of such spaces in the sense of a relational value, outside of a useless innovation rhetoric⁵.

Therefore, co-working is a tool to talk of the metropolitan space as a creative city, like happens in other European cities that presents portions of the city with a strong social and planning dynamics, in an idea of the city as a complex infrastructure capable of producing networks, that is also required by the guidelines of the European territorial cooperation program URBACT II. The attempt in the years to come will therefore be to develop, in the interests of European network, integrated management strategies and best practices to facilitate the balance between heritage conservation of historic urban centers and their socio-economic development, and to increase the competitiveness of the most vibrant and vital areas of city historic center. From this point of view, art and culture - even the material culture - become a tool to regenerate (materially and symbolically) abandoned areas, to rediscover monuments and rarely visited sites, engage citizens in community life, as evidenced by the European Report on Cultural Heritage drawn up in 2015 on the initiative of the European Commission (CHCfE 2015), as well as by the report of the European Parliament 'Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe'⁶.

In an effort to give back to the community - not only an artistic community - the required good, a good that the public sector alone is not able to provide anymore from time

immemorial: a relational space, a community space where there can be the polis, a space in which intelligences can be fed encouraging relationships, a space in which ideas can circulate and can be shared, consistently with the approach whereby the main contribution to the development by cultural heritage is not so much in the revenues generated by the public of the individual cultural events or by the impact on the tourism sector, as in its contribution to social innovation process, in its natural role of capabilities production in different areas of life: in the relationships with creativity and innovation, in the skills to sew the urban space identity, up to the capacity to be a motor of collective imaginaries, and to the ability to be a vector of urban and environmental regeneration.

The potential of the phenomenon requires a different assumption of responsibilities and leadership by the politics and administrative machinery that go along with these new informal trajectories of enterprise and cultural offerings reorganisation. They would be asked to act as activators of enabling contexts that, for example, favour the diversity of operating entities (for profit and non-profit); the collaboration among governance actors; the development of operator skills on several fronts; the incubation of new realities; the culling of bureaucratic constraints; the creation of "free zones" in which to facilitate research and private investment; the creation of platforms that help to generate economies of competence and to promote vertical integration and the internationalisation of profiles and markets.

> [Conclusions: the material culture as 'smart land' laboratory](#)

This possible balance between density and knowledge in the urban context is obtainable by the model of what Ezio Manzini defines as "creative communities", outposts of new sociality, which in the perspective of diffused planning experiment with new practices through collaborative systems, planned to solve problems and generate sociability. If

in the future these groupings of sociability and knowledge will be transformed into more systematic entities, we will have to immediately experiment with new ways of doing⁷. In this sense, Fabrizio Barca speaks of the need for an “experimenter state”, finally corroborating the local as the humus of hard work and community cohesion. About this topic, Aldo Bonomi speaks of ‘smart land’: a territory always tells about its contemporaneity, its capacity to produce, and in the same way, the artisan knowledge is undoubtedly a way to identify the creative potential of the popular and middle classes of communities that inhabit the popular quarters of the city through a shared and recognised practice according to a necessary semantic gap in the definition of the ‘creative class’: no longer a bohème circle of artists, experimenters, musicians, architects, or graphic designers, since the creativity of a region is given by the popular aspect of the poor and the middle classes (cf La Cecla), who, understanding and using the know-how as a methodology, a practice and a language, become factors of activation of actions and processes responsible for urban transformation and social emancipation in the territories in which they live and in the professional activities they perform.

In fact, cities become creative if they maintain a balance between everyday life and the other; therefore, to promote in the international context the artisan (and neo-artisan) work will necessarily mean to promote a process of convergence between the components of the urban fabric in which such activity has been produced, and of which, in some aspects, is a cultural expression - through a processing that becomes project and planning method on informal modalities (Storper 2013).

It is therefore necessary to “trigger a phase of development based on a new social paradigm” through the recovery of the “artisan spirit of knowing how to do well a thing” (Sennett 2008), as a basis of essential skills in order to “build a different performance and not having to propose an already known one”, out of that consolatory narrative that in recent years

has cloaked the rediscovery of the artisan knowledge, to aspire to the production of new knowledge.

In conclusion we must aspire to a greater awareness of planning strategies oriented to urban smart specialisation, in a way to enhance the thousand realities nestled in the creative districts of the cities that have not yet been told.

End notes:

1. In our case the historic Pignasecca market, which almost extends over the entire neighbourhood
2. The historic street where artisans and venditori of typical votive statues are concentrated, and whose governance has always been a moot point among the operators (Santagata 2006)
3. “In the higher stages of skill, there is a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective”. (Sennett, 2008, p. 56)
4. In contemporary capitalism, then, the production of knowledge benefits from the processes of sharing and collaboration, leading us into a new phase that could be called the relational capitalism. Co-working, the fab-lab and incubators, due to their essence in collaborative spaces, become the places where new capitalism is produced.
5. The choice of these operators to work within collaborative organisations is not functional productivity but rather the quality of the relations of production and the production itself before then. (Cf Busacca 2015)
6. 'Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe'. European Parliament's report, drafted by the Committee on Culture and Education dated 06.24.2015, rapporteur: Mr Mircea Diaconu
7. The observation in the current phase of networks between operators in the neighbourhood (workshops, associations, etc) shows a configuration next to a smart community, an entity characterised by extensive and blurred boundaries: indeed, wanting to find an appropriate criterion for measuring “the ‘intelligence’ of a community, we must consider a quality parameter by which the greater the ‘adaptive capacity’ of a system in transition ready to ‘get involved’ in order to transform the critical issues into opportunities, the higher must be its estimated level of ‘intelligence’”, according to a report on direct proportionality, in the latest attempt to come to indicate the tools and concrete practices makers to embark on a new operating behaviour to recognise the evolutionary potential of the cultural heritage and open scenarios of choices connected to this renewed understanding.

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