

Community & Space for it

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How to make a community as well as the space for it

‘community to come’

The term ‘community’, is at the core of all regeneration programmes, and remains for me problematic when used uncritically, and tokenistically, as in the language of governmental policies and regeneration programmes. In this discourse, ‘community’ is a generic term undifferentiated and associated with deprived neighbourhoods. It is, as Jeremy Till puts it in our co-edited book *Architecture and Participation* ‘a wishful and wistful hope that fractured territories can be reconsolidated into some semblance of community, without ever specifying what that word may actually mean’. (1)

Artists, philosophers and political theorists have critically approached the notion of community, trying to understand the sense of ‘being-in-common’ beyond the generic and undifferentiated term. They have introduced a notion of community that exists only through time and space determinates, in the very articulation of person-to-person, of being-to-being; suggesting that the politics of community cannot be separated from the politics of place. (2)

Questions around the term ‘community’ in socio-politics, overlap with those surrounding the notion of ‘public’ in art and architecture. Like ‘community’, ‘public’ is a generic notion, most often understood as what is ‘common’: of shared or of common interest, or as what is accessible to everyone. *Public* has a cognitive dimension, but also a political and poetic one. It may also have a double meaning, of social totality and specific audiences. The notion of ‘public’ has been variously articulated, ie. ‘public realm’, ‘public sphere’ or ‘public space, each time conveying an ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings.

Many architects and planners today advocate the necessity of having more public space in the city. Richard Rogers in his report *Towards an Urban Renaissance* (Urban Task Force, 1999) calls for such public spaces, envisaging them as squares, piazzas, unproblematically open to all. However, as Doreen Massey notes in her recent book *For Space*, ‘from the greatest public square to the smallest public park, these places are a product of, and internally dislocated by, heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting social identities/relations’. (3) This is what gives real ‘public’ dimension. Public space should be, then, described in terms of its evolving relations, as a space in permanent mobility, not only physical but also social and political. Architects and urban planners might learn that creativity is required where the conflicting nature of public space is revealed; by way of imagining solutions, or of making sense together, etc.

On this point, contemporary art practices are maybe advanced. Rather than the centralised and fixed notion of public, inherited from modern theories, many contemporary artists, curators and cultural workers have started to address the public within its fluid and plural forms; speaking about *publics* constructed as ‘elusive forms of social groupings articulated reflexively around specific discourses’. (4)

As Jorge Ribalta puts it, ‘the public is constructed in open, unpredictable ways in the very process of the production of discourse and through its different means and modes of circulation. Therefore, the public is not simply there, waiting passively for the arrival of cultural commodities; it is constituted within the process itself of being called. The public is a provisional construction in permanent mobility.’ (5)

multiple and informally produced public space

Making community and making space for community cannot be separated. Planners and architects might start to consider the inherent social and *relational dimension* of the spaces they create, and to integrate their specific temporalities and mobilities into the design process. The Lefebvrian understanding of the 'production of space' being social and political is now widely accepted, far beyond Marxism and sociology, as a base for any sustainable approach in urban development. The question that remains is that of methodology and critical innovation, the degree of openness of the different professional and political frameworks that commission such approaches, which might leave room for unpredictability and bottom-up proposals issued from real claims. The architectural production of public space could start by identifying the claims for it. Sometimes these claims are modest and informal, but what is important is how to transform them into a brief, a challenge, and sometimes a proposal that will give room to the multiplicity of desires and needs of diverse sets of users.

An example is given by muf's project 'Small Open Spaces that are not Parks' (6) commissioned by the Stratford Development Partnership on behalf of the London Borough of Newham, in 2003. It was a commission to work with residents to identify small open spaces suitable for investment, devising programmes and identifying sources of funding for them and acknowledging the need to make provision for the young people in the borough. Through an extensive consultation, 34 separate sites have been identified across the borough, including unexpected types of open spaces that people felt as being 'public': a pedestrian bridge, a cinema foyer, underpasses, a strip of pavement outside a chip shop, an alleyway bridge, a cinema foyer, an alley frequented by girls only. muf translated this street expertise into a brief and a proposal which states a typology of spaces which consider all the recorded claims. What is important is the multiplicity and smallness of them, which express the scale of use, the modesty but also the precision of claims.

In the 'Parks&Products' project, *public works* (7) identify the different social forces which manifest themselves through spatial and temporal variables which shape Kensington Garden's public space. The project proposes tools and processes to operate with the fluid and elusive entity of a 'community' made by informal and temporary relationships between gardeners, dog walkers, catering staff, walking groups, pupils from College Park School, etc. Their tools are concretized as spatial objects and infrastructural devices which increase connectedness and enhance the networked nature of the public space. The quality of these devices resides in their mobility, temporality, smallness, informality. They define as such the open, unplanned and emergent nature of the public space.

dealing with the messy, complex, lives of users

There is a 'non-planning' tradition in British architecture which starts in the 1970s: an architecture represented by practitioners like Cedric Price and theorists like Rayner Banham, Peter Barker and Peter Hall, who aimed at subverting the planning legislation and 'putting planning back into politics' by promoting freedom, social mobility and participation (8). From that architecture, still believing in the modernist values and the revolutionary role of technology, practices like *muf* and *public works* have kept their resistance to imposed aesthetics, their playfulness and enthusiastic attempt to get people to shape their own environment.

The important drive for participation that was originated by critical practices in the 1970s, has now become the Government's mantra. In the UK and most European countries, urban policies and regeneration practices encourage 'community participation', but by lacking specificity they generate stereotypical approaches and reiterate fixed, notions of 'community' and 'public space'. The existing frameworks of both governmental and local participative programmes are organised in the same way, without taking into account the particularity of each situation. Participation becomes an organised (and potentially manipulated) part of any

regeneration project, in which the users are meant to be given a voice, but the process itself erases the outcomes. The problem is also that the term ‘participation’ is accepted uncritically, idealised and centred on concepts of consensus (9). This is what some would call a ‘pseudo-participation’ and, as Till suggests, the question for contemporary architects and planners would be ‘how to move from it to a transformative participation, how to suggest a positive transformation of architectural production that benefits architects and users alike’ (10). This *transformative participation* ‘makes confrontation with difference inevitable, as the users will bring to the table their personal beliefs. In the negotiation of the personal with the social, the individual with the collective, political space emerges’. This is something that architects, who are still obsessed with maintaining control over space through their buildings, could learn; that art practices can provide tools and critical methods to approach what goes beyond strict management, to reveal the political nature of space. Artists are also sometimes better positioned to deal with the ‘messy, complex, lives of users’.

‘stealth architecture’

The contemporary art theorist and curator Stephen Wright has remarked on the emergence in the past few years of a broad range of practices that can be described as ‘art-related’ rather than ‘art-specific’ activities (11). They constitute a kind of ‘stealth art’, operating in contexts often far removed from art-specific spaces and infiltrating spheres of ‘world-making’ beyond the scope of work operating under the banner of art. They are considering art in terms of its specific means, its tools and its competence, rather than its specific ends as artworks. Within these practices, ‘art remains free to deploy all its symbolic force in lending enhanced visibility and legibility to social processes of all kinds’. Art perceived as a ‘latent activity’ has another function, or in Wright’s terms, a ‘use value’: ‘it crops up in the everyday not to aestheticise it, but to *inform* it’.

In questioning the role of architectural practices in revalidating everyday life activities and giving back value to existent places, maybe a ‘stealth architecture’ could also exist: an architecture which would deal with *architecture-related* activities, rather than *architecture-specific* ones, which would consider architecture in terms of its specific means (tools, competences, processes), rather than its specific ends (constructions and buildings). What would it be, this architecture which ‘crops up in the everyday’ not to give it a form, but to inform it?

This is a question that I have also raised in my own practice *atelier d’architecture autogérée (aaa)*, a collective practice including architects, artists, urban planners, landscape designers, sociologists, students and residents living in La Chapelle area of Paris. (12) Together we conduct research into participatory urban actions. This practice allows for the re-appropriation and reinvention of public space through everyday life activities (gardening, cooking, chatting, reading, debating etc.), understood as creative practices in urban contexts. The aim is to create a network of self-managed places by encouraging residents to gain access to their neighbourhood and to appropriate and transform temporary available and under-used spaces. It is an approach that valorises a flexible and reversible use of space, and aims to preserve urban ‘biodiversity’ by providing for a wide range of life styles and living practices to coexist. The starting point was the realisation of a temporary garden, made out of recycled materials on one of the derelict sites belonging to the RFF (the French Railway company), located in the area. This garden, called *ECObox*, has been progressively extended into a platform for urban creativity, curated by the aaa members, residents and external collaborators, catalysing activities at the level of the whole neighbourhood. It literally has cropped up in the neighbourhood’s everyday life. (13)

What is interesting for all the practices mentioned above, is that none are described as architectural in a traditional way. These practices are located ‘in between’, and their proposed devices are meant to increase this ‘betweenness’; to reveal what is different but also what is

common within a multi-angled approach, by sharing methods and inventing cross tools. This sharing of methodology and hybridisation increase creativity and open up unexpected possibilities of thinking and acting in the public realm.

the peculiarities of existence

If Katherine Shonfield (14) identifies the role of art in urban regeneration of making the users feel more empowered in their confrontations with rules and policies, could this not become, by extension, the role of an architectural practice as well, if this practice accepts getting rid of its authority and power.

aaa defined itself as a practice which enables inhabitants to participate directly, to decide how they want to organise themselves, knowing that sometimes the community desires could be different from the public or private interests. Both residents and professionals become equal members in a 'bricolaged' structure: 'what happens depends upon what people bring with them and what they do once they are there'. This kind of structure also preserves a certain economic and political independence in the negotiation process with both private and public bodies. But at the same time, it is a structure which takes risks, because nothing can be taken for granted when everything depends on the presence of all those involved. Sometimes this presence is conflictual, for people's desire change along the way, and one should learn how to deal with tensions, contradictions, oppositions and failures. The residents also participate in the invention of new tools for multiple and flexible use. For example, a series of modules of mobile furniture have been co-produced by *aaa* members, eco-designers, residents and students, to function as urban catalysts and mobile extensions of the *ECObox* garden: these include an urban kitchen, a play station, a media lab, a library, a fountain-rainwater-collector, and a joinery mini-workshop. They generate infrastructure and networks, stimulate desire and pleasure at the scale of proximity. Inhabitants can use them for different activities to appropriate space within the city. Nobody is in control of the outcomes of these practices: neither the architects, nor the institutional representatives, not even the community.

This lack of power is at the same time an enormous power. It is not the power of making things for the community, of representing it, (which is the architects, planners and regeneration officers' privilege), but of participating in *making the community* itself, through discrete spatial interventions. It is a performative shared experience of community: 'community is coming about, or rather, is happening to us in common', as Jean-Luc Nancy says (15).

public space of proximity

A renewed approach to architecture and urban planning cannot be initiated solely by centralised structures and governmental bodies. It must also include 'microscopic attempts' at the level of collective and individual desires within the micro-social segments of public space: neighbourhood associations, informal teams, self-managed organisations, small institutions, alternative spaces and individuals themselves. Urban development policies need to learn how to make provision for such attempts.

The micro-dimension of *public works*' interventions (i.e. manufactured objects, improvised urban furniture, cleaning and gleaning, etc.), bring precision, detail and localisation with the public space. These activities are additionally effective in their attempts to change and transform space. The scale of proximity, the small scale devices and the walking distances that demarcate the area of intervention, bring another quality to the networks and the relationships between participants. They increase *intensity* of living.

As with *aaa*'s project in Paris, and *muf*'s project 'Small open spaces that are not parks', small scale can come to define the public space itself. Such projects are based on the temporary appropriation and use of leftover spaces and urban interstices, and commonly include waste space from the real-estate market, or due to the temporary neglect of the urban planning

policies. These are 'other spaces', the 'other' to what constitutes the 'planned' city. Studies have demonstrated that in big cities they function as an alternative to conventional forms of public space, that nowadays are more and more subject to surveillance and control. The 'leftovers' are spaces of relative freedom, where rules and codes can still be redefined. These 'spaces of uncertainty', to borrow architects Cuppers and Miessen's term (16), are the very opposite of the functional spaces of the city, as recast public space as heterogeneous, fragile, indefinite, fragmented and multiple. The status of these spaces inspired *aaa's* strategy, the aim of which was to leave space for 'others', others than the usual actors of the urban planning process, visible and less visible users, through a process that would enable them to get involved in the decision making and take control over spaces in the area where they live. It is also a political process. The problem is how to avoid freezing functions in these spaces, while conserving their flexibility, their programmatic 'uncertainty', their fragility and indefiniteness.

Another way to create a public space of proximity is through sizing temporary dynamics. The *aaa's* strategy tries to manage these different temporalities, politics of use, and ownership statuses to propose, instead, temporary inhabitations that will create new usages and new urban functions in the area. Temporality supposes mobility and multiplicity. The mobile furniture modules, acting as urban catalysts in the area, generate temporary agencies, and form progressive networks of actors. As the aims are continually evolving according to new spatial opportunities, participation becomes a *process-in-progress*. Usually, the participative process is solidified as soon as the goals are met: when a contested space is occupied, a project is built, etc. The role of the temporary activities is to keep the use of space and the process of decision open.

The sustainability of processes within temporary (architecture and art) interventions is one of the concerns with the regenerations programmes which target punctual interventions without considering the continuity with the dynamics which have been created by them. Allowing (both in terms of funding and politics) spaces to function according to their own dynamics, encouraging different temporary and self-managed agencies to emerge in time, this is a solution to stir public participation and make it sustainable and transformative process.

- (1) J. Till, 'The Negotiation of Hope' in *Architecture and Participation*, P.B Jones, D. Petrescu, Jeremy Till, (eds) Spon Press, London 2005, p.23
- (2) Philosophical inquiries into the notion of the community by Jean-Luc Nancy (The Inoperative Community, 1983), Maurice Blanchot (The Unavowable Community, 1983) and Giorgio Agamben (The Coming Community, 1993), seek to open it up toward a broader politico-ethical context. Nancy's call for the deconstruction of the immanent community has been particularly influential: community as the dominant Western political formation, founded upon a totalizing, exclusionary myth of national unity, must be tirelessly "unworked" in order to accommodate more inclusive and fluid forms of dwelling together in the world, of being-in-common.
- (3) D. Massey, *For Space*, Sage Publications, London 2005, p 152.
- (4) Cf. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002.
- (5) J.Ribalta, 'Mediation and Construction of Publics : The MACBA Experience', http://republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01_en.htm
- (6) muf is a collaborative practice of art and architecture committed to public realm based in London. (<http://www.muf.co.uk/urban.htm>)
- (7) public works is an art/architecture collective based in London consisting of three architects and an artist who have been collaborating in different constellations since 1998. (http://www.publicworksgroup.net/pages/Park_Products_01.html)
- (8) See 'Non-Plan Essays on Freedom, Participation and Change', *Modern Architecture and Urbanism*, Jonathan Hugues and Simon Sadler (eds), Architectural Press , Oxford 2000, pp. 2 - 22

- (9) For example *Architecture and Participation* book criticises pre-formatted participative approaches and suggest innovative approaches, which are both creative and critical.
- (10) J. Till, oc. p.31
- (11) Stephen Wright, 'The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade: An Essay on Use-Value and Art-Related Practice', <http://www.turbulence.org/blog/archives/000906.html>
- (12) The *atelier d'architecture autogérée / studio of self-managed architecture (aaa)* is a collective platform, which conducts actions and research concerning urban mutations and cultural, social and political emerging practices in the contemporary city. (www.urbantactics.com)
- (13) For more details see my article 'Losing control, keeping desire', *Architecture and Participation*, P.B Jones, D. Petrescu, Jeremy Till, (eds), Routledge, London 2005, ps 43-64
- (14) K. Shonfield 'We need artists' ways of doing things - A critical analysis of the role of the artist in regeneration practice', *Architecture and Participation*, P.B Jones, D. Petrescu, Jeremy Till, (eds), Routledge, London 2005, p.225
- (15) cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*
- (16) cf. K.Cupers and M.Miessen, *Spaces of Uncertainty*, Wuppertal, Verlag Müller, 2002

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- Doina Petrescu, 'Losing Control, Keeping Desire' in P. Blundell-Jones, D.Petrescu and J.Till (eds) *Architecture and Participation*, Routledge, 2005

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