

**Participation and design. The collective process of sense making in urban projects**

by Emanuela Saporito

Tutor: Agata Spaziante

Co-tutor: Matteo Robiglio

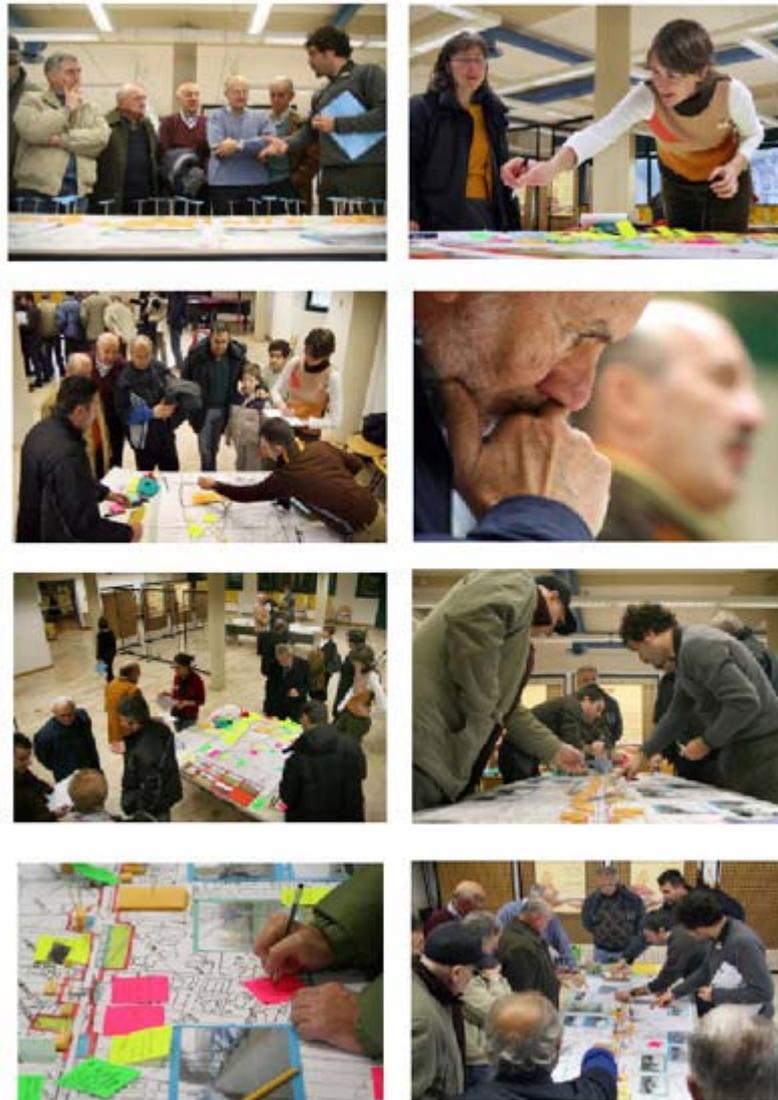
Among the ever growing scepticism and supporters and experimentations, the topic of citizen's direct participation in decision making processes is still an extreme and urgent news. In the light of the recent news which, between Naples and Val di Susa, once again demonstrates the necessity to deal with an insurgent population, it becomes increasingly coherent, in relation to territorial planning and design, to examine this controversial topic more deeply.

Indeed, for years ministerial and European norms have foreseen methods of inclusive decision, enriching their language with new expressions such as "partnership" and "participation". The investigation I ran enters into this normative and cultural setting but at the same time attempting to surpass certain common ideological conceptions, often the basis of such policies, that consider participation "a good thing in itself" and even "the only solution to all the negatives of town planning". The approach I propose on the other hand is that of analysing the **practical aspects of "doing participation"** by studying its methods, meanings and implications.

The operational reality is that the participant sizing is relegated to "liturgical type" behaviour too frequently, confined to local consultations between representatives who are unable to produce sufficient results both in terms of sharing knowledge and the development of collective intelligence processes.

The comparison between these common convictions moved me to get to the root of the problem by investigating the practices of participated planning and trying to answer the following question: "is it really possible to make territorial plans which are participated?" and then "how is it possible to make the beneficiaries of the plans and policies an operative part in the definition of the latter?". Answering these questions raises some important issues, above all about meaning and specifically about method. Indeed, speaking of participation implies a clarification on "**what we mean by participation**". At the same time making participating plans on the other hand requires considerable **technical preparation** and an in-depth knowledge of the tools and languages of interaction, as can be deduced by the notable production of manuals in the last few years. All this, however, was still not sufficient.

The direct experience of participated town planning, run by the Avventura Urbana studio in Ozzano nell'Emilia, was an opportunity to experiment those tools and at the same time a place of **observation and reflection** on the mechanisms, more communicative and cognitive, which allow different people to co-ordinate themselves in order to create a shared vision, a collective plan, founded on the creativity of the participants and on **deliberative exchange**.



*immagini tratte da Avventura Urbana, (2008)*

Reading the procedures and outcomes of running a participated town planning experience therefore imposes **two levels of interpretation**: one of a **normative-procedural** nature, the other, however, of a **methodological-cognitive** nature.

The two levels are in any case strictly interrelated: specific normative and methodological decisions do not only determine the application of the participation and achievable objectives, but in particular they influence the quality of interaction and consequently the outcomes of the participation in terms of planning and social capacitation. Building a “polyphonic” view of the land therefore means favouring **deliberative and compromised interaction** in which the exchange of dialogue between expert know-how and local knowledge is based in acknowledging local people as holders of resources for the project and produces *empowerment*.

In this sense therefore the participation is intended as “the art of interactive planning”, the method and procedure for which constitute the flexible instruments and normative references for setting out processes that are comprehensible and as transparent as possible, stopping an instrumental and routine use from being a restraint to creative interaction and deliberative communication, the founding principles of sensible collective constructive processes.

For further information, e-mail:

Emanuela Saporito: [emanuela.saporito@hotmail.it](mailto:emanuela.saporito@hotmail.it)