

Chapter 2

Beyond a Buzzword: Situated Participation Through Socially Oriented Urban Living Labs



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Abstract In the broader framework of Living Labs and participatory planning, the essay proposes socially-oriented Urban Living Labs (ULLs) as a possible way of understanding and experimenting with participation in marginalized contexts. It does so by applying a focus on individual/collective capacities and enabling processes to support them. Drawing on the literature and the observation and implementation of concrete cases, the essay proposes a reflection on ULLs as situated environments in which “everyone’s” capacities are formed and tested, thus challenging the functioning of local democracy. This implies a focus as much on residents and local agents as on institutions. The essay proposes a shift from Living Labs to socially oriented Urban Living Labs, in order to foster the social dimension of planning, questioning the mechanisms of involvement and support of the most fragile profiles, often excluded from the political process. The perspective is the implementation of an enabling and mutual learning process through devices to reinforce organizations and people’s ability to reflect on, aspire to, and take action for the transformation of their life context, becoming real agents of change.

Keywords Living Labs · Participation · Situated approach · Marginalized contexts

2.1 Introduction

This essay proposes to analyze Urban Living Labs (ULLs) from the perspective of participatory planning. In the last decade, the need to adopt new forms of city governance seems increasingly evident, including various ways of interacting with a plurality of actors. Terms such as *inclusion*, *partnership*, *collaboration*, and *participation* characterize the rhetoric of different projects and policies, not only in the field of urban transformation but also in the fields of social cohesion and in cultural and integration projects. With respect to this important change, which marks an openness to these issues but also the risk of their uncritical and undifferentiated use (Brownill

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and Parker, *Plan Pract Res* 25:275–282, 2010; Legacy, *Plan theory* 16:425–442, 2017), this essay reflects on the form and quality of the participation, of which the tools adopted through the ULLs are bearers, particularly in marginalized fields. In fact, introducing positive participatory processes into these contexts means centering concrete tools to open up the decision-making arena and also centering empowerment mechanisms and inclusive tools of co-learning and co-design. ULLs, under certain conditions, can be a device to strengthen this perspective, marking some innovations with respect to the now consolidated field of participation as opportunities ‘in and for planning’ (Concilio and Rizzo (eds) *Rethinking the interplay between design and planning*. Springer, 2016).

2.2 Which Participation and Why?

The last 20 years have been marked by experimentation with, dissemination of, and subsequent consolidation of practices of a participatory nature, even within the tools of territorial government at different scales, from urban regeneration to strategic planning. This is acknowledged by some studies in the field of urban planning in Europe as well.¹ In its gradual consolidation, the field of participation is in danger of losing some of its initial charge, which was aimed at the possibility of radically generating more open and inclusive projects. On the one hand, the participatory approach has represented a discontinuity with respect to the more traditional orientations of urban planning, marking the possibility of opening up the context—considered for a long time to be exclusively technical and presided over by experts—to broader political practices and citizenship. On the other hand, a certain pervasiveness of participatory tools and methods, in the face of not being as valid in terms of shared processes, has begun to raise doubts about the effectiveness of the approach and the possibility of its widespread use. Arguably, a participatory approach oriented toward urban transformation can be summarized as follows: participation is a process promoted by public actors to stimulate individual citizens and organizations to ‘participate’ in the material and immaterial transformations of the city, using techniques of shared decision-making. This statement contains the contours and the premises of an idea of participation, on which it is useful to reflect.

The assumptions seem to be the following:

- With respect to the participation process, the public entity is the promoter and has an active role: it establishes the framework for and the rules of involvement; it designs the political and project arena; it ‘educates’ the stakeholders, and it convenes the citizens;

¹ For an overview, see Nadin et al. (2021). The article explores the evolution of European spatial planning systems in their capacity to promote integration between policy sectors, to respond adaptively to changing societal and political conditions, and to involve and engage citizens in decision-making processes. Indeed, the reach and impact of these changes is still an open question.

- The outcome of participation consists of choices and directions that can guide, in a more or less binding way, transformations or lines of conduct in the future;
- Those who participate have the possibility to actually do so in terms of time and ability, making available their ideas and their skills to the collective process free of charge and freely;
- Third figures or facilitators of participation have a neutral role and simplify the exchange through the use of tools and techniques.

A wide range of research and practices look at participation, and many have been critical of the benefits of participation in planning and more broadly in local governance, underlining the ‘crisis of participatory planning’.

Many authors have questioned whether these processes truly generate more open and inclusive policies, projects, and contexts. There are many perspectives critical of participation: some call it a ‘nightmare’ (Miessen 2010), others a ‘tyranny’ (Cooke and Kothari 2001), or something to be ‘looked upon with suspicion’ (Bobbio 2016) that is weakly oriented toward ‘increas[ing] social justice’ (Fung 2017). Participatory planning is in danger of becoming a pacified process, and the interaction between participants is more and more a functional moment to make decisions ‘a little more shared’ and to build consensus (Crosta 2003). This is even more plausible in marginal contexts, in which there are few experiments underway and in which the role of residents and local representatives is weak, while the presence of institutions is ambiguous and controversial. Besides, participation in the renovation of large-scale social-housing estates has been rather ineffective in the previous decades, primarily involving segments of the population, namely those who are best capable and most comfortable expressing themselves (Maranghi et al. 2020).² And in many cases, encouraging greater participation by marginalized groups does not safeguard values of equality, nor should it be presumed to do so (Beebeejaun 2006). For these reasons, participation could be considered an alternative among many possible policy tools, to be adopted only after a careful evaluation of its costs and benefits (Mela 2016). Moreover, participation can be articulated in different ways, depending on the territorial context, the political environment, and available instruments.

The aim of this essay is to investigate whether and under which conditions Living Labs can contribute to redefining and experimenting with participation in planning, especially in marginalized contexts. The objectives are therefore several:

- to insert the Living Lab tool into a broader framework of perspectives on participation, which problematize the relationship between technique, politics, and policies, providing a different understanding of the role of actors and the role of spaces in the interaction process;
- to reflect on the specificities of social ULLs as a possible way of understanding participation in marginal contexts from the perspective of capacities and skills,

² Mainly the voices of elderly retirees and what can be called the middle-class segment of the population are heard, at the expense of the voices of others such as young people, immigrant populations, etc. The risk is that this ‘selective’ participation and the dominant voice of some groups contributes to and increases, rather than regulates conflicts between generations, between long-term residents in the neighborhoods and the newly arrived (Lefrançois 2021).

and as a specific variation within a broader framework of experiments on Living Labs;

- to investigate the characteristics of social ULLs starting from an interdisciplinary and inter-scalar experiment called the SoHoLab project, where we had the opportunity to field-test the implementation of three Living Labs in different marginalized social-housing neighborhoods.³ Through this empirical study, reflections emerge on how to understand participation in this type of context.

2.3 Three Key Perspectives on Democracy in Participatory Planning

When discussing participation, there are many aspects to pay attention to, carefully evaluating the costs and benefits of this way of enlarging decision-making processes and transformation of the city. The issue we are reflecting on concerns on the one hand the relationship between technical and political dimensions, and on the other the relationship between institutions and citizens (both understood as collaborative or autonomous promoters of participation). As we will see later, this aspect will also concern Living Labs, which, as tools for initiating and implementing inclusive processes, can have different characteristics, depending on how participation is understood.

In fact, participatory processes are often managed with sophisticated techniques of communication and dissemination, the collection of opinions, and the construction of forums and discussions, most often using pre-packaged formats with the support of technological tools. Living Labs have increasingly become platforms to support this approach.

However, the more participation is understood as a policy instrument that is technical in nature and therefore, to some extent, certain and adjustable, the more there is a risk of downplaying its political significance. This risk relates to power relations and their effects on people and places; the explicit confrontation between different parties and opinions, which can also result in conflict; the interdependencies between local conditions and urban or supra-local balances; and the structural factors that run through groups and society. Ultimately, the emphasis on the political disposition of participation refers to forms of democracy and the possibility of constructing frames of activation and confrontation in which an unpredictable and unexpected creative potential can be released, building new conditions for institutional and social action.

Contemporary perspectives on democracy connected to the participatory dimension are articulated and varied. In this essay, I focus only on those theoretical frames

³ Founded by *ERA-NET Cofund Smart Urban Future Call 2016*, the SoHoLab project involved the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (international coordinator), DASTU—Politecnico of Milan, AHTTEP—AUSSEER—École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris La Villette. Additional nonacademic partners at a local level were included as well. For more information, see the website: www.soholab.org.

that open up different perspectives and consequent ways of understanding participation as a political context in planning, in which a multiplicity of actors, not only the public institutions, could have a role as promoters and activators.

A first, well-established frame concerns deliberative democracy, which operates on cognitive resources and on the creation of a relational context. In this frame, on one hand, the public actor can recognize citizens' preferences expressed in structured environments; on the other citizens prove their accountability through their point of view and inquiring about public choices. This process is not necessarily an occasion to remove differences and conflicts, but it can create an arena in which disagreements can be expressed in a reflective and informed way (Florida 2017). Deliberative thinking is mostly associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas (1996),⁴ who considers deliberation to be established by institutions, ensuring the equal participation of all. Habermas is aware of the fact that different cultures, world views, and ethics can lead to difficulties in the deliberative process. Despite that, he argues that communicative reason can create a bridge between opposing views and interests.⁵

Starting from 'deliberative polling' and going up to 'citizens juries' or 'citizens assemblies', there are numerous examples of models and methodologies that try to translate the idea of a 'deliberative democracy' into practice (Bobbio 2010). Furthermore, in some cases, this frame has been consolidated in Europe with the establishment of new rules and laws that regulate the relationship between institutions and citizens in a structured form, for example on issues such as large public works.⁶

Employing a 'radical democracy' perspective, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue that deliberative democracy risks flattening differences and repressing points of view by building consensus.⁷ They primarily suggest that power relations need to be made

⁴ Habermas introduced this concept in policy sciences and urban studies in the 1990s, arguing that political problems surrounding the organization of urban life can be resolved through deliberation: people coming together and deliberating on the best possible solution, developing a reflexive critical process of coming to the best solution. Deliberative democracy is now an influential approach to the study of democracy and political behavior. Its key proposition is that, in politics, it is not only power that counts but also good discussions and arguments.

⁵ To solve these difficulties, those who practice this kind of participation emphasize that places and instruments of discussion must be structured with higher care taken in the identification of participants, the offering of debates, the conducting of processes, and the organization of the physical space; citizens should be enabled to obtain balanced information, to consult experts with different backgrounds, and to express their opinions.

⁶ Different books examine the interplay between the normative and empirical aspects of the deliberative model of democracy, presenting the main normative controversies in the literature on deliberation, including self-interest, civility, and truthfulness and proposing methods by which deliberation can be assumed as well as measured. See, for example, Gastil and Levine (2005), Steiner (2012), Jossey et al.

⁷ Laclau and Mouffe (1985) propose to pursue a more radical vision of democracy, focusing on difference, dissent, and antagonism. The challenge is to strengthen democracy around difference and dissent, looking at ways to redefine existing power relations. This reflects a broader turn to thinking of democracy which focuses on redefining 'the political' as a realm in which new identities are formed and new agendas are generated, and through which official procedures and institutions are contested and potentially transformed.

visible and should be renegotiated and changed, setting important points of attention regarding participation.

A second frame is about policymaking and place-making—concepts linked to the definition of policies and place—through interaction and social participation. These are types of local collaborative processes, aimed at treating a complex problem through the realization of a project, the implementation of a policy, or a small concrete improvement. In critical urban practice, making can start from the concrete transformation of objects and spaces that define it and become a tool to examine a situation and trigger future action for change.

Local experiences referring to a ‘collaborative construction of the city’ are becoming more and more important for territorial development and cohesion, and therefore can no longer be considered ‘marginal’ experiences. The concepts of ‘doing together’ and ‘activation from below’ are emerging as new words for urban planning (Bianchetti 2014; Wachter 2020). In this sense, we can say that the result of participation is not so much a decision or the opening of areas for discussion and debate, as in the deliberative perspective. Instead, it is an outcome primarily concerned with concrete urban issues (policies, scenarios of change, reuse projects, modification programs, and transformations).⁸ This activity does not necessarily refer to the design of spaces, but to design processes that start from places in a broad sense (a small garden, a disused building, an urban plan, an event in public spaces, a community center, etc.); it also refers to the possibility of establishing new links with the territory based upon design and action, upon the construction of collective spaces of identity and self-representation.

In other words, a process of co-design can contribute to social mobilization, expanding the range of devices and rituals that residents and their support networks can put into practice. If approached in a situated and collaborative manner, design can support participatory processes in connecting experiences of everyday life with broader visions for more emancipatory urban futures. It also focuses on open-ended scenarios and options for change, rather than settling for the lowest common denominator (De Carli and Frediani 2021).

Finally, the third theoretical frame looks at experiences promoted in a self-organized form by citizens who participate in the transformation of the city through their practices, outside institutional settings. Actors undertake initiatives that concretely push themselves to confront urban issues, testing their ideas and abilities. These practices position participation beyond formal planning systems and highlight everyday life as a key site for urban change. This is a vast field of activities and experiences that sees the widespread involvement and leading role of citizens, individually or in association, as activators of processes of change starting from the urban space.

⁸ Design via social interaction is an attempt to construct meaning and a common space, starting from the direct sharing of the ‘things to do’ related to interests and common goods (Laino 2012). Interaction aimed at a physical structure helps participants develop a real argument consisting of small advances in content, which often take place more easily if they are concerned with the dimension of ‘making’ and the construction of a common space, which is not a deliberative space but a physical one.

The relationship between collaborative practices and the reappropriation or regeneration of urban spaces is crucial and profound.⁹ Even if social processes of this kind have always been present in our cities, today it is extra evident, since these practices are gradually expanding and covering a wider range of diverse fields and actors. Often, activation is linked with everyday actions that circumscribe areas of reappropriation, reclamation, and reinterpretation of the local, indicating ‘struggles by communities and individuals’ (Hou 2010) to find their place and expressions.

These experiences are also important occasions for ‘cultivating sociability’, experimenting with relationships, and sharing knowledge and alternative models of consumption: in many cases, they are ‘social’ experiences, that concern the dimensions of appropriation and construction of common paths (Cellamare and Cognetti 2014). They constitute what Ingold (1993) defines as a ‘taskscape’; that is, a social landscape characterized by related human activities that grow in it. These practices are not static, but instead must be considered in a continually changing procedural perspective.

The different approaches to participation and participatory planning presented here are not mutually exclusive, but there are important variations in emphasis between them. They question the role of institutions and of civil society and propose different balances between pushes for change (e.g., between top-down and bottom-up, or between ‘way of deliberation’ and ‘way of action’).

2.4 Participation as a Process of Enabling? A Possible Role for Living Labs

The three frames outlined above show different perspectives that contribute to reinterpreting participatory planning as a policy tool, i.e., as the bearer of a concrete conception of the relationship between politics and society (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007). This avoids reducing it to a technique and efficient procedure for ‘involving’ participants, valid regardless of the contexts in which it is applied.

The three frames are not exclusive, are all partially valid for reinterpreting Living Labs, and should be considered in order to take the social and political context into account. However, it is useful here to place Living Labs in the second frame, emphasizing their nature as a ‘design device’ which selects actors, interests, opportunities, resources, and problems and helps problematize the nature of the actors involved (public, political, technical, social).

Indeed, Living Labs, as described in Chap. 4 of this book, are a device to reinforce people’s ability to reflect on, aspire to, and take action for the transformation of their life context, becoming real agents of change (and in this aspect, they are part of the

⁹ Usually, these practices promote the regeneration of empty buildings or abandoned green areas or foster the organization of informal welfare and accessible cultural production.

third frame described above). Living Labs are therefore a space for building networks and alliances for change and for mutual learning and capacitation through action and design.

In this sense, they can contribute to nurturing an enabling process: a long progression and practice of education, a kind of ‘collaborative learning arena’ that builds links between narratives, competences, organizational logics, and different cultures. This ‘gym’ is a learning environment linked to the construction of interpretations, the realization of plans or the drawing of scenarios, and the implementation of concrete projects. Mutual contact and familiarity, collaboration on knowledge construction, and concrete actions of change thus become levers for learning from others and from the situation. In this way, the process stimulates improved institutional learning on the one hand. On the other, the learning practice is broader and includes other actors who progressively qualify as relevant partners (third-sector organizations, local groups, residents, etc.). A relevant outcome is also the possibility of scaling up and introducing learning into ordinary practices (both institutional and local).

To initiate this process, the question of the positioning of experts is central: they are called upon to be part of the learning dynamic, making their expertise available, while practising involvement and proximity. The figure of the expert required by this process is therefore not so much that of a facilitator but rather that of an enabler who takes part in the dynamics of the territory, inhabiting the places, within the existing power relations, close to residents and local institutions.

In some experiences, this figure is represented by university bodies, which can play an expert but ‘third’ role, taking part in processes with a propensity for self-reflection and cultural autonomy. Moreover, this figure is an actor which, by its very nature, has a vocation linked to education and the formation of skills. In this sense, the university can play a crucial role as a knowledge bridge (Benneworth and Cunha 2015): on the one hand, it becomes an enabler, legitimizing local competences and capabilities; on the other, it reinforces its role as a responsible actor among others by working directly with local operators and communities.¹⁰

Of course, there are many definitions of a Living Lab: it is an ‘umbrella’ concept that contains many aspects and different approaches, reflecting the same risks to which participation is exposed, as described above. Through the SoHoLab project, developed in contexts that pose specific questions to participation, we have developed a type of intervention that I will illustrate in the next section.

¹⁰ This condition entails finding new ways of interaction between the university and society that can overturn the one-way relationship traditionally conceived: from the idea of the city as an object of study for the university, to the idea of the city as a partner with whom the academy can build a dialogue useful for refreshing academic reflections and enhancing the collective understanding of urban practices. A new current in Italy identifies this as a society-oriented component of the Third Mission, which gives an increasing amount of value to scientific research and innovation as tools capable of supporting society in overcoming the multidimensional challenges it faces (Cognetti 2021).

The definition of the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) is similar to many others that can be found in the literature about Living Labs.¹¹ For instance, Leminen and Westerlund (2012, p. 7) define Living Labs as ‘physical regions or virtual realities in which stakeholders form public–private–people partnerships of firms, public agencies, universities, institutes, and users all collaborating for prototyping, validating, and testing of new technologies, services, products, and systems in real-life contexts’. This very broad definition highlights certain aspects in the field of citizen participation, mainly linked to certain characteristics: the idea of generating and nurturing a multifactor ecosystem; the possibility of practising a real-life oriented approach; and the opportunity to initiate a process linked to co-design, which integrates research and innovation.

A first theme is therefore related to the potential of Living Labs as multi-actor platforms, cross-boundary objects/arenas, and contexts for the creative use of knowledge that can connect stakeholders and relevant actors at different levels (institutions and the so-called ‘users’, for example, citizens and communities). In this perspective, Living Labs are devices shared by various stakeholders¹² to cocreate knowledge for sustainable products and services in real-world settings (Evans et al. 2015). The forms of interaction among the different actors may be different. Leminen et al. (2014) identify four user roles in Living Labs—informant, tester, contributor, and cocreator—in order to underline the possible ways of participating with different degrees of involvement, influencing innovation (Nyström et al. 2014).

A second theme relates to the real-life environment and thus the environment in which the participatory process takes place. Indeed, Living Labs are described as real-life environments in which to experiment, develop, cocreate, validate, and test services and systems with different actors. Environments range from a single isolated place to broader environments such as educational institutes, people’s homes and workplaces, and even a city or a part thereof. Real-life environments play a role as landscapes intertwined with stakeholder activities (Leminen and Westerlund 2016), a sort of familiar usage context (Schuurman et al. 2015) in which to experiment with actions.

Finally, Living Labs have a strong action orientation, as they help develop new products and services by engaging users with heterogeneous knowledge, ideas, and experiences. ‘User’ involvement indicates a shifting of innovation toward the community, thus cocreating with them (Tukiainen et al. 2015). Overall, Living Labs represent

¹¹ The ENoLL is the international federation of benchmarked Living Labs in Europe and worldwide. Living Labs are defined as user-centered, open innovation ecosystems based on a systematic user co-creation approach that integrates research and innovation processes in real-life communities and settings. In practice, Living Labs place the citizen at the center of innovation and have thus shown the ability to better mold the opportunities offered by new ICT concepts and solutions to the specific needs and aspirations of local contexts, cultures, and creativity potentials. ENoLL identifies five key elements that should be present in a Living Lab: (1) active user involvement; (2) real-life setting; (3) multistakeholder participation; (4) a multimethod approach; and (5) cocreation.

¹² Such as academics, developers, industry representatives, and citizens as well as various public, nonprofit and private organizations (Ballon and Schuurman 2015).

a promising tool to stimulate cocreation by including diverse target groups and often including just a small number of users with specific characteristics.

2.5 Socially Oriented Urban Living Labs. Reflecting on Urban and Social Connotation

We have seen that Living Labs have potential in terms of participation because they emphasize processes of network composition for urban governance, immersion in real life, and co-creation of knowledge and action. But under what conditions can they be enabling spaces? This is a central question in marginalized contexts, which are often the site of failures, mistakes, and interrupted projects. Therefore, more than other contexts, they require support for institutional and social capacities to generate new paths to growth and learning.

The SoHoLab project has created an interesting domain for experimentation, in which different planning and policy tools have been tested through Living Labs operating in fragile contexts, such as social-housing estates. Interpreting the project outcomes, I propose to talk about socially oriented ULLs; that helps to stress the term ‘urban’ and the labs’ social connotation,¹³ which generates a process of enabling.

Living Labs are urban because they refer to the political dimension of cities. In this perspective, they are environments allowing those involved to experiment and train the civil capacity ‘of all’, thus challenging the functioning of local democracy. This implies a focus as much on residents and local players as on institutions. All these actors must be put in a position to learn from the local situation, introducing mechanisms that contribute to the redefinition of both the habits and the places of citizenship as well as routines and institutional norms.

Living Labs also favor the social dimension of planning: they call into question for involving and supporting fragile profiles, which are often excluded from the political process. In marginal contexts, the risk is that the arena has ‘selective access’, in the sense that only those forces (institutional, private, third sector, associations) that can enter the areas of discussion will participate, without a substantial redefinition of power relations and democratic arrangements. The paradox is that Living Labs themselves can become an instrument of exclusion, particularly of the weakest actors, who do not have the tools to represent themselves.

Therefore, one field of work is the recognition of informal and fragile actors: a work that identifies and favors the emergence of those subjectivities that can bring new knowledge and can acquire new roles in local contexts. There are in fact significant disparities between people, which the process must take into account: they

¹³ Elena Maranghi and I introduced aspects relating the prefix ‘social’ to Urban Living Labs in Chap. 4 in this book, emphasizing the possibility of forming a platform that rehabilitates residents of peripheral contexts first by recognizing them as bearers of desires, capacities, and wills. So what does it mean to place the emphasis on the prefix ‘social’? In this regard, the chapter says that ‘social’ ULLs promote actions that are cultural and plural and that unfold on a daily basis. The definition ‘socially oriented Urban Living Lab’ was also taken up by Aernouts et al. (2020b).

concern their capacity for self-representation, the quality of the resources they are able to provide, their practical knowledge of the problem to be dealt with, and their ability to formulate their ideas adequately. The habit of participation and the ability to share resources and develop an approach to design thinking does not apply to everyone. Therefore, it is important that the Living Lab is socially oriented and that it takes on the real possibilities of expression and choice developed within the process itself.

So, when can Living Labs be considered socially oriented ULLs? First of all, when they are able to stimulate complex interactions among institutions and local actors belonging to civil society (bringing different pieces of knowledge, values, cultural belongings, power positions, etc.). Indeed, they are primarily intended as a relational field, in which relationships of trust and cooperation can be strengthened and can enrich the local social capital. As such, the formation and nurturing of a collaborative network that promotes visions and policies are crucial, prioritizing the process rather than the product. Too often, in fact, the ability of actors to collaborate and exchange is taken for granted. Latent conflictual dimensions, competitive and power dynamics, antithetical and difficult-to-reconcile positions are often not taken into account. Socially oriented ULLs work on that, favoring the establishment of a collaborative network, a locally rooted ‘community of planning’ (Maranghi 2019), which is constituted through an investigation activity aimed at planning.

Second, Living Labs can be considered socially oriented ULLs when they are fluid and incremental contexts, in which actors can change their positions, roles, and points of view over time through different kinds of possible interactions (cooperative but also conflictive). Relationality offers a mutual learning path generated through the recognition and acknowledgment of a field in which different interests can be negotiated and conflict can be seen as a manageable issue rather than a barrier. In places such as large-scale social-housing estates—where the traditional relationship between political representation, routine mechanisms of governance, and social cohesion are often compromised—these socially oriented ULLs can contribute to ‘mending’ relationships. This is particularly relevant in contexts where institutions (at different levels) have progressively lost their ability of ‘staying in contact’ with the local and thus the effectiveness of their actions.

In this perspective, it is useful to be aware of the risk of referring to the enabling space as a conciliatory place, aimed at pacifying conflicts and building consensus, perhaps more sensitively; traps in which there is a risk of not practicing more radical oppositional positions in order to preserve established relationships and small positions of acquired power. In some cases, on the other hand, empowerment might actually derive from a process that is not collaborative but conflictual, as an opportunity to nurture a widespread critical spirit, to make positions explicit, and argue for different points of view.

Third, Living Labs can be considered socially oriented ULLs when they are contexts able to produce new knowledge because of the construction of bridges among social worlds. This aspect implies that all forms of knowledge are legitimate

within the platform. Through participation in these processes, actors are induced to negotiate their own values, roles, and understandings and are, therefore, ‘enabled’ to build new ones, based on the relationships with other actors involved.

An environment is generated that fosters sensemaking, i.e., a knowledge-building process that constructs new meanings with respect to everyday facts and situations in the lives of people (Weick 1995). This can also take place retrospectively, through a ‘back-talk conversation’ (Rein and Schon 1994) which, by means of a reflexive confrontation, contributes to reading the past and improving the ability to forecast and develop the future. In fact, the effort is oriented toward understanding the levers of change in a specific area and therefore toward a shared focus on what the problems and possible solutions are.

2.6 Situating and Permanence: Embodied and Rooted Socially Oriented Urban Living Labs

Socially oriented ULLs create new types of collaboration based on local spheres of democracy, a trading zone that acts as an ‘exchanger’ for dialog among different subcultures (Balducci and Mantysalo 2013; Gorman 2010), building bridges and coherence between different worlds (municipalities, different institutions, associations, citizens’ groups, individuals, etc.) and between different scales of planning.

These physical or virtual places have emerged in some recent reflections on participation as ‘neighborhood think tanks’ (Laws and Forester 2015): on the one hand, they pay attention to structural inequalities and urban-scale dynamics taking shape in the territories; on the other, they take care of local conditions for change, such as the establishment of new coalitions for community development, the strengthening of leadership, and capacity-building. They have a transformative role, in which mutual exchange triggers the possibility for change and improves existing practices.

In the three SoHoLab national contexts, the research units experimented with different forms of ‘being in the field’, with the common characteristic of somehow leading the researchers to ‘inhabit the place’ to a certain extent.¹⁴ We can define such an approach as ‘situating’ (Castelnuovo and Cognetti 2019); in this regard, other authors have referred to the concept of ‘architectural permanence’ (Hallauer 2015),

¹⁴ In the Belgian case, one of the researchers conducted ethnographic fieldwork between July 2017 and July 2018, during which she lived in the neighborhood, in an empty apartment provided by a social housing company; in the Italian case, the research group reopened a vacant space in the neighborhood in 2014, which is currently open three times a week and which has been operative during the last 8 years. The French team was also ‘on-site’ to a certain extent, both through the ethnographical survey realized in the La Fosse aux Loup neighborhood and during a three-day-long experimental, interdisciplinary on-site workshop in La Gonflée, which involved architects, town planners, artists, sociologists, etc.

derived from the culture of the ‘artist in residence’,¹⁵ or ‘exploring the embodied side of cities’ in the field of cultural and urban studies.¹⁶

Choosing a situated approach to planning involves centering live experiences, particularly those of exclusion, rather than ‘technical attitudes’; approaching sites and people through careful listening and observation; and working with others to understand situations together and from within. The notions of ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway 1988) and ‘situated learning’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) highlights that knowledge always reflects the perspectives of the knower and the relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs. Through reconnecting with ‘situated stories’ (Doucet and Frichot 2018),¹⁷ other forms and imaginations of engagement can emerge, reclaiming a capacity for agency in situations where power relations have become imbalanced.

These concepts suggest that establishing the ULL as a stable presence in the local context is critical for at least two main reasons. On the one hand, in large social-housing estates, a long-term and stable presence counters the processes of abandonment and neglect that characterize these places. Therefore, it helps build a qualified relationship with a context in which residents and local organizations usually perceive research and institutions as temporary and unstable presences, often ‘taking’ from the context without offering anything in return. On the contrary, taking care of a certain place or ‘simply being there’ (Aernouts et al. 2020a), listening to people and directly facing what they are experiencing in relation to the place, helps practice a relational dimension based on trust between and mutual recognition of both residents and local organizations.

On the other hand, inhabiting a place can help deal with the ‘unexpected in the contingency’ (Cognetti 2018) that fosters the collection of the most diverse materials as clues.¹⁸ In other words, ‘being on site’, in different ways, helps deal with the complexity of social-housing contexts, where the overlapping of different dynamics and phenomena makes it difficult to frame issues and problems clearly. This helps avoid the pitfall where participatory planning tends to merely answer predefined questions from an ‘expert’ and external perspective. The contingencies associated with being on a site enable unexpected questions to pop up. Contingency (Karvonen and Van Heur 2014) also helps to critically look at the context from

¹⁵ According to which artists reside in a certain place to create pieces on and within it.

¹⁶ In the field of urban studies, there is a growing stream exploring the embodied side of cities (Careri 2002; Degen and Rose 2012; Hubbard and Lyon 2018; Low 2015; Paterson and Glass 2020), which seeks to provide detailed accounts of the ways in which walking and other forms of embodied presence produce understanding and meaningful design.

¹⁷ The authors are coeditors of a special issue of *Architectural Theory Review*, 22(1), 2018, for which they invited contributors to examine the potential of situated perspectives for the study of architecture and the city and to demonstrate the possibility of critical engagement in research and design through the analysis of concrete practices and practices of thought: architectural and urban, contemporary and historical.

¹⁸ We can also refer here to the concept of ‘floating observation’ (Petonnet 1982), intended as a methodological tool that allows researchers to approach the site with an open and ever available perspective, enabling information to penetrate without a filter until reference points, convergences, and underlying rules emerge (see Aernouts et al. 2020b).

an ‘internal perspective’, which is open to new interpretations and meanings and which at least tries to overcome stereotypical representations often associated with large-scale social-housing estates.

In other words, the process and practice of situating help build a more ‘reliable’ form of knowledge: by changing position and temporarily becoming ‘residents’, urban experts, researchers, and practitioners change their perspective, diving into the everyday life and daily practices of the context (Cognetti and Padovani 2017). Theoretical concepts, rather than being mobilized as analytical ‘lenses’ through which to study the world, ‘come from specific situations and are transformed by the subsequent situations in which they are deployed, that is to say, with each new situation, a concept is likewise resituated’ (Doucet and Frichot 2018, p. 3).

Being part of the place helps researchers develop a vision of their role, which includes loving attachment to people and place. By ‘love’, here I refer to its multiple dimensions of ‘trust, commitment, care, respect, knowledge and responsibility (Porter et al. 2012, p. 603). Moreover, a long-term presence, mixed with a scientific and critical background, can function as an important resource for effective interpretations of problems or creative elaborations of possible answers. In this way, socially oriented ULLs become able to bridge different ‘positions’ and social worlds (academic, institutional, local, etc.) because they can understand the different sides, while (and precisely because) they do not completely belong to any of them.

These practices are rooted in everyday life; more specifically, social ULLs can be placed in a geographical area—authors refer to geographical embeddedness (Voytenko et al. 2016)—within which the lab represents the ecosystems of open ‘urban’ and ‘civic’ innovation that takes place in a real urban context.¹⁹ So, even if it is limited in time or objective, the dimension of ‘diving into’ a real-life context is considered extremely relevant.

The focus then is on how this ‘immersion’ takes place. Social ULLs should be framed as ‘spaces of encounter’, sufficiently open to unexpected interaction and to the unplanned. They should be experimental environments, not entirely artificially constructed with a top-down (even if participatory) approach but emerging from the encounter between researchers and users. Their overall outcome is not predefined but is the result of the interactions between promoters and stakeholders.²⁰

According to Franz (2015), time is a crucial dimension in the promotion of effective local involvement.²¹ The author questions the feasibility of the limited duration

¹⁹ This may be a region, an agglomeration, a city, a district or neighbourhood, a road or corridor, or a building. There are many possible urban configurations that can host a ULL, but the area is normally clearly defined and has a manageable scale (Voytenko et al. 2016).

²⁰ Also, in the space of the ULL—whether it is a stable and physical space or a more metaphorical space of encounter—a balance should be constantly pursued between a planned space and a space that is flexible enough to adapt to what comes from the context in terms of inspiration, demands, and suggestions.

²¹ ‘Social living labs should ensure authenticity and credibility. Both cannot be assured as long as the research is limited to the duration of a specific research project. To create a trusting and collaborative interaction with local citizens, a shift in research strategy towards long-term engagement is unavoidable’ (Franz 2015, p. 113).

of her research and the outcomes that it generates in the local context. The participatory process has to incorporate ‘timing issues’, also promoting initiatives taken to activate other organizations such as local housing associations, the regional housing corporate, the office of the government architect, the municipality, and local social workers in order to continue initiatives on a more permanent basis. Therefore, we could state that if the conditions do not enable a long-term presence, other devices must be found to assure a certain continuity of engagement or to engage other actors to take up this role.

2.7 Conclusions

Socially oriented ULLs are local planning platforms in which it is possible to experiment not only with good practices among citizens and local organizations but also with new forms of governance and interaction among administrations. In this way, socially oriented ULLs can help assess the validity of those processes at the local level, where institutions are pushed to experience the possibility of innovation of procedures, and locals have the chance to strengthen their community empowerment. In this sense, the context enables people to ‘do’ and build visions for the future. By strengthening the networks and capacities of actors, areas with ULLs can be considered experimental laboratories for the future: the future, in fact, becomes a ‘cultural fact’ (Appadurai 2014), contrasting the ‘ethics of probability’ with that of ‘possibility’.

Initiating complex processes requires new intelligence, skills, and sensitivity from everyone: a new openness and attention to the creation of multilevel and multi-actor planning areas and tools from public institutions; an open and inclusive idea of design in which the city becomes interlocutor for a collective enterprise that develops over time from the experts; an active and proactive role beyond the historical inertia and opposition from the position of residents and local forces; sensitivity and attention to important opportunities to be seized from the local players. This is a very ambitious horizon, because it is linked to the possibility that during the process, spaces will open up both for learning (individual and collective) and for generating new protagonists (individual and collective).

In conclusion, in contrast to the more consolidated forms of participation which, as mentioned before, trigger deliberative processes promoted unilaterally by institutions supported by facilitators, the paper introduces two other ways of understanding participation. These two ways are promoted not only by public actors but also by many others who participate in the transformation of the city through their practices. These modes are based on co-design and collaboration between different partners or promoted in a self-organized form by citizens, outside institutional settings.

Living Labs have the required characteristics to be part of the field of co-design and reciprocity between different actors, with a focus on the protagonists as individuals and groups. For this reason, they are positioned between the second and third

modes, emphasizing their nature as a ‘design device’, reinforcing people’s ability, and building networks and alliances for change and mutual learning.

In this arena, experts are also called on to take on new roles, taking care of local conditions for changes such as the capacities of individuals to become active, the establishment of new coalitions for community development, and the institution building.

If Living Labs promote processes of interaction between different actors oriented toward co-design, the urban dimension, and the social connotation are central. Therefore, the paper proposes to call them socially oriented Living Labs. This is necessary in marginalized contexts, in which it is useful to work on a social context that encourages people and their capacities, supporting the building of agency in situations where power relations and expectations have become imbalanced.

It seems necessary to start reflections and experiments in this direction in European urban contexts increasingly characterized by social and economic inequalities and by marginal contexts that require participatory planning to be radically rethought, addressing both theory and practice.

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