

Chapter 9

From a Community of Practice to a Community of Planning: The Case of the *Sanshero*es Network in the San Siro Neighbourhood in Milan



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Abstract In the current framework of welfare shrinking, it is highly necessary to transform citizens and local organizations from targets into co-producers of urban policies. Moreover, even though large-scale social housing estates are often characterized by social exclusion and high levels of socio-economic vulnerabilities, they at the same time represent ‘local tanks’ of competencies and social resources. In these regards, the ‘empowering planning’ approach—referring to the valourization of local competences and expertise within urban regeneration processes—has positive impacts, both in terms of socio-economic inclusion and the ‘expansion’ of active citizenship among local actors and in terms of designing more effective policies, enriched by local perspectives and know-how. Based on the analysis of a pilot action developed within the SoHoLab project in the San Siro neighbourhood that fostered the empowerment of a local grassroots network, the chapter examines processes of recognition and reinforcement and the promotion of local competencies, outlining their different phases and the characteristics of the groups involved. It will highlight the transition from a community of practice to a community of planning that is able to develop visions and actions aimed at a shared regeneration of a certain area.

Keywords Local network · Community of practice · Knowledge coproduction

9.1 Introduction

The field of urban studies is increasingly characterized by an open and hybrid approach that involves the cross-fertilization of ‘expert’ and ‘locally produced’ knowledge. The Urban Living Lab methodology constitutes a relevant part of this tendency, as it includes different and multiple stakeholders in the analysis of a certain problem and the design of shared solutions (see Cognetti, this volume). Indeed, in some way, the complexity of contemporary cities is ‘asking us’ (Cognetti and Fava 2017)—as researchers and practitioners in the fields of urban studies and

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urban planning—to go beyond our disciplinary positions, as such complexity needs more adequate categories in order to be interpreted correctly. Our perspectives—as architects, planners, anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, etc.—need to be ‘contaminated’ by one another in order to get closer to a deeper understanding of ordinary life in our cities (Cellamare 2016; Cognetti and Fava 2017). As Cognetti and Fava (2017) have extensively described, it can be stated that a city is to a certain extent an object that cannot be disciplined and that has a character of resistance: ‘it resists being reduced to a disciplinary order and always emerges as the extraordinary that forces the single disciplines to think from the outside’ (Cognetti and Fava 2017, p. 134).¹ If, on the one hand, this aspect invites different disciplines to question themselves about their ability to open up to other perspectives, interpretative frameworks, and tools, on the other hand, it also pushes them to be open to the contribution of ‘nonexpert’ knowledge. Indeed, over the last decades, urban areas have become increasingly complex arenas of actors. Many different stakeholders are today recognized as legitimate ‘carriers’ of urban knowledge, which becomes essential for promoting more effective knowledge frameworks and public policies.

Therefore, contemporary cities challenge us to go beyond interdisciplinarity or, from another point of view, to turn it into its more profound meaning: the capacity to listen to and collect knowledge that arises from urban space itself through relational observation. This kind of observation considers ‘local knowledge, knowledge of everyday life, a knowledge that is embedded in the actions and reflections of the subjects engaged with. This means to have an interdisciplinary but also non-disciplinary way of thinking and producing knowledge’ (Pizzo and Rolnik 2019, p. 30). This attitude is fundamental in both a problem-setting and a problem-solving perspective. Indeed, interdisciplinarity questions the effectiveness of the languages and tools used to interact² with urban areas and propose or produce any change.

If, in an initial phase, this trend found an outlet in the promotion of participatory approaches, in recent years we have moved from a so-called phase of ‘weak participation’ (Cognetti 2007) to an ever greater role for those who, for various reasons, inhabit places (residents, local activists, third-sector actors rooted in certain spatial contexts, etc.), especially in some contexts within the Italian panorama. Local actors have increasingly become ‘experts’ in their own spatial field and started to participate in a process of producing social and ‘enlarged’ knowledge (Ranzini 2018). Especially in more challenging contexts,³ their activation becomes fundamental in any process of policy initiation and implementation. The structural lack of knowledge that characterizes large-scale social housing estates⁴ pushes engaged researchers and practitioners to question themselves about how knowledge is produced and shared

¹ Translated by the author.

² To describe them, to promote participation within them, etc.

³ Such as peripheral and marginalized territories.

⁴ I refer here especially to the fact that, in the experience of the SoHoLab case studies, housing associations in large-scale social housing estates do not usually have a clear picture of the dwelling conditions and condition of the built stock, particularly in neighbourhoods where informal dwelling and squatting are more widespread.

in these places. This regards not only the evaluation of the meanings and targets of knowledge production but also how and which sources of knowledge are selected, which materials are collected and elaborated on, etc.

It is particularly important to underline how ‘nonexpert’ knowledge plays a crucial role in these contexts, as it is characterized by significant informality or, in some cases, even by ‘parallel’ systems of values. Lave and Wenger call this phenomenon ‘situated learning’ (2010): learning that takes place through the relationships between people and through connecting prior knowledge with authentic, informal, and often unintended contextual learning. By relating to these different sources of knowledge and through the process of situating (see Cognetti, this volume), researchers and practitioners acquire a ‘more local’ perspective, which anthropologists would define as an ‘emic perspective’ (Vereni 2015).

Based on these assumptions and the action research developed by the Mapping San Siro group⁵ within the SoHoLab project in Milan, the contribution discusses the role that the activation of local networks through the coproduction of knowledge can assume in large-scale social housing estates. It analyses the experience of the *Sansheroes* network, which was developed in the San Siro social housing neighbourhood.⁶

9.2 Mapping San Siro as a Multisource Observatory

As stated above, within the SoHoLab project framework, interdisciplinarity was conceived not only as a profound collaboration among different disciplines⁷ but also as the combination of ‘expert’ and locally produced knowledge. During the entire development of the Urban Living Lab implementation, this knowledge assumed multiple forms and meanings.⁸ To produce local knowledge meant, then, not only to ‘include’ dwellers but also to stimulate collaboration and exchange among the

⁵ Mapping San Siro is an action-research group belonging to the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano and is part of the Polisocial programme. Coordinated by Francesca Cognetti, with the support of Liliana Padovani, it has been active since 2013. In 2014, it opened a space in the San Siro district. From 2017 to 2020, Mapping San Siro was part of the SoHoLab project (see the Introduction of this book).

⁶ With its approximately 6,000 dwellings and 12,000 residents, the San Siro district is one of the largest public housing complexes in the city of Milan. Built between the 1930s and 1950s, the district is today located in a semi-central position with respect to the urban fabric, but it is characterized by dynamics of social exclusion and economic deprivation. San Siro is one of the most multicultural districts in the city: about 50% of the resident population is of non-Italian origins. The neighbourhood suffers from severe decay of most buildings and is characterized by the presence of many empty apartments, an element that has contributed to the consolidation of squatting practices.

⁷ Represented in the composition of local research teams.

⁸ This aspect is clearly linked to the concept of ‘situating’ (see Cognetti and Grassi, this volume), which enabled the research group to share intensive and long-term ‘engaged ethnography’ (see Aernouts et al., this volume) in the field, during which it was able to constantly gather knowledge from local actors.

different professionals and activists who were working in the considered urban area,⁹ whose contribution appeared to be crucial in the different development phases of the SoHoLab Urban Living Lab: from the understanding the local context, to the implementation of the pilot projects developed, to the evaluation of the research and the actions promoted.

From the very beginning of its research activities, and in line with what was argued at the beginning, the position of the Mapping San Siro action-research group was characterized by the organization of dialogue and the creation of a relationship with the various players present in the area. This approach was seen as a necessity to face the almost ‘annoying complexity’ (Scanni 2015) present in the context, with respect to which it was essential for the research to be based on a solid local mediation. What can be defined as the neighbourhood’s opacity regarding fact-finding, pushed the group towards this orientation as well: there was a lack of reliable data and clear sources to refer to as well as the presence of numerous informal and complex dynamics that were objectively difficult to investigate without a grounded and situated knowledge of the context.

This opacity fed the stereotypical and stigmatizing image of San Siro, with the effect of not only consolidating the negative perception of the neighbourhood by ‘the outside’ but also determining the worsening of internal conflicts and of the difficulty of dealing with local problems. These problems were often too unclear or seemed insurmountable: as can be guessed, it also inhibited the capacity for action of the various actors present in the neighbourhood. Often, in their relationship with Mapping San Siro, a university group, these actors demanded more public knowledge to emerge and to be shared (Cognetti 2018a). Since the group did not have a clear and defined ‘client’ at the time (see Castelnovo and Cognetti 2019), local subjects—who expressed requests that were certainly fragmented but also concrete and situated in relation to the possible roles that research could assume—progressively became not only the most direct interlocutors and ‘informants’ of the group but also the main ‘clients’ on Mapping San Siro’s research path. Therefore, one of the main aims of the research, from the very beginning, was to systematize and collect knowledge on the neighbourhood in order to build a ‘multisource observatory’ in which different forms and types of knowledge had the possibility to converge and meet: local knowledge, linked to inhabiting the place or based on professional practice (third-sector organizations) or even on activism (voluntary associations, informal groups); quantitative and qualitative sources produced by institutions; research of an anthropological and socio-spatial nature, produced by the university and independent researchers, etc.

From this perspective, based on an interdisciplinary approach, Mapping San Siro tried to push itself to interpret interdisciplinarity as an interweaving of knowledge (and not just disciplines) of different natures. The enhancement of common knowledge (Dewey 1938) produced by so-called everyday-makers (Bang and Sørensen 1999)—who are experts in a certain context in a different way (Cognetti 2018b)—thus became a full part of the research, helping the group to access and interpret a

⁹ Social workers, activists, local administrators, etc., who usually acquire knowledge through experience and practice (see Dewey 1938).

context which was very difficult to permeate. The main objective was to construct a knowledge base that could become the engine for the improvement of local change and development. In this sense, the group was also reflecting on the role of knowledge coproduction for local organizations, imagining it as an accessible and usable asset for improving and strengthening the capacity of each actor to act. In order to act in this direction, however, the first step the group needed to take was to recognize local knowledge as valuable. Second, the group had to help local organizations and activists to structure this knowledge through moments of self-reflection.

9.3 Towards a Competent and Structured Local Network

Following the consolidation of the process of gathering local knowledge, also thanks to the establishment of the research group headquarters in the neighbourhood,¹⁰ it became progressively more evident how the strong internal fragmentation among different groups and activists represented a problem with regard to the possibility of influencing public discourse and having a voice in the structuring of urban policies aimed at the neighbourhood. Indeed, internal fragmentation and latent conflict among locals seemed to play an important role in a certain dynamic of exclusion of the neighbourhood from the framework of city policies. It appeared to limit the capacity for implementing collective action and improving local agency. Especially in the context of Milan, a city characterized by a strong, proactive role of the third sector and a high level of civic participation in the definition of policy frameworks, the ‘ability’ of local activation (Ranzini 2018) strongly influences the possibility of attracting public investment and financial resources to different urban areas.

Therefore, creating a structured path of co-construction and of sharing local knowledge related to the neighbourhood and its conditions became one of the priorities of the Mapping San Siro research group, as this was seen as a tool to open negotiations and foster a dialogue with the institutional level. A first step in this direction took place in November 2016, when around fifteen representatives of local associations and cooperatives as well as activists accepted an invitation to meet at the Mapping San Siro headquarters in order to discuss the situation of the neighbourhood. The intention of the research group was to use the perspective and knowledge of each of the participants (and their respective organizations) in order to produce a shared, adequate, and updated vision of the socio-spatial scenario for San Siro. This was intended as a tool capable of, on the one hand, guiding local organizations in dealing with the complexity of the neighbourhood and, on the other—once the scenario was transferred to the competent institutions—calling the institutional level to counteract the critical conditions the neighbourhood was suffering. These included phenomena such as educational poverty, social isolation and exclusion, and

¹⁰ In 2014, Mapping San Siro obtained a free concession from Aler Milano to reopen a former shop in the neighbourhood, located at the street level, to be used for research activities. Afterwards, in 2019, Politecnico di Milan obtained a larger space, located a short distance away from the first one.

the bad maintenance of public spaces. About ten organizations were represented at the table: both more formal and structured entities and organizations of a voluntary and informal nature.

The existence of a trust relationship between Mapping San Siro and the represented organizations was key to stimulating their willingness to participate. In fact, between 2014 and 2016, Mapping San Siro activated some pilot projects in collaboration with different local entities, gradually consolidating and deepening everyday relationships in the field.

Another relevant factor that pushed the meeting was the continued exclusion of the neighbourhood from several municipal programmes and policies directed at urban peripheries. This generated a proactive reaction in those who were engaged in improving the neighbourhood's conditions on a daily basis. It was the beginning of a slow but constant process involving the construction, expansion, and consolidation of a local network, which I will try to reconstruct as five different stages below (Maranghi 2019).

9.3.1 Getting to Know San Siro Together (November 2016–December 2017)

Through five meetings and a subsequent re-elaboration of the content that had emerged, the local actors who gathered around the table produced a first 'snapshot' of the current state of the neighbourhood. This document aimed to bring out the latent knowledge capital of the various organizations and to dissect the emerging issues related to the neighbourhood through the recognition of problems and resources. The document was built on the knowledge gathered by each organization in its daily practice and also included a series of initial considerations related to possible actions to promote change. The result of this phase was the publication of an online, open, and accessible document (*Fotografia del quartiere*¹¹). After the first meetings, the group decided to establish itself as a network of organizations and people, which was given the name of *Sansheroes*.¹² It also decided to set up a mailing list and monthly meetings for mutual updating and collaboration.

9.3.2 Sharing the Path with the Neighbourhood (January 2018–June 2018)

As part of the local network and in collaboration with it, Mapping San Siro, organized a series of focus groups and dialogues aimed at sharing the document mentioned above with target groups that were representative of some relevant populations in the

¹¹ https://issuu.com/52340/docs/fotografia_del_quartiere_san_siro_2.

¹² The play on words refers to the name of the San Siro district: it sounds like 'heroes of San Siro'.

neighbourhood (the elderly, young people, women of foreign origin, etc.). Observations, suggestions, and criticisms were collected in order to enrich and consolidate the document. The objective of this phase was to validate, together with residents, what had been elaborated by the network. The result of this second phase was an expanded and revised version of the document. During this period, the network further expanded itself, welcoming new organizations from the neighbourhood.

9.3.3 Designing Together (June 2018–December 2018)

The members of the local network worked together to design a vision for the future of the San Siro neighbourhood, outlining five possible areas of intervention to be strengthened and developed: interculturality, education, local competencies, housing policies and support for vulnerabilities, and the quality of the built environment. Some first hypotheses of strategic lines of action were developed and were associated with the five areas. The document was then expanded to include this design evolution, enriched and completed by some maps drawn up by Mapping San Siro on the basis of collective work. A new version entitled *Istantanee di San Siro. Presente e future del quartiere* was then published online.¹³

9.3.4 Involving the City (January 2019–February 2019)

The local network stimulated the sharing of the process and its results with institutions and with the city in order to show the potential of the path and at the same time call on the responsible institutions to implement actions to improve the living conditions in the neighbourhood. Therefore, it was decided to organize a city-level public presentation of the document and of the network itself.¹⁴ Representatives of the main local institutions and civil society were invited to the event, which took place in February 2019 and was open to the public. Although the institutions publicly expressed an important signal with their participation and with the declaration of their intention to work together with the network, this did not happen in the following weeks.

¹³ https://issuu.com/52340/docs/istantanee_2019.

¹⁴ This took place at the Triennale of Milan, one of the most relevant cultural institutions of the city.

9.3.5 *Dialogue with Institutions and Consolidating a Planning Vision (March 2019–February 2020)*

In April 2019, the Lombardy Region and the Municipality of Milan, in the presence of the Aler Milano¹⁵ Housing Agency, decided to meet at the Mapping San Siro headquarters in the neighbourhood, declaring their willingness to work together in the neighbourhood on an experimental basis. However, this position was once more not followed by further steps. The network, therefore, decided to set up some internal working groups to continue implementing concrete proposals and strategies. The chosen themes were: housing and living conditions; public art; job opportunities; and public space, courtyards, and waste management. The network members also continued to work together to develop applications for local calls for tenders and initiatives. They were able to win some funds and bring new energies to the neighbourhood. Moreover, the network continued to expand itself through the participation of other organizations active in the neighbourhood and also attracted new professional competences and city-level organizations.

9.4 From a Community of Practice to a Community of Planning

A first key aspect to underline in the reconstruction of the above-described path concerns the possibility for local actors to recognize themselves as a collective subject, which could be defined as a community of practices (Wenger 1998, 2010) that is intended, first of all, as a co-learning context. In this case, the practice that generated and reinforced the *Sansheroes* network can be identified with the local production of welfare, both at a formal and an informal level. In this sense, the dynamics of the transformation of welfare, which rooted it in an increasingly local perspective (Vitale 2007), made it possible for some professional figures (but not necessarily strictly professional ones) to tie themselves to certain specific areas. They built cognitive expertise and relational capital, which transformed them into increasingly competent actors in relation to the dynamics of the context's urban and social regeneration, beyond their specific area or sector of intervention. Just to mention some of the most significant examples: the school parent committee acquired skills in analysing and collecting social needs of families that had recently arrived in the neighbourhood, mostly from other countries, and consequently implemented small mutual aid networks; volunteer women teaching Italian to foreigners became the most 'expert' in understanding the needs of the female population of foreign origin, to which they dedicated specific courses; and so on. It appears, then, that the field of

¹⁵ The Regional Public Housing Agency which owns and manages the public housing stock in the neighbourhood.

‘territorial welfare’ is configured as a field of shared and mutual learning, which the different local actors feel they belong to. They are, at the same time and to different degrees, both competent subjects and learners.

While these processes are increasingly widespread and significant in the contemporary city, they simultaneously require considerable investment of resources and intentions. This usually corresponds to a first step of self-recognition and mutual recognition among local actors, of competencies, knowledge, and skills which are significant not only in daily practice but also in a broader and more systematic perspective. A first element at the basis of the constitution of the *Sansheroes* network was, therefore, precisely the construction—promoted, in the first place, by Mapping San Siro—of a fertile context for the recognition of the fundamental role that locally produced knowledge and action¹⁶ play in policy arenas. By locally produced knowledge, I refer to knowledge which is the expression of various local actors and different perspectives and which, above all, does not necessarily take the form of exclusively scientific and expert or exclusively local knowledge. Instead, it assumes a hybrid character, and therefore, becomes more effective as it configures itself as a bridge between social worlds, skills, and organizations.

In this sense, the work with the *Sansheroes* network started at first as a process of local actors’ self-recognition, identification, and mutual recognition of the ‘dignity’, the value, and the crucial role played by spatial competences and locally produced knowledge. The three aspects (self-recognition, identification, and mutual recognition) of the process allowed local actors to become familiar with their competences and endorse the legitimacy of their voices (self-recognition); thereby understanding the relevance of their work and their points of view for the policy arena (identification); these aspects, as was the case for *Sansheroes*, can then lead to the breaking of a spiral of local fragmentation, stimulating local organizations and activists to acknowledge each other’s role (mutual recognition) and converting conflict from a barrier into a treatable problem (Padovani 2016). Naturally, this process does not have an immediate effect, as it operates as a long, incremental, and nonlinear negotiation. This process needs a kind of ‘mediator’, as was the case with Mapping San Siro: the research group played a bridging and facilitating role through an open approach and in virtue of a certain degree of impartiality which characterizes the university.¹⁷

It is also important to underline the characteristics and nature of the knowledge produced. In the above-described case, Mapping San Siro implemented from the

¹⁶ I refer here to the concept of ‘situated learning’ (Lave and Wenger 1991), which underlines the relational character of knowledge, constantly negotiated in different contexts (Cognetti 2018b). It is no coincidence that as Mapping San Siro, we refer to the concept of situating as a practice of building knowledge carried out by the research group through a deep and slow rooting in the context, based on the multiple relationships with local interlocutors and places we engaged in.

¹⁷ From a methodological point of view, it should be underlined that ‘in this process of building knowledge it is important to gild oneself with tools that give space to the contributions that will emerge from common knowledge and from situated knowledge (interviews, dialogues, informal contacts, work tables, participant observation, etc.)’ (Cognetti 2018a., p. 35); just as it is essential to activate skills linked to the relational and so-called affective dimension of planning (Kondo 2012), capable of leveraging the degree of rootedness in the local context and civil commitment of each subject involved.

very beginning an action-research approach in an attempt to counteract the inertia of the local context and the paralyzing effect of the public image of the neighbourhood as a unitary object that could not be discussed or changed (Cognetti 2018a). From the very start—originally on an extremely small scale, then gradually extending more significantly—Mapping San Siro developed several pilot projects aimed at testing and stimulating change (see Cognetti et al., this volume). These projects were aimed at encouraging, guiding, and supporting local action, gathering and elaborating usable knowledge on certain matters (such as public space, housing, educational poverty, etc.) in order to strengthen and to some extent further legitimize local subjects in their action.

In this process, therefore, the collection of knowledge is profoundly linked to the theme of action: in the action-research paradigm, indeed, change occurs when action and discourse become complementary. This happens when the actors involved in a common path carry out a concrete action together (Barbier 2007): when knowledge structures and stimulates the action and thus produces new knowledge. In the case of *Sansheroës*, several concrete actions can be identified which, as they were designed together, contributed to the self-recognition of the network: the coproduction of the above-mentioned documents, their publication online, the public presentation (to the neighbourhood and the city), the co-design of pilot projects, etc. In this process, the co-construction of shared knowledge through action functioned as an ‘enzyme’ for the cohesion of the network, as co-designed actions really represented a shared field, accessible to every actor who participated in the process. Moreover, recognizing itself as a competent community (Iscoe 1974) stimulated the *Sansheroës* network to become a permanent planning platform for and with the neighbourhood. This aspect implied a significant transfer and activation of design skills and spatial sensitivity from the Mapping San Siro group to the other entities of the network, linked to the ability to promote complex visions of transformation and to activate co-design groups. This transition can be described as the transformation from a community of practice into a community of planning, able to project itself and the neighbourhood in a vision of local, complex, and integrated regeneration which goes beyond the specific fields of action represented by the different actors involved.

It is interesting to note, in this regard, how a ‘peripheral actor’, which the Mapping San Siro group was at the beginning of its activity in the neighbourhood, acts with respect to a certain learning context. On the one hand, through what Lave and Wenger (2010) defined as apprenticeship, peripheral actors are able to recognize and reveal the cognitive and symbolic expertise associated with a certain community of practice, precisely by virtue of occupying a position on the sidelines. On the other hand, as initially ‘external’ subjects, they could bring new skills that, in certain cases, prove to be essential for consolidating and strengthening the community of practice. In the *Sansheroës* case, these are the skills associated with urban analysis, spatial codesign, planning vision, etc.

In conclusion, it can be stated that, even if the path described here did not naturally produce a definitive solution to existing problems associated with the neighbourhood, as the network members continued to work together even after the end of the SoHoLab project, the emergence of the network represented a fundamental advancement in the

recognition of the neighbourhood in policy arenas and in the capacity of local actors to produce more effective, coordinated, and integrated interventions and projects. It appeared to be an especially valuable aspect, for instance, in facing the first stages of the pandemic crisis in 2020, which strongly hit more fragile areas of our cities, such as San Siro.

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