

North to South: Space for Memories. A multidisciplinary project about narratives of urban spaces.

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Introduction

In this article we will describe the genesis and implementation of a project that was designed by Atelier culture.projects (Malta) in partnership with Fabel Kommunikation (Sweden) and Compagnia Rodisio (Italy).

We are all coming from different backgrounds: cultural management; content design and innovation and theatre and research; however we all have a common interest in urban spaces, community development, narratives and participatory contexts.

North to South: Space for Memories was designed in spring 2009 as **an experiment that aimed at exploring three spatial realities and the interaction between these spaces and their inhabitants**, both in a contemporary and in a historical perspective. To this end, the project involved two different generations.

The project was implemented between June 2009 and February 2010 with the support of the European Cultural Foundation, the Amsterdam-based organisation that focuses on cultural cooperation as an instrument for European integration.

The project dealt with three main themes:

- **Memories (stories, narratives)** connected with a neighbourhood and its people;
- **Transformations of urban spaces;**
- **Public participation processes** related to urban areas.

In this context, space has not been considered simply as a geographical and urban concept but also as an element with a strong social value. Space in fact “does not have a self-referent meaning, but assumes different significances based on its social use. Its meaning is socially produced, and is therefore primarily relational and interactional. The use of a place, the possibility to access it, to own it, to be ‘out ’ or ‘in’ the space, a resident or a stranger, to be stationary or passing through, are all aspects that contribute to construct the concept of ‘space’ which makes itself the object of study. **A place, then, cannot be solely described as a physical space – space is socially produced, and is dependent, above all else, on the way it is socially used and negotiated.**”¹

¹ North to South:Space for Memories | Report of project results. Research and interviews by Brian Campbell and Valeria Zangrandi, Malta 2010.

Three neighbourhoods located in Sweden, Italy and Malta were selected as 'laboratories' for this research, juxtaposing the North and South of Europe.

We chose Birgu because it is a city with a lot of history which at the same time has been able to 'reinvent' itself through urban regeneration projects, local community initiatives and a welcoming attitude towards newcomers.

Oltretorrente in Parma was chosen because it is a neighbourhood with a rich tradition and a history that still influences people's attitudes today. The locality has a very strong and defined character. It is also a place in transformation, facing the challenges of integration and migration fluxes.

Finally we chose Hasselby in Stockholm because it is a suburb which is experiencing gentrification and social challenges and it needs to look deeper into its future as a community.

Methodology

Various methodologies were employed to connect all the project components. We wanted to experiment a mix of disciplines, using different approaches and including the artistic point of view, which we believe is a fundamental part of the project.

The main drive of the project is therefore methodological. That is, it seeks to find ways to:

- Produce simultaneous data about three far-removed urban contexts, thus assuming some sort of commonality, of 'urbanism as a way of life' as Wirth² put it. The project is premised on the idea that although contexts will vary (and here we have three very different ones indeed), it is possible and desirable to attempt to theorize the city and find common threads of information-exchange when dealing with, say, urban planning or issues of segregation.
- Encourage people to 'talk about' (in the broadest sense) the urban spaces they inhabit, through the use of mixed techniques. The premise here is that the process of classifying and demarcating urban space stands to benefit from the participation of the people who in some way interact with it.

The project works towards these aims by using multiple, flexible, and collaborative strategies, as follows:

- The project is multi-sited, in that fieldwork was carried out simultaneously in the three different localities. Data from these three sites were juxtaposed, rather than simply stacked and/or compared. The model here is formulations of 'multi-sited ethnography' as developed within sociology and especially anthropology in the last ten-fifteen years;

² Wirth, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 1. (Jul., 1938), pp. 1-24.

- Different research techniques were used by our field teams. In Birgu, we used a combination of participant observation and qualitative interviewing using open-ended aide memoire, recording the interviews on an Mp3 recorder. In Oltretorrente, an on-site intensive pilot research led to the production of a short film consisting mainly of narratives and testimonials of local residents. In Hasselby, people were invited to react, and respond via sms, to prompts presented as street posters in places of high visibility. Following this interaction a blog was set up to continue the public debate online.
- Our research was throughout intensely responsive. That is, although we invested considerable time and effort in planning and design, once in the field we sought to be sensitive to research questions and threads raised by our informants themselves. The results we present are therefore very much co-produced. The model here is that of 'collaborative ethnography', as developed within social anthropology in recent years.

During the period dedicated to fieldwork all the three research teams followed a guideline that was used as a point of reference and helped to keep a common ground, allowing for high flexibility and freedom to structure the site-specific research.

The guiding principle was an observation of the following characteristics:

IMAGES

- What sort of images of itself does the space produce/consume?
- What forms do they take (artistic production, narrative, festivals, etc.)?
- In what way/s are these images related to processes such as tourism, urban renewal, and gentrification? ('Culture-led regeneration' a crucial aspect here.)
- How do they compare to images of the space by outsiders?

MOBILITIES

- Which historical mobilities is the space associated with?
- Which contemporary mobilities is the space associated with?
- How do these mobilities converge?
- In what way/s, if at all, are they represented (artistic production, narrative)?
- How, if at all, are spatial and social mobilities related?

MULTIPLICITIES

- Which ways of life (ethnic, class, language, etc.) converge on the space?
- Is the process of convergence underwritten by seasonal, daily, and/or other rhythms?
- In what way/s are these mobilities politicized?
- How do they ultimately translate into a (physical) townscape? ('Domestication of space' by dominant groups a crucial aspect here.)

Oltretorrente (Parma), Italy

In Italy, the research focused on Oltretorrente in Parma, an area divided from the rest of city by a river and by history. Oltretorrente was the only Italian territory to resist fascism in the 1920's. The 'barricades' halted invasion, and this has remained a point of pride, not only for the historical inhabitants of the city, but also for the youths that listen to their stories. Oltretorrente, furthermore, has always represented a point of migration fluxes that converge on the city – it has incorporated the natives of the countryside, the migrants from the South of Italy, and now students and new migrants, foreigners originating from Africa, Asia and the eastern Europe. It has always been a popular (some say 'dangerous') neighbourhood, and in certain areas it still has such a reputation. New projects by the local administration also risk to change the face of the quarter, cancelling the traces of memory in favour of a new face. Oltretorrente is a cultural mosaic: cancelling history and memory risks making the place an anonymous one, making it wear a mask which does not fit it, that does not belong to it. It would be to represent the locality in a way that not only oversimplifies the complexities of experience, but which might lead to dangerous developments in the long run.

Hasselby (Stockholm), Sweden

Hasselby is one of the final stations of the Stockholm underground, constructed in the 1920's at a time of great urban expansion. In the 1950's the area began to change and Hasselby adopted modern architecture, the same architecture, which guided urban design during this period. It is not only an aesthetic transformation, the construction of public housing contributed to changing the social structure of the locality, attracting new inhabitants and becoming a popular neighbourhood through constant migration, especially from Finland. Today, these migration processes continue, and social segregation is becoming increasingly evident, to the extent that separate schools are being built for Swedes and for migrants. But social tensions cannot be solely attributed to the difficulties of interaction between locals and migrants. The presence of alcoholics and homeless people are also an issue that reflects deeper tensions at this locality. These are presences that the locals do not accept, and are trying to transfer to other areas of the city.



3-4: Workshop in Malta: discussion and visit to Birgu



'Truly Yours': the element of public participation enters the project.

The project then went north, where we took part in the conference 'Truly Yours' organised in Stockholm by our partner Fabel Kommunikation.

The experiences, projects, ideas and discussions revolved around the themes of *citizen participation* and *open democracy*.

This tallied perfectly with our project's aim of engaging citizens using narratives of urban spaces.

How can democracy become 'truly ours'? Who can participate in decision-making processes? Are there new methods for citizen involvement in community development and local democracy?

The most interesting connection that emerged from the conference was the one that links public participation and the many different forms of 'participative cultures' that are flourishing as a result of a new social outlook and increased access to technology through the web 2.0 approach.

We heard of guerrilla gardening experiences in Finland (citizens using wasted land to set up vegetable gardens for the community); of web-communities of cyclists who share helpful information on the best tracks to use whilst making the city more bike-friendly; of communities of citizens who publish, discuss and report online various problems of their neighbourhood (fixmystreet.com).

We also discussed *wikicities* (ways to make the city smarter and diversify the shared space). We heard of how all the inhabitants of Umeå, a Swedish city, participated in building a winning pitch to become an EU Capital of Culture.

In this panorama, it becomes evident that the new winning infrastructure for governance has to shift from a vertical 'top-down' approach to a more 'horizontal' participative one.

We are in the middle of a radical change in social behaviour; in this perspective a radical change in politicians, civil servants and citizens is becoming a perceived need.

More participation means also more responsibility for everyone and an increased trust of 'people like me', into communities of peers.



5-6: Some moments of the conference 'Truly Yours' in Stockholm

Final outcomes: a report (in narrative form); a theatre performance; a short film.

One of the biggest challenges for the project was to find a suitable form for the final analysis in order to enclose the three different sets of results in a way that could be used to target citizens, local authorities, researchers and policy makers, all of whom have a stake in themes such as urban planning, social policies and community development.

A big team effort drove us to conceive a **'narrative report'** where we follow an imaginary 'citizen' who, during his lifetime moves from one place to the other (as a youth he is pictured in Birgu, as an adult in Oltretorrente and as an elderly in Hasselby). **In this way we travel amongst the three localities, using space and time references, and we can narrate the crucial points which have been identified and analyzed during the research.**

To support the narrative, technical details and practical reflections were added within the booklet produced, in parallel with the text and framed in separate 'boxes' for easy access.

Together with the report the project produced also a **theatrical rendition** of what has been the experience of 'North to South: Space for Memories'.

Compagnia Rodisio, based in Parma, hosted the project team for a weekend of artistic production and fruition.

The result of their artistic reprocessing of the project's data was a highly participative moment where the audience was invited to become part of the performance, sitting on stage in a reproduced atmosphere of an *osteria* (a traditional Italian pub) or an open air common meal where little tables, candles and soft electric bulbs welcomed the participants. The Oltretorrente video '*Am Ricordi*' (one of the research tools in Parma) was showed and many of the interviewed could recognize themselves on screen and add comments and smiles.

The final moment was an instant theatre performance (following the form of short plays or '*corti teatrali*') reproducing the tension and the sense of anticipation that lead to the '*festa*', to the community celebration, to the relief of all anxiety. The performance included the ingredients of memory and irony (the characters were covered in dust and they pictured a family and its generations). The set design recalled the light decoration of a parish celebration.

Finally, actors, audience and project team were all together on stage where a table-full of simple '*festa* food' was offered and the music continued to play.

Some feedback was collected from the audience:

Q: What do you think the performance was about?

A1: Memories need to be defended, they are able to save you from old and new forms of racism. The atmosphere that was re-created inside the theatre brought back feelings and emotions of childhood celebrations and the joy of sharing common spaces.

A2: A sense of anticipation for something that seems never arriving. Expectations and tension that are freed in what will be the 'feast', the liberating celebration. For me, the performance was also about the popular village feast that goes out from the intimate and closed familiar dimension into the outside, into the dimension of encounter.

A3: The identity of a place, viewed through the voices of people who lived there and who are now witnesses of transformations and changes.

A4: The unavoidable and natural socio-cultural transformations that affect every city and every neighbourhood. With all the unavoidable, but surmountable – if everyone adopts a correct behaviour – cohabitation problems.



7-8-9: Some images from the theatre Performance in Parma



The last artistic outcome of the project was a **short audio-visual production** filmed and edited by artist and graphic designer Tony Hultqvist.

The video intertwines 3D animation and the actual landscape of the three cities, trying to convey the idea of a continuous debate and tension between the competing narratives that create the identity and the daily 'small history' of a place. For example in Birgu there could be the narrative of 'preserving the authentic historical touch' competing with the narrative of 'giving more room to the contemporary element'.

The second part of the video imagines a hypothetical future when some of the narratives have 'won' the debate and the cities adapt their 'shape' accordingly, leading to an open and somehow melancholic conclusion.

Conclusions and what we have learnt.

The short-term objectives of collection of intangible data, production of a comparative analysis and of two artistic 'products' were successfully completed.

Above all the project took us a step further in the long term vision of linking the results into existing research networks in the field of cultural and urban planning (connecting with local initiatives, for example experiments of horizontal democracy or investments in participative experiences) and to **propose new methods for public participation** (including for example the tools of creativity and the arts).

Ultimately we will continue working towards the long term aim of developing instruments that could be used in the context of territorial valorisation where the project methodologies and the project outcomes can function as support or starting point for research and discussion.

We are aware that in Sweden some municipalities are very interested and already in the process of developing new methods to enhance democratic processes. Our Swedish partner will work in that direction, using the experience gained during our common work.

Similarly in Malta we will be trying to establish a dialogue with the local councils and we would like to continue to collaborate with our partners to follow up some aspects of the project that could work better for our territories.

In Parma there were requests to continue the debate using public viewing of the video and community meals as moments of discussion.

Professionally speaking the project has been a remarkable experience and also a challenge. Very often in international, collaborative projects the direction that has been planned and carefully designed could need to be modified and could follow new paths. However, this can always be used as a positive ingredient that should add instead of subtracting value to the project.



9: Detail of set design for Parma performance

Furthermore **the combination of art + enterprise + academia was a real laboratory that allowed our organisations to exchange practices and experiences**, enriching each other.



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