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Navigating Crises. Transient communities for urban preparedness.

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Abstract. The crisis has been challenging cities and urban planners for decades, producing theories, scenarios, and imaginaries aimed at governing its emergence and its consequences. The latest of such crises - the Covid 19 pandemic - seems to have once again brought attention to the unsolved urgency of planning to tackle the changes and stresses caused by insurgent events, which once again appears to involve cities and their spaces as holders of both the reasons and the possible solution to the crisis consequences.

Despite the abundance of possible approaches, however, the debate has not yet clearly highlighted the operative lessons learned from these challenges. In this vein, the urban studies debate has been reflecting on the possibility to act provisionally but in a preparedness perspective, opening alternative paths, rather than proposing solutions, planning for uncertainty and complexity with temporary means and actions. An attitude that requires both the flexibility and adaptability of consolidated urban systems and the affirmation and legitimization of collective and practical instances in an operational institutional dimension.

The article briefly reviews the relevant positions in the relationship between cities and crisis; next, it highlights the role, responsibilities and relevance of planning to inhabit the consequences of the crisis, from a preparedness perspective; thirdly, it calls to consider the potential alternative answers resulting from interaction with temporary communities of practice.

Keywords: preparedness, transient communities, adaptive planning, urban crisis, communities of practice.

1. Crisis in the urban world

“Crisis” comes from the Greek *krinō* meaning ‘a decision made by a jury’. As a Latin word ‘decision’ comes from *de-caedere*, to cut. In medical terms, this term is based on a practical concept, ‘to sift’, the activity of the Greeks when choosing the grain seeds. In this definition, the crisis represents the moment of choice, of transition [1] it indicates the unexpected modification of a physiological state, sudden and unpredictable because it radically changes previous conditions. In all aspects in which the word ‘crisis’ is conjugated, it indicates a distinct, sharp bifurcation, a change of conditions, as modification or disappearance. The crisis age has been described as often characterized by acceleration, haste and focus on the present [2], to the extent that – in some cases – the risk is to routinize the state of exception. At the same time, a countermovement of the opposite sign concerns the time of planning, design, decision-making and proceduralisation, which is expanding as never before. We find ourselves employing more and more preparation and anticipation time, in contrast to the acceleration and presentism about which many agree is characterising times of crisis [3]–[5].

Against this, however, some authors have been reflecting on the slow pace of crises and on what causes this sharp bifurcation, focusing on the current critical situations that generate the vulnerabilities we are dealing with, as the result of a slow evolutionary path of our human species.

Baumann and Bordonni [1] express concern about the transformation of crises away from the form of conjunctures that appeared and disappeared in a limited period, evolving into a

permanent state, which transforms by regenerating itself, influencing every sector of society in its evolution. Zardini [6] reflects on the path from today's crisis back to the 1970s, outlining what appears to be a long climatic-environmental, energy, and health crisis, which also affects institutions, professions and – as a consequence - the way we currently operate and design the living environment. Similarly, Serres [7] addresses the 2007 financial crisis. He explains that six major ‘critical’ events have been on the way for a long time and relate to the slow pace of the relationship between humanity, the earth and technology:

- the largest population displacement ever in history (from the countryside to the city), contributing to provoking an ecological catastrophe that depends directly on anthropisation;
- the intensification and rapid pace of mobilization, due to technological innovation in the transport sector;
- the development of health technologies, from which human bodies evolve into very different types from those of our ancestors;
- the greater demographic transition, exponential growth, and rapid ageing;
- the substitution of the collective, where the individual and the collective destinies were interconnected, with the connective, that allows relating at a distance and transforms ways and devices of production and reproduction of knowledge;
- the military and nuclear technologies that made humanity the most dangerous species.

As a general tendency, the occurrence of crises apparently did not introduce new ideas or paradigms but has pushed toward policy change [8] and favour certain strategies and trends - which were already in place - until they became predominant. Following this thought, Latour [9] does not speak of a crisis as a contingent and removable event, but as a perennial condition. Other authors [1] observing the economic crisis of 2008, emphasize its deep roots and longer-term manifestations than a temporary economic slowdown. This challenges the idea of crisis as a decisive moment of the upheaval of the political order, replaced by an understanding of crisis as a lasting, enduring [3], [10] condition from which there is no escape, and which requires us to navigate its uncertain outcomes.

These points convey the sense of the times in which we live, within a feeling of the unknown and uncertainty for the future, but at the same time a sense of urgency to act quickly [1]. The latest of such crises - the Covid 19 pandemic - seems to have once again brought attention to the unsolved urgency to tackle the changes and stresses caused by insurgent events, which once again involve cities and their spaces as holders of both the reasons [11] and the possible solutions [8] to the crisis consequences.

As expected, the consequences of Covid-19's most intense crisis years are superimposing themselves on the remnants of previous crises in the city spaces and social segments already hardest impacted. At the same time, the insurgence of the pandemic crises confirmed the pattern of what has been described as the bi-directional relationship between planning and crisis [8], [12]. It is widely acknowledged that urban planning is complicit in creating the conditions for the crisis which has deep roots in urbanization [4], at the same time, the consequences of the crisis are exposing the weaknesses of planning and generating pressure for its re-thinking.

Following the first months of 2020 [5], [13], planning discourse has been re-shuffling well-established theories and models among which the flexibility and adaptability of consolidated

urban systems, the affirmation of "practical" and fast social answers and their legitimization in an operational institutional dimension. These positions are long-discussed challenges of urban studies, but they acquire new insights if reflected upon in a permanent crisis perspective.

The long-lasting temporality of the crisis urges on the one hand to re-think the temporaneity of the planning answers and on the other, to increase their territorial distribution.

Based on these premises, the paper reflects on two main issues:

- one is addressed by putting forward a "preparedness" dimension for urban planning, one that looks for a continuous capacity to respond appropriately to emergencies by making the uncertain future available for impermanent action in the present.
- The second issue is what interaction with communities of practices might offer concerning the re-connection with those socio-technical practices and solutions elaborated by actors directly engaged in the daily reproduction of responses to stresses and outbreaks. Communities of practice, as transient communities, are various forms of alliances built between territorial actors that are constituted and organised around shared issues.

These two postures will be explored to answer some guiding questions. How to develop the ongoing capacity to respond appropriately to uncertain futures, acting in the present? How to initiate exploratory conversations, augmenting the resilience of systems by increasing the number of agents ready to intervene in a crisis? And how to act in an experimental but permanent way? Looking at the crisis through the lens of urbanism can help answer to some of these questions, and lessons learned from experiments in our cities can indeed become sediments of future urban attitudes and approaches.

2. Preparedness as a field of experimentation for planning

As has become increasingly clear in recent times, crisis events carry consequences of radical uncertainty that require new forms of rationality and a strong capacity for experimentation. Within this framework against which planning efforts must also be placed, falls the concept of *preparedness*. This keyword has been used to describe the adaptation and resistance to shocks, and crises, incorporating the concept of resilience and widespread adaptability. The concept was initially developed in relation to nuclear threats and bioterrorism, but was later extended to crisis management related to disasters, health threats and climate change risk [3]. The approach calls for moving from a state of emergency answer (typical of prevention and risk management) to vigilance and collective awareness for early detection of signals that lead to a system breakdown, and thus a crisis. Lakoff [14], distinguishes between prevention and preparedness as two ways of thinking about and intervening in the future of society. In prevention, a potential threat is considered a regularly occurring event whose probability can be calculated based on historical models and can be managed through risk distribution. Preparedness, on the other hand, applies to events whose regular occurrence cannot be mapped through statistical knowledge and whose probability cannot, therefore, be calculated. A threat is understood and managed as a certain event and, instead of limiting action in the face of uncertainty [13], [15], preparedness transforms potentially catastrophic threats into vulnerabilities that can be collectively mitigated [14]. Since the probability and severity of such events cannot be calculated, Lakoff argues that the only way to avoid disasters is to

maintain a continuous capacity to respond appropriately by making an uncertain future available for action in the present. Similarly, Keck [16] uses the concept of preparedness to encourage a shift in focus from the short timeframe of emergencies to the long timeframe of ecologies [10]. This interpretation is useful to be explored as an orientation towards a specific way of understanding society and a specific form of evidence generation.

Anticipation of risk in the present [5] is an ecological notion [10] that carefully observes the sites where early warning signals (or sentinels) [16] are produced which, translated into an urban dimension, may represent the places that are most vulnerable in the event of emergencies or the most fragile populations that might be affected by their consequences. Keck, however, solicits that these signals, situated in local proximity to crisis events and consequences, are embedded into processes to assess alternative responses at different scales.

The concept of preparedness related to planning was once again introduced into the international debate immediately following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic [3]. In a context of radical uncertainty and instability and given the inability to plan today's actions and responses to cope with the ever-increasing environmental and social complexities, preparedness solicits thinking about the imponderability of crises that may arise not aiming to avoid them but rather building a capacity to react that is valid in the most diverse situations.

Several authors [2], [17] call to adopt a preparedness perspective in planning. This directly relates to a resilient approach [17] that replaces the search for full predictive and preventive control of a situation, with the idea of dealing with both hidden development and sudden emergence with operational alternatives. However, planning in terms of non-linearity or uncertainty appears insufficient, as it would require constructing development opportunities which can continuously iteratively reflect on themselves, improving the territorially distributed capabilities and competencies.

Pellizzoni and Balducci [3], [17] examine the transitional phases of disaster and crisis management: from the recognition of an external threat to be prevented (known); to the hidden (unknown) threats that emerge from the complexity of socio-ecological systems, against which one must prepare. Balducci further elaborates on this by stating that in today's society we cannot afford to be prepared for the 'known-unknown', i.e. the risk we know will occur, but we must be prepared to face the 'unknown-unknown', something unpredictable that should not find society ill-equipped, but ready to implement collective mitigation strategies. This according to the authors should inspire future policies and planning actions.

An interesting focus of this discourse is to see planning for preparedness as a form of shared responsibility while avoiding the risk of turning it into manipulative thinking [18]. This focus allows seizing the opportunities offered by the preparedness framework as a chance for planning to open up [19] to alternatives consistent with the permanent crisis situation. However, to seek adaptation to permanently open future risks generating more rigid and chrono-centric structures, or even formulating strategies that might confine innovation to predetermined future scenarios, reducing their flexibility and, consequently, their ability to rapidly adapt to unforeseen change.

Starting from the positions envisaged by preparedness, the risks and threads highlighted and its possible translation in a planning framework, the objective appears to become one of creating models capable of adapting, in a transformative and reversible manner, to something that has not yet been predicted and imagined, converting uncertainty and indeterminacy into

an engine of innovation. However, as many suggest [17] not to renounce or eliminate the possibility of planning but creating complementary forms in terms of answers capacities. Following this logic, preparedness requires to be put to work, made operational and, above all, territorialised and contextualized [4], [20]. This resonates with the tendency to improve the territorially distributed capabilities and competencies [21], to subvert the growing construction of tools to increase individual effectiveness [18] with a renewed emphasis on universal service provision and collective empowerment.

This direction calls for the need to broaden the base of agents ready (prepared) to provide alternatives in response to crisis events and long-term navigation. Henceforth, within the framework of preparation for inhabiting the crisis, comes reflections on the widespread approach to anticipation, with the construction of collaborations and alliances with urban actors who intervene in the city with their practices. This, in addition to being a well-established principle of urban planning, is part of the debate on socio-ecological resilience, for which the adaptation of a system increases as the number of actors able to extend its capacity to react and improve in anticipating signals and consequently in reacting to a crisis and its consequences.

3. The construction of impermanence: a role for the communities of practice

As discussed above, the urban crisis with which the design professions are confronted is a perennial condition [9], offering opportunities for permanently temporary emergencies, but no longer to be understood as a limited and reversible event. To plan for the preparedness in the tense field of uncertainty, it appears necessary to expand the agency of citizens, a form of shared responsibility in the response to crises. Lessons learned from the ultimate urban crises [20] reinforce the hypothesis that an open framework for planning would be necessarily made operative by engaging with short-term, reversible, contingent, dynamic solutions provided by the constellation of urban social actors. These solutions are often generated by informal organizations or even individuals self-activating and proposing alternatives to fill a gap left by the retraction of the public institution [22]. Through time, these experiences have been generating ad hoc, purpose-related, transitional communities, forms of multi-agent collaborations that provide organization to active citizenship, that are light, intentional, open, and reversible, and originated in specific space-time contexts. Drawing from the literature on an educational theory I will refer to them as communities of practice [23].

The term communities of practice is here employed to focus the attention on groups of subjects that, temporarily and intermittently, share values, needs and solutions for such needs [24]. It refers to ad hoc communities that exist to satisfy a particular problem and for a limited period [25], or transient communities [26] being activated by a project coalition in which the actors are involved in a common initiative, strongly sensitive to geographical proximity, but not exclusive to the local scale. They are called upon to give shape to spaces and devices, to reflect on the urban future or already ongoing transformations in the city through an innovative, sometimes radical perspective, investigating tactics that may not be codified, but are rooted in the urban population. This is the case, for instance, of energy communities, organised groups of citizens, homeowners or tenants, who actively engage and cooperate to develop innovative forms of energy sharing. [27]. Energy communities are configured as an aggregation of citizens for whom energy is a community asset, and it is widely recognized as one of the main leverages

to act upon fighting climate change in the long run and achieving the ecological transition. Energy communities can be interpreted as transient communities of practice for their purpose-orientation that, through time, has generated new types of organizations. These are much more oriented toward value redistribution among participants, framed by specific types of governance, structures and purposes: cooperatives, foundations, limited partnerships, housing associations, non-profit customer-owned enterprises, public-private partnerships or public utility companies who “voluntarily accept certain rules for the purposes of shared common objectives” in relation to energy [28].

This indicates the coexistence of a group of individuals, with like-minded interests in a communal space, who interact not just in a defined geographical area but mutually identify as a group which shares competencies born from common goals, values, and resources. Communities of practice are henceforth characterized by a social bond that is not stable, is both functional and solidaristic, and based on mutual recognition, exchange and sometimes gratuitousness. The latter is among the causes that leave these experiences to remain confined within contingent perspectives: as a matter of fact, they come into being in response to difficulties but do not always succeed in effectively carrying their impact towards a potential condition for change.

The Community Cooperatives (*cooperative di comunità*) in Italy for example, are - still not-formalised - models for the aggregation of localized enterprises, associations and institutions, organising to be producers and users of goods or services, fostering synergy, opportunities for growth and cohesion. They are becoming a model for their capacity of responding to crises thanks to their ability to internalise emerging needs by finding a solidarity-based model of response to them. According to Wenger, members of communities of practice structure their identity from their experiences in the community and the meaning they attach to their actions within their context. It can be said that the communities of practice are able to produce an alternative vision of (temporary) citizenship, one based on the defence, production and management of collective interests and goods.

The most recent crisis has accelerated and, in some ways, prototyped new networks and coalitions for the communities of practice, oriented to expand their role and influence, encompassing heterogeneity, capable of sharing common missions: alliances, that involve different actors who share both means and common goals. Many of them provided services and products, involving experiences that include communication activities, set-ups, and collaborative practices implemented thanks to the commitment and voluntary work of citizens and social groups.

Among these new prototypes we can mention the experience of Ethical Delivery (*consegne etiche*), an alliance between workers, shop owners, and restaurateurs in Bologna (Italy), to respond to two challenges: a contingent one, to help the delivery of goods in the short term during the Covid-19 pandemic; a long-term one, to reduce the prevalence of large platforms which have long been deficient in terms of workers' rights. On a similar note, in the case of South Working organization [29] promoting innovative formulas of business development, self-regulation and management of spaces and services for de-localised smart workers who, during the hardest months of the Covid-19 lockdown, were forced to work from their hometown (often located in remote places from where they had been moving). The

experimentation has been so successful that it turned the pilot network into a stable service for the workers re-locating to smart working in their (southern) hometowns.

The actions of ad hoc, transitional communities of practices take shape through interaction, they are thus originated by the actions of the people that share an issue and the intention to address it collectively, generating joint meanings, albeit pro-tempore, in a non-stable form. This learning outcome should not be seen as an interference in planning but at the same time, communities of practices should also not be considered as a homogeneous “whole” responding “mechanically” and automatically to a systemic need or to unmet crisis consequences. Indeed, the challenge is to formulate strategies that do not confine them to predetermined future scenarios, as this would risk reducing their flexibility and, consequently, their ability to adapt quickly to unforeseen circumstances, acting also as signals for the consequences of an imminent crisis.

4. In form of an open conclusion: can communities of practice operationalize preparedness in planning?

Western cities have long been going through a field of tensions due to a series of pressures and stresses generated by various crises (economic, financial, global, climate and, most recently, health). The consequences have deposited in the living environment a series of challenges that have tested mainstream planning and decision-making processes but also risk management practices: declining public funding in the provision of services, the increased prominence of non-traditional urban actors in the production of welfare, the slowdown in the housing market, political instability and distrust in policies.

While navigating within the ultimate crisis, we wonder what to learn, what to leave behind, but above all how to adapt to its permanent consequences with which we have to live. Planning for preparedness exhorts territorial planners, designers, and policy makers to “stay” in the crisis and its consequences. Broadening the scope of action and awareness of responsible and vigilant actors regarding crisis signals could go in this direction. In the background, about the lessons learnt from the transient communities of practice, a number of issues emerge, from which to operationalise a preparedness approach in planning, design and policy making.

The first aspect to be taken into account in the actions of communities of practice is temporariness. The inherent logic of constituting themselves (formally or otherwise) as a result of a need that may be contingent, also characterizes their results: their actions are more tactical than strategic, pro-tempore rather than permanent. At a time of transformation of planning, design and policy making, more oriented towards strategic than spatialised, normative arrangements, the temporariness of practices and the possibility of building alliances with them, deserves attention and discussion

The second aspect concerns their geography. They are in fact both strongly spatialised and localised experiences (such as community cooperatives, which refer to a defined territorial context), but also collaborative networks that emerge in multiple contexts at the same time (the SouthWorking experience is paradigmatic of the ability of a localised movement to act at the same time strongly connected to the national dimension, to the point of touching on global issues). This is a geographical dimension led by proximity, where the term does not only indicate spatial closeness, but a communion of intentions and goals, thanks to daily (or

sporadic) contact and exchange. The increasing degree of complexity and the critical mass determined by the practices of transient communities suggest the adoption of approaches able to deal with new spatialities, beyond administrative borders and oriented to build a more coherent spatial logic, responsive to the real and effective living territory.

The experimental approach is the third point of discussion. This is a way of working that allows practices to act on a small scale, through prototypes to be tested, and then upscaled. The case of Consegne Etiche in Bologna followed a similar path, first testing and prototyping the possibility of addressing the ethical issues of the deliverymen's work by going through a process of assessment and constant evaluation, first on a small scale and then at the city level. Experimentation allows to adjust, think laterally, try new possibilities and fail, in order to expose other realities, with alternative points of view. This approach might mirror an inquiry process for planning, which is essential to exercise a real capacity to review planning, design choices and actions. Policy, however, understood as a process of enquiry, is necessary to activate dialogue and transactions between the many actors involved in urban reality. This involves sharing a problematic and strategic approach that clarifies the issues at stake and solutions through provisional projects, reflecting an inductive research methodology.

The last consideration concerns the governance of communities of practice, as a hybrid, multi-actor, contamination between public, private and social actors. The governance model envisages that the parties interested in collaborating take on a characteristic (or a part) of the actors with whom they collaborate: a hybrid set-up that favours institutional change by affecting - albeit temporarily - the balance of power relations in planning processes.

These preliminary points of reflection, allow considering the equipment and skills of the ordinary everyday practices of communities, to be repurposed in response to the extraordinary of the crisis, in a planning setting, with an argumentative attitude, orienting rather than determining, selecting what is indispensable, but also saying what is provisional and therefore treated differently. Furthermore, it is a useful overview for understanding how to pick up the thread of a great wave of public planning which, at least in Europe, will be able to benefit from investments and resources on a considerable scale.

Interpreting how communities use (and struggle for) everyday and temporary (even precarious) solutions to crises in an organised and engaging way can reveal several insights. On the one hand, the needs emerging from crisis situations are often interconnected not only at a neighbourhood scale but following broader geographies. On the other hand, unexpected relationships and interactions emerge between the built environment and the way people inhabit it in response to changed living (and working) needs. The way transient communities of practice operate can ultimately contribute to both the theory and practice of the co-production of cities and territories.

In conclusion, a research perspective is identified, whereby transitional communities of practices may become the privileged observatory where attitudes but also alternatives and even inspirations to crisis preparedness policies can be recognised. Practices that could ultimately inspire a broader change, especially in the delicate management of risks: from a controlling attitude towards an approach centred on institutional adaptation, to coexistence and governance for navigating the urban and territorial crisis.

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