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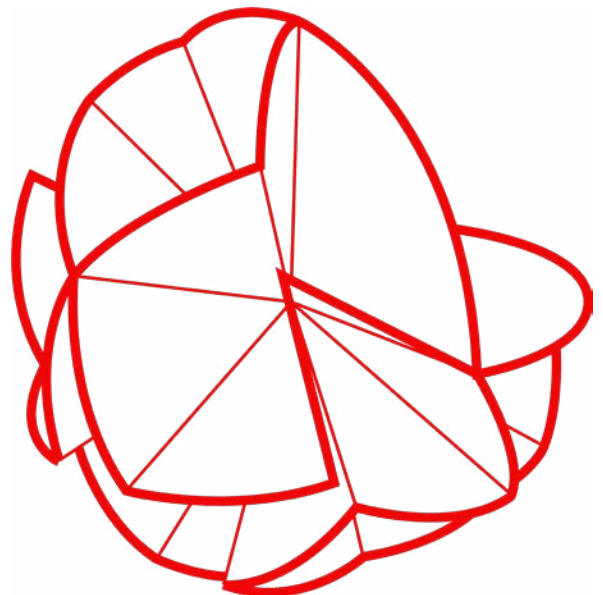
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Beyond Collaboration: A Network Analysis of Local Stances and Global Frameworks in the Collective Design of the City

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Abstract
The research observes practices of collective city-making beyond the participatory framework of institutional urban governance. In particular, it looks at how grassroots organizations in Bologna are able to produce a dual movement between the local and the global, mutually informing global movements and local practices oriented toward the sustainable growth of cities. The first section introduces the theoretical framework, based on participatory governance, urban commons and grassroots networks; it presents the methodology in the second section, introducing the criteria for the dataset and the network analysis consisting of local and global nodes within the city of Bologna; it then presents the results of the analysis, discusses them and draws the conclusions in the final section.

Keywords
Grassroot activities
Collaborative governance
Networks
Urban economy
Urban design

The Shadows of Collaborative Governance:
A New Framework for Looking at Collective City-Making

Multi-level governance has become a necessary modality of narrating, if not governing, the contemporary city by implementing participatory techniques. Born as a best practice in isolated stances (de Sousa Santos, 1998), a distinct stream of research on participation was already consolidated at the beginning of the century, identifying a taxonomy for the varieties of participation (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006), with its potential and limitations. Participation was initially intended vaguely as the involvement (or validation) of citizens in the decision-making process concerning urban transformations (Cornwall, 2002); later on, participatory practices have been better understood as a practice of open innovation (Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013), introducing outer, if not divergent, inputs in the process of governing the city. A further specification was added when both urban planning tools and the scholarship that observed them started to acknowledge that participation was not to be understood only in the citizens-administration hiatus, but that intermediary bodies and other organizations, belonging both to the domain of NGOs and the private sector, were ideal partners in collaborative governance (Healey 2003). This became particularly evident (and a widespread practice) within the agenda for the sustainable development of cities and smart cities (Conti et al. 2019; Kalesnikate 2018; Pereira et al., 2018; Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006).

What has, however, been emphasized beyond institutional narratives and participatory scholarship is that citizens and grassroots activities can contribute to urban governance even when they are not actively engaged with the local administration (Cellamare, 2008; Castelli et al, 2011). Quite the reverse, grassroot movements are at the forefront of city making - i.e. of the factual production and reproduction of the city, of its spaces and its economy - an activity which often happens not only outside conventional spaces of "participatory practices" and "collaborative governance" but in open contrast to it.

The literature on the commons (Kornberger & Borch, 2015) have posited in most explicit terms by bearing reference to the collective processes of city-making as processes of "commoning" the city, i.e. of shaping the city by producing, reproducing, using its spaces and mechanisms as a shared resource (Stavrides, 2016). Here, citizens cannot be seen as isolated individuals but rather as cooperative subjects who self-organize themselves in more or less formal groups to enact practices in the urban space which, simultaneously, respond to urgent and practical contingencies and to a broader need to rethink the urban paradigm within a framework of sustainable growth. Through their interaction, they are able to strategize and build the capacity to alter the current urban paradigm (Schmid, 2021).

These phenomena have a twofold nature: on the one hand, they are localized and they operate in a tangible and spatially evident environment which articulates the nodes of the urban fabric (Orioli & Massari, 2023) - they are social centers, cultural organizations, and neighborhood committees, "intermediate places" (Massari, 2019) that offer informal services, share information, enable, produce local

agency; as hybrid governance configurations they often combine a societal vocation, cultural programming and political initiatives for the sustainable transition of cities (Sabatini, 2022), while contributing by both their actions and the imageries that they produce to enacting an "alternative city", which opposes the current status quo (Morea & Sabatini, 2023). On the other hand, they are networked at both the local/national level and to broader national and international environments (Boulanger & Massari, 2022), producing a local-global feedback loop (Tsutsui, 2017). This loop has a twofold effect: it informs practices and more grounded actions at the local level, and it produces agency and reconceptualizes political frameworks at the global level (Maskovsky, 2020).

Eventually, this constantly updated, collectively produced body of knowledge seems to have the potential to adjust to the constant surge of urban crises in a more responsive way than institutional urban design tools, contributing to a sustainable model considering the interconnectedness to its nodes, its global outreach and its local-sensitive actions.

The present paper aims to observe how these collective phenomena, localized in the city, yet reaching out towards a broader framework, create a network of actors who shape concentric environments in the city (the cultural milieu, local decision-making committees, and activism) and contribute to the design of the city as a political, spatial, cultural and economic entity. Bologna is the focus of the analysis, and specifically the local and global networks of its grassroots activities.

The Context of Bologna and Its Challenges

Bologna represents an ideal ground to observe these stances for manifold reasons, which relate to the political temper of the city. The city holds a strong tradition of local grassroots activism on different fronts, covering the cultural sphere (LaTerra, 2021), labour rights (Chesta et al., 2019), civil rights (Heywood 2018.), sustainable food production and consumption (Alberio & Moralli 2021) and human/political rights (Bazzoli, 2021). Bologna is further characterized by a solid organization of the economic and social life based on sharing and cooperation: both the vibrant economy of the city and the grassroots political life are grounded on structured organizational forms which have, in time, consolidated the grassroots environment and the local economy; this occurred respectively through cooperatives, co-owned social enterprises (Selloni & Corubolo ,2017), and *centri sociali*, dissident political collectives operating in spaces often illegally appropriated (Mudu, 2004). From an institutional viewpoint, the city has been responsive towards this collaborative ecosystem by deploying political actions such as Neighborhood labs (Dalfovo, 2020) and the Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons (De Nictolis & Iaione, 2021). At the transnational level Bologna, with the dense knowledge economy generated by the University and its paramount number of temporary inhabitants, is crossed by a dense flow of human and social capital where the local and the global dimension intertwine.

Within Bologna's political, sociocultural and economic ecosystem, frictions exist between collaboration and cooptation of local citizenship, as the Municipality seems to be less responsive to radical stances of transformation than to those embedding its own political agenda (Giannini, Pirone, 2019). This scenario requires the understanding of what the grassroots organizations' contribution to collective city-making is, and how this is enacted through local and global network.

Method

The research has produced a database of the grassroots organizations operating in the city of Bologna, and has analyzed their interactions through network analysis, carried out with the Cytoscape software.

 The first step in constituting the dataset was conceptual: the theoretical framework and the research question contributed to framing what organizations to include in the quest. Their major feature would be that of having societal aims, regardless of their field of action (be it that of food production and consumption, of education, of artistic practices, sustainable lifestyles, and so forth). Strictly commercial organizations, though part of a creative ecosystem which contributes to the overall grassroot economy, were excluded from the mapping.

 To identify the organizations operating in the Bologna environment, triangulation of different sources was used: first, institutional registers were investigated where the major typologies of organizations are recorded: *Circoli Arci*, *centri sociali*, cultural associations, social cooperatives. Second, exponential discriminative snowball sampling (Yadav et al., 2019) was used: snowball sampling consists of interrogating an initial sample (in this case the registered organizations) until it reaches saturation, i.e. until all objects having an existing connection to the other sampled objects are, in turn, sampled. Discrimination was used in snowball sampling so as to exclude those organizations that had a solely commercial purpose. This step allowed to include in the sample the organized yet unrecognized groups of activists, collectives, and organizations that are not formally recorded in institutional registers, and to identify organizations that were external to the Bologna context.

 The dataset was then articulated to include the geographical position, the nature and the activities of the organization. The activities, extracted from the organizations' social and web pages, contributed to articulating a taxonomy of grassroots initiatives and contributed to the clustering illustrated in Fig.1. Once the dataset was created, a third step consisted of looking at the organizations' interactions. As said by Castro-Martinez et al. (2022: 74), "since the activities in the [symbolic] sectors are often developed within a project framework, interactions differ from project to project". Therefore, in order to properly map these interactions, the research did not gather information about the network from the organizations' webpages, but from their communication channels, analyzing their project collaborations within the past 18 months. Nodes were then differentiated by geographical location and divided into "Bologna, Region, Europe, World" categories.

The research constitutes an unprecedented mapping of city initiatives at the grassroots level and their transnational interactions. Yet, it presents some limitations: first the sampling needs refining – for instance, there are many organizations that engage in multiple collaborations with one another over the year but the weight of such relationships is not accounted for; many of the mapped organizations did engage in collaborative activities with formal institutional actors; while the object of the research was the identification of grassroots network, institutional cooperation might indeed play a role in the ability of an organizations to be central to the network, and further research is needed to identify these power dynamics. Another possibility for future development is the analysis of the spatial distribution of the organizations in the city, looking at the type and nature of organizations through the lens of their position in the urban space and at the activities they enact. A semantic and thematic analysis of the organizations' actions, together with some fieldwork, would produce insights into the process of mutual information of local and global levels.

Findings

A total of 94 organizations and 445 interactions were mapped.

A prominent number of organizations are artistic NGOs, cultural associations and collectives working with different media and methods, with a major focus on the performing arts – all these activities are carried out with the distinct aim of creating relationality and social inclusion through artistic practices. The second largest portion of organizations has been labeled as "green transition and sustainability", under which are recorded the organizations promoting a different paradigm of the city, featuring sustainable mobility and new sustainable systems of resources production and consumption (from food to energy). *Centri sociali*, which usually act on the verge of illegality, have been placed in this category in light of their involvement in alternative commercial circuits that support degrowth or sustainable growth, from local food markets to upcycling and recycling.

Multifunctional spaces cover yet another significant portion of the grassroots ecosystem: they are social centres, cultural centres, multifunctional spaces and 'third places': "intermediate places" (Massari, 2019) where cultural, social and mutualistic activities can be performed simultaneously. These spaces often belong to the historical fabric of the city, have a long-standing tradition, and often welcome a very diverse range of users, from students in after-school to elders and temporary residents.

Education, intended as lifelong learning and as an activity for social inclusion, is also covered by several organizations – a choice was made to place here the organizations that mostly deal with book exchanges and presentations or publishing houses for children as a form of education.

Other organizations deal with social inclusion, intended both as creating cohesion, shared understanding, common practices in communities and as the integration of migrants; traditional as well as innovative crafts (mainly fostering cooperation and integration) are also present, while many deal with women's rights and anti-violence initiatives. Two organizations were able to create clinics which address health rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups.
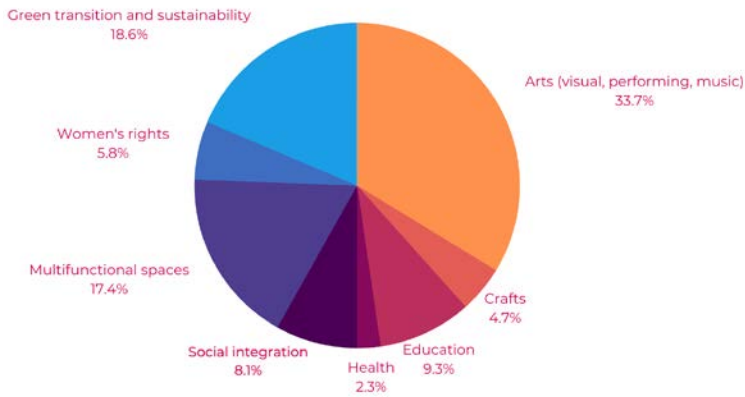
The organizations of this ecosystem are tightly interrelated to each other and to a broader transnational ecosystem. Some insights are presented here that illustrate how networks are articulated, structured and clustered according to the organizations types introduced in Fig. 1.

Cultural organizations show a structured and dense network which distributes, quite predictably, in an uneven way: larger artistic organizations are more strongly correlated to numerous external international organizations (*Danza Urbana, Camere d'Aria, ArteMigrante* among others) and, even though the present paper did not account for these ties, are likely to have a strong interaction with institutions. Here, a strong exchange of cultural capital is visible, and the ambition to update expressive languages in the light of emerging European and global trends. Minor organizations, which are additionally focused on community initiatives and area-based development, engage in a dense network at the local scale. What is interesting, however, is that their network is more diversified, as it involves social cooperatives and NGOs with a societal focus which, by engaging with them, aim at fostering social inclusion and dialogue through the arts (*Circo SottoSopra, Dry-art, EtaBeta, Fraternal Compagnia, Laminarie*). The two levels, however, cannot be entirely disentangled, as the two network structures meet in areas where the lower and the higher level of cultural production exchange practices and share spaces - as is the case with the centre *DAS, Dispositivo per le Arti Sperimentali* or the cultural spaces who have entered the Trans Europe Halles network.

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Informal organizations, political collectives and associations of social promotions are, in their turn, tightly correlated: a dense network exists between collectives promoting grassroots political actions and protests (as is the case of *Centri sociali* such as *Làbas, TPO, Vag61*); organizations proposing new systems of food production and/or distribution to fragile groups (*Campi Aperti, Cucine Popolari*, respectively "Open Fields" and "Popular Kitchens"); associations organizing health services for those who do not have access to basic healthcare. The local network, operating in a diffuse way within the urban fabric, is corroborated by interactions with organizations having mostly a European reach and which aim at similar goals, such as *Noname Kitchen*, supporting people on the move with food supplies, and *Mediterranea - Saving Humans*. Similarly, women rights collectives and organizations show particularly intense cooperation with actors at the National and European level, activating initiatives which are embedded in international rights' networks (*Global Network Shelter Forum, Women Against Violence*, respectively at the Global and European levels). A robust network of organizations operating in the domain of sustainable mobility exists mostly at the local level, often sharing spaces and goals with political collectives.

Besides the existence of some isolated network of cultural organizations or minor neighborhood associations, which appear at the margins of the network analysis, what is evident is the interconnectedness of levels which, though clustered into denser networks, contribute to overcoming the view of grassroots activities as sparse, and identifies a distinct grassroots level of urban governance and collective city-making which, according to the typologies indicated in Fig. 1, act in common to produce behavioral changes for more sustainable production and consumption modes, for low-carbon mobility concepts, and for social cohesion, with a robust contribution from the arts and cultural sector.

Discussion & Conclusion

Effective responses to urban crises "depend on successfully integrating 'universal (scientific) knowledge with knowledge particular to the social, ecological, and historical circumstances of particular places'" (Gollagher & Hartz Karp, 2013: 2346). What emerges is that the Bologna grassroots ecosystem operates within a very dense network of interaction on several levels, which seems dependent on the size of the organizations and, to some extent, on its scope. The impossibility to disentangle the two levels and to identify distinct ones testify, however, for a dense interaction between local practices and transnational frameworks. This is particularly evident in the ecosystem of NGOs and political groups whose activities are grounded in the spaces of the city, and whose actions have practical implications in the life of its dwellers, especially those living at the margins, not having access to healthcare or food, or a proper shelter. This action is highly coordinated, embedding mutualism and the complementarity of actions which end up resulting in a coherent, patterned and networked practice of city making. As said by Schmid (2021: 202), "patterns of practices can catalyze spaces for grassroots governance. Practices which built relations that are conducive to

further transformative activities enlarge the spaces for alternative economic and political relations".

These organizations, while engaging with a local struggle for a more sustainable and accessible city, and in shifting the economic paradigm towards sustainable growth, are simultaneously acting in partnership with other major global or European organizations (in most cases even bypassing the National level) by which they are informed and which, in turn, are informed by their actions. This produces a twofold movement between political practices and concepts aimed at making cities sustainable from a social and environmental perspective. This generates a loop between the local and the global, where "global human rights first transform local actors' movement actorhood, which concurrently shapes their goals and strategies, and then provides political opportunities to propel the movements into new activities." (Tsutsui, 2017: 1092). Within this perspective, such initiatives appear to be "sustainability transition pioneers" (Gernert et al., 2018), operating at the forefront of open innovation for environmental justice and the ecological transition.

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