

Innovation wanted! The challenge at the crossroads of crisis

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Abstract

The crisis, contrary to belief, may be a unique opportunity to rethink cities. These will continue to survive the crisis and hold privileged spaces to promote and articulate knowledge, innovation and creativity. Although gathering these and other positive aspects, the future of the cities will depend on the way they are designed, built and lived. Therefore, it is easy to grasp the importance of social capital – strengthening it – through communities of practice that encourage collective learning. By managing this, we are directly contributing to build an “urban” capital, with an emphasis on society. It then becomes crucial to create and operate ways of active participation, led by trained and qualified professionals and backed up by the appropriate methodologies. The idea is to overcome the limited knowledge of urban liberalism (academic or current) and raise awareness for a wider range of knowledge essential to generate contextual contributions – particular and general – of increasing complexity and uncertainty in which we live in, essential for a successful balanced society and based on the idea of a creative and innovative sharing, which ensures that everyone has the “right to the city”.

Introduction

The mega cities with more than 10 million people emerged at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, reflecting the growth of global economy with spectacular high-rise buildings (towers, shopping centres, campus technology and luxury housing projects) (Rao, 2010). The euphoria gave way to “entertainment architecture” and an urbanism based on “advertising decoys” (Wisnik, 2009) and the “architect/professional author”. The idea was that these great works of architecture would be a cure for improving cities. The goal was to reach a solution to solve urban problems solely through design.

At the same time, we saw an explosion of informal housing and work areas including street selling and informal dwelling (Rao, 2010), generating coproduction of spaces, based on complex social networks that allow a sense of belonging instead of a permanent fight against a hostile world, creating rich human experiences.

In short, the city created two poles, two worlds, and tried to give an economical answer according to the social background where the communities are challenged. On the one hand, the cure for the problems is through design, on the other hand, through the human component. Is it possible to merge these two views – design and coproduction of spaces – taking advantage of what each has best to offer?

The crisis: *design* vs human component

After the euphoria and explosion, we have entered a period of crisis and containment, where we are forced to review the consumerist lifestyle. The crisis, while imposing restrictions, also has advantages when requiring more creativity in finding solutions. In fact, we need to reflect on what was done and challenges to find new ways and new formats. For this, it is essential that we get rid of the “lens” with which we viewed the world – a permanent PARTY – and replace them with new ways of looking at reality and explore the potentials that were forgotten or overlooked.

We are therefore at the turning point of the paradigm of “architect/professional author” for something different that has yet to come, as defined by Sandercock, who referring to the “cities of difference” as a result of global migration, argues that this new phenomenon transforms urban planning, architecture and citizenship, which seek to answer to the complexity of inter-cultural urban spaces, and in turn, allows the exploring of new opportunities towards a positive change. Aren’t these “cities of difference”, emerging from both worlds of affluence and consumerism, optimizing what each one has best to offer?

To achieve it, it is clear that the focus should be to work with the human component. So, in this context, a solution for more restrained times should pass through working with urban communities. These will take a new role, more active and interventionist, contributing greatly to the city project. Everyone participating, including citizens, will

broaden the accessibility to several types of capital available that have been overlooked or even forgotten, but can make a difference by bringing an added enrichment to the decision-making process.

Hence it seems clear that we will have to encourage a bridge (or bridges) between the physical (design) and social (social networks) in order to maximize both. Since design has been widely explored, I will focus more deeply on the social component.

Human capital: a city asset

Nowadays, more than half of the world's population lives in cities and the trend suggests that many more will join this army of "urbanites" in the coming decades. We are expected to live in cities, as survivors of several crises, because these are privileged spaces to promote and articulate knowledge, innovation and creativity, supported by appropriate contexts to build partnerships and networking (Glazer, 2011). What is needed is how to live healthily in the cities, in which increasing complexity poses many challenges. Of these, one of the most relevant will be to enhance what the human component can give to adjust ways of living and using the cities.

In urban settings, even those that are critical, there is often considerable social capital. A 1999 study analyzed the physical and social qualities of critical urban areas: Teesside, London, Liverpool and Nottingham, and concluded that even though the residents had acknowledged the deprivation of many neighbourhoods, there appears to be a shared sense of belonging and a shared sense of what neighbourhoods need, which cuts across age, gender and ethnic group. Furthermore, when residents are asked about what the community means to them, they talk about the positive qualities of the people around them, showing the importance of "social capital" in which to work with. "It was the people who provided the basis for the strength of the community". (<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/FO4109.pdf>, 23.08.2011).

If people are brought into the process of building a city, aren't they an asset to design these spaces? Even in urban areas deemed as critical, there is a human added value that may give answers in the near future, in a quest to overcome the crisis.

New windows of opportunity challenge our creativity and ability to innovate, allowing space to accommodate new paradigms yet to be established. With this idea, a new urbanism focuses on the human component, more specifically on what people have to offer, and it can be the key to overcome the crisis. Ensure the strengthening of social capital can contribute to social cohesion and to community interaction, and the development of intellectual capital can generate new knowledge built in spaces promoting equitable articulation of technical, scientific and layman knowledge.

The conviction that layman knowledge can add a value to the process has earned the skepticism of many professionals. For instance, and to illustrate how this can sometimes bring about change, here is an example of what happened in one of our counties in the

south. In the 90's, when the massive construction of landfills replaced the existing dumps, one of our southern counties was struggling with the location to build the landfill. At a meeting with the local people and technicians to present and discuss the proposed site, technically defined, a farmer spoke out and questioned the location, on the basis that the site occupied an area of creek water recharging. The technicians showed the cartographic studies and it was evident that this had not been technically registered. After some debate they went to the site and confirmed what the farmer had said, so the landfill was diverted to an adjacent area.

Ensuring the promotion of many types of capital in the communities implies, in particular, that we reconsider the use of different knowledge, many of which are often excluded from decision-making processes, such as layman knowledge. Without privileging any particular knowledge, it is essential to create spaces where technical and scientific knowledge can in conjunction with other types of knowledge be subjected to public scrutiny as a way to balance the power between the average citizen and the professional elites. By doing this, we will promote the democratization of knowledge and simultaneously promote social justice, creating interventional and co-responsible agents. What we are proposing is the "right to the city" for everyone who lives in it, and in return be accountable for their contributions and involvement, something that has been forgotten: "The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is (...) one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights." (Harvey, 2008)

These concerns are not only ours. In Brazil, known for its informality, a recent proposal for a more innovative approach is described briefly below, seeking to enhance the several types of urban capital and seeking to articulate technical and scientific knowledge and layman knowledge in order to improve the quality in urban spaces, focusing on public safety and justice (we suggest that it be an example for other areas of expertise, such as social sciences, architecture and urbanism).

University Favela begins to build community leadership in communities in Rio de Janeiro

Nielmar de Oliveira, of Agency Brazil, 17/08/2011 12:47:54

Aiming at building 90 community leaderships of “Vila Aliança” and in the “favelas” of “Maré” and of “Alemão”, in the northern area of Rio de Janeiro, University Cândido Mendes began on Tuesday (16) the project University Favela.

The first class was given by Judge Geraldo Prado, a human rights supporter, and was attended by the national secretary of Public Safety, Regina Miki.

The idea of the project is to create a space to share knowledge between the university and residents of those communities for intellectual, social and political exchange.

Students will have classes at University Cândido Mendes, over the next four months in the area of public safety and justice.

At the end of the course, students will receive certificates of completion issued by the University Cândido Mendes, provided they have fulfilled the necessary requirements, such as an attendance of 85% of the classes and participation in guided tours to public institutions.

Opportunity windows for the democratization of the city

What is really at stake in the urban spaces nowadays? Obviously, we operate mostly in complex and uncertain contexts, in which planning tools currently being used are unable to provide satisfying answers. These contexts favour an increasing availability and flow of information, requiring that a number of factors and areas of expertise be considered and integrated in a world of strong dynamic and change, where power is shared and fragmented and where “no one has control”; where “institutions and organizations have to share goals, activities, resources and power, or authority to achieve collective gains and minimize losses” (Bryson et al, 1992). There is, therefore, a need for new tools, including more active ways of participation involving citizens: the possibility of a resolution and the opportunity to build partnerships, to achieve joint solutions and ensure its implementation (Innes, 2001; Forester, 1999).

This school of thought argues that policy makers and experts should be involved in the structuring and use of forums to create meaning (Bryson et al, 1992), in order to make it more flexible and adjustable to current planning activities, merging the hierarchical top-down model, more scientific and rational, with the bottom-up model, more likely to recognize the common-sense knowledge (Lindblom et al., 1979). This can be an

indispensable contribution to improve the process of city building, and, even more than that, the society. (Bourdin, 2010).

The processes of active participation are, this way, considered “positive” and required, and can ease and inform the decision, playing a key role in planning. Thus, communities must work together in seeking joint solutions for local problems, “linking social relations and speeches with networks in the urban arena” (Healey et al., 1997).

This literature argues that current methods of interactive participation can be an asset to structure inclusive processes essential for the democratization of the city project. But how can active participation methodologies reduce inequalities and access to power when there are structural differences (socio-economic)? Will it be enough to give voice to someone who lives in poverty or social/economic/political exclusion?

If properly managed – i.e., respecting the conceptual argument that supports it – a participatory process can generate empowerment, strengthening social networks and creating a sense of belonging.

Maximizing the capital - opportunity

By promoting understanding and joint work, the potential of the city is strengthen and reinforced, through the development of several types of capital. In fact, if there are meeting places where people can actually interact, share and discuss ideas genuinely, openly and transparently, there is a solid basis for building an intellectual capital – integrating accepted and shared information, which provides the framework for discussions among participants in search for an agreement -, social capital- that creates trust, standards of behaviour and communication networks, a basis for serious debate -, and political capital- that ensures the possibility of transforming the agreements into relevant action (Innes et al., 1994; Gruber, 1994:3).

These three types of capital ultimately contribute, in its continuity, to create institutional capital, privileging “systematic institutionalization” (Healey, 1997), i.e., introducing new rules and roles.

The challenge for all of those working in planning will be how to properly structure participatory processes, promoting shared responsibilities among different participants. If we succeed in doing so, we will be laying the basis for collective learning, identified in literature as communities of practice (CoP): “people who engage in a collective learning process, in short, a group of individuals who learn, build, and manage knowledge” (Wenger, 1998).

When well-built, these communities of practice will constituted a strengthened network of autonomous citizens, responsible and interventional that will make all the difference in an urban context. Social cohesion must reflect “a permanent work in building, maintenance and compatibility of fragile relational networks, but very different, through a process of recognition and mobilization, surrounding common projects” (Bourdin, 2011:86). However, some flexibility should be ensured throughout the CoP avoiding them to become institutional structures identical to the existing ones that are inadequate in giving satisfactory answers, because “such forms take on a life of their own outside their original context where their meaning can evolve or even disappear” (Amin et Roberts, 2006).

Therefore, it is suggested the use of tools that allow operational forms of involvement with informed participants, allowing to integrate their values and interests, in searching for more informed and consensual collaborative solutions.

Building society to make city

In fact, more than making the city, with its emphasis on “design”, what we need is to build society, a fair society, accessible to all and where everyone has the right to participate. To build “cities of difference” – those who favour the inclusion of urban spaces, we need to use appropriate methodologies supported by expert knowledge. For this, a possible alternative is to use participatory methodologies that effectively involve the local actors in urban spaces.

The sceptics will question whether this fact will lead us to something new, considering that these attempts have failed in other countries, having drawn a distinction towards participation.

I think this requires a reflection on three core questions:

1. Have participatory methodologies given their best and are now doomed to failure?
2. Is the challenge about how to involve the community, and if so, how are the procedures for the participation established?
3. Is it how the community views itself, its responsibilities and its role in a capitalist/neoliberal/consumer society?

Regarding the first question, as in any area of expertise it is necessary to have individuals with the appropriate knowhow. Building communities of practice, promoting knowledge and providing spaces for innovation and creativity, requires a set of prerequisites that, if not managed properly, can create perverse effects and even compromise future attempts. Hence, there is a need for caution and intelligence in how to choose the methodologies and how to make the options. The success or failure of the participatory process depends directly on how work is conducted, i.e., “to apply the appropriate methodology to the identified problem” (Vasconcelos, 2011).

How to involve the community and how to structure the participation processes is connected to the results that can be achieved. Active participation is based, as in other areas of expertise, on own knowledge that often arises from past experiences. Unfortunately, the professionals who conduct these processes, although in goodwill, are often experts in other fields such as architecture, urban planning, engineering, and they were not prepared in advance to deal with a successful participatory process, such as the study of interpersonal relationships and group dynamics, ignoring the key concepts and principles that support them, and may compromise the process. This is one of the reasons that has placed participation initiatives “in danger” and under heavily criticism by many professionals and decision makers who are frustrated with the failure of some situations in urbanism.

The way the community sees itself and its role can substantially influence its intervention in the urban space, although the process of collective building of meaning of the community may be socially constructed through collaborative processes supported on a genuine, transparent and effective participation. The challenge is to ensure that key

actors, with different interests and even if in conflict, are able to develop collaborative ways of working, targeting solutions of common interests that go beyond the project itself (Vasconcelos, 2011).

Involvement, mobilization and participation

Involvement, mobilization and participation require an effective reflection, but also the appropriate methodologies. Methodologies of win-win, guided by professional facilitators, to ensure phasing, structuring and facilitation of joint working activities (Vasconcelos, 2011) may be the answer to this question. A range of methodological requirements support the process:

- all participants are equally informed;
- all knowledge/arguments are valid and treated equally;
- participants can challenge assumptions/issues;
- validation is done on the basis of a good argument, promoting the multiplicity of knowledge present in the session;
- the facilitator should be independent (in terms of content and results and does not comment on them), and should ensure a safe space and that all have the same opportunity to intervene and be heard;
- the facilitator must ensure that the process progresses at a good pace, but should give enough time for participants to create their own dynamics and consolidate knowledge;
- participants should be encouraged to seek consensus, focusing on interests and not positions, and win-win solutions should be valued;
- the facilitator should be able to separate the people from the problem, encouraging that all issues are placed on the table, appropriate by the group and subsequently discussed.

(Source: adapted from Lia Vasconcelos, "Participação pública aspectos metodológicos", p. 4-5, Infortejo nº12, Mar/Abr 2011)

The main idea of these methods is to encourage participants to engage in a genuine ~debate, identifying issues and interests, in order to contribute to the project, developing proposals for a more based urban intervention and meeting the interests of those who will be living the space.

If these conditions are handled by trained professionals, "communities of practice" are created to privilege creative contexts, to articulate knowledge and to generate innovation.

To ensure spaces of interaction for “empowerment”, especially with the involvement of the excluded, is essential to overcome situations of exclusion, “amplifying the voice” of those who are less heard and contributing to the co-construction of inclusive spaces. This collective space – is an opportunity essential to generate strategies, proposals and decisions, promising innovation. This work is made with the participants until achieving a collective speech where everyone can identify with and ends in “empowerment”, a crucial element for establishing a social cohesion and community identity. In short, it strengthens the social capital essential for adequate solutions in times of crisis and to respond to particular situations. In sort, everyone is involved and contributes to find options and partnerships, essential for achieving results.

However, it is not enough just to build a good process that contributes to the empowerment, it is necessary that the responsible institutions are actually involved and ready to take their role in implementing the agreement, otherwise we will create many unanswered expectations and add more discredit to participation. There are situations that although they have been successful in building empowerment and agreeing on the action plan to be carried out, more than four years later little or nothing has been accomplished.

An articulation of knowledge

In short, we propose building professional spaces that promote the articulation of knowledge, aiming at a co-construction of collective capital contributing for solutions that are tailored and appropriate to the interests and concerns of those living in an urban space. Urban liberalism is convinced that everything can be simplified. However, the success has only been with the minorities working on this type of urbanism, which can, in addition to recognizing the complexity, instil in its spirit and place the action in a world of uncertainty (Bourdin, 2011:61). So, if urban liberalism was imaginative and produced conjuncture innovations, it “failed to renew the knowledge of reference” that has now become “highly obsolete” (Bourdin, 2011:68).

The low priority given to the lessons learned among urban actors, collaborative networks, interfaces between the sectoral and territorial actions, among others, offer a wide range of possibilities and space to explore (Bourdin, 2011:81). In this new context, it is essential to relay on the “solid references common to all the actors involved”. When these are absent or weak, they should be created (Bourdin, 2011:81).

Foster the emergence of a more comprehensive, collective and meaningful knowledge, allows the construction of qualified urban communities (empowered urban communities), essential to generate more adjusted, balanced and shared contributions, indispensable for a creative and innovative society.

We believe that despite the crisis, the urban future, may be promising and eager to try new tools and strategies for a solution.

“We build civilizations and culture together, constantly learning from one another and from the past. New technologies from the book to Google have failed to change our fundamentally social nature. They’ve made it easier to learn some things without meeting

face to face, but that hasn't eliminated the extra edge that comes from interacting in person. Indeed, since new Technologies have increased the returns from new ideas, they have also increased the returns from face-to-face collaboration." (Glaeser, 2011: pg 268). "We build civilizations and culture together, constantly learning from one another and from the past. New technologies from the book to Google have failed to change our fundamentally social nature. They've made it easier to learn some things without meeting face to face, but that hasn't eliminated the extra edge that comes from interacting in person. Indeed, since new Technologies have increased the returns from new ideas, they have also increased the returns from face-to-face collaboration." (Glaeser, 2011: pag. 268).

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