

Democratic Streets (and Cities)

Giancarlo Paba

Università degli studi di Firenze
giancarlo.paba@unifi.it

The Author(s) 2016.
This article is published
with Creative Commons
license CC BY-SA 4.0
Firenze University Press.
DOI: 10.13128/contesti-20367
www.fupress.net/index.php/contesti/

Introduction

The economic and social crisis came about *in*, and perhaps even *from*, cities. From the way

Il primo numero della nuova serie di Contesti prende in considerazione il tema delle “strade democratiche”, a partire dal famoso articolo di Mark Francis, e più in generale del diritto alla città, con riferimento alle forme di democrazia urbana, alle pratiche di auto-organizzazione sociale, alle tattiche di resilienza e di sopravvivenza spaziale, alle esperienze di riappropriazione della città. Nell’articolo sono sviluppati alcuni di questi temi, sia in termini generali, sia con riferimento agli articoli ospitati nella rivista.

urban materials (land, houses, streets, neighbourhoods) became subject to speculation, then prompted the financial crisis, and finally turned into the stage for social hardship and new forms of urban poverty. Impoverished by the crisis, and shaken by conflict, the city is nevertheless still a place of (possible) fightback, social survival and transformation practices, and renewed experiences of urban democracy.

A few years ago, in his book on public space edited by Vernez Moudon, Mark Francis used the expression *democratic streets* to speak of the welcoming traits, diversity and openness that a city’s streets and squares should have. Democratic streets are difference-sensitive; they guarantee freedom of movement and use;

they increase the possibilities of self-expression and self-manifestation; they combine the highest possible number of activities and behaviours; they exalt the unpredictability and the creative scope of social encounters.

Lastly, the streets and squares (more in general the city's connective fabric, from the centre to the furthest edges) are willing to be 'occupied', 'coloured', enriched and transformed by social practices.

In the first issue of its new series, *Contesti* takes up the topic of *democratic streets*, and more in general the *right to the city*, with reference to the concepts of urban democracy, social self-organization practices, spatial survival and social resilience tactics, and research on experiences of social reappropriation of the city (self-produced urban planning, interactive practices to transform the urban space). Some of these topics are focused on in the following points, both in general and with regard to the articles hosted in the journal.

“Palpación pedestre”

Tim Ingold is an irregular writer on worldly things, anthropologist and highly imaginative observer, with the odd touch of eccentricity. Nevertheless, he has a firm grip on reality and what the earth and human settlements



are tangibly made up of. One of his most interesting books for the topic dealt with in this issue of the journal is *Lines: A Brief History*. At the beginning of the book, Ingold asks himself: “What do walking, weaving, observing, singing, storytelling, drawing and writing have in common? The answer is that they all proceed along lines of one kind or another” (Ingold, 2007, p. 1). By developing this simple statement, Ingold builds a fascinating *anthropology of the line*, from the paths followed by writing to the trails and routes that cut through the land, from the genealogical lines that mark continuity in time, to the tracks impressed on the ground by walkers and travellers that mark a continuity in space. Naturally, Ingold knows that a road is not simply a line, but a complex, tangible and intangible location. Treading a line is therefore a way of interpreting the world: “the world perceived through the feet”, as the same Ingold underlined in another essay (Ingold 2004). Let us read Ingold's list again: the street contains



and combines all the activities contained in his list of phenomena that take place along a line: walking, weaving (relations, the threads of existence), observing (observing each other, meeting the direction of our gaze), singing, storytelling, drawing and writing.

In a small essay called *Discurrir con los pies* (which could be translated as *Reasoning with the Feet*), Soria y Mata, who knew the suggestive power of lines, gave his feet a fundamental role in finding out about the world: “Si nada hay en nuestra inteligencia, [...] que no haya penetrado por la puertas de los sentidos, el del tacto el más inferior de todos es el que suministra la primeras noticias y como primeras las fundamentales de toda informacion; y dentro del sentido del tacto, la *palpación pedestre*, la más inferior de todas, es el cimiento sobre que apoyamos el edificios de nuestros conocimientos”¹ (Soria y Mata, 1926, 151, my italics).

Palpación pedestre [literally, pedestrian palpation] is recurrently used as a knowledge and planning tool in urbanism and planning practices, and, like a kind of continuous bass rhythm, it accompanies the papers in this issue of the journal too. The first and the last papers are written by two very different authors – Luigi Mazza, planner and politics scholar, and Mark Francis, architect and urban planner – yet their essays have much more in common than it would seem at first sight.

In his article, Mazza devotes particular attention to the topic of citizenship in Patrick Geddes and Henri Lefebvre. With regard to Geddes, Mazza remembers that “pratiche di cittadinanza sono legate ai luoghi in cui avvengono, alle tradizioni e ai saperi sedimentati in quei luoghi e la conoscenza dei luoghi e della storia è decisiva per la costruzione della cittadinanza e per la sua rappresentazione”². Mazza underlines the role

The city and landscape scholar is essentially a pedestrian, and, to use Soria's words, *palpación pedestre* is a device for reading and interpreting the urban text and the population's needs.

of "strade processionali" [processional streets] in Geddes's construction of reports on the Indian cities: the enactment of citizenship on the city stage, the ceremonial parade as the result of an itinerant survey, walking through the city streets as an interpretation and planning tool. Mazza again writes: "i risultati della survey vanno raccolti nel museo della città, e rappresentati nello spazio dei parchi pubblici e delle strade processionali. Il parco pubblico è uno strumento di formazione civica e di costruzione e di rappresentazione della cittadinanza. I percorsi del parco celebrano la storia della città, sono itinerari di iniziazione, formazione, rieducazione, approfondimento, sono strade processionali lungo le quali celebrare processioni civili"³.

While reconstructing Geddes's work in the Indian cities, Smriti Srinivas in turn strongly underlines the role of the planners' body and hermeneutic walks in the planning process. The city and landscape scholar is essentially a pedestrian, and, to use Soria's words, *palpación pedestre* is a device for reading and interpreting the urban text and the population's needs: "Geddes's approach is that the urban scholar or the student of cities is primarily a pedestrian, and his/her walking and moving body becomes the methodological tool for the studies of cities. Not only in Edinburgh but also in Indore

and other Indian cities, Geddes's demonstrates again and again that this technique of the body [...] is the initial pathway for (social) science. [...] He positioned himself experientially in routes, patterns, monuments, places, and rhythms of cultural life, with their possibilities for city renewal and 'life more abundantly'. His Indore report glitters with observations and insights that could only have been gleaned by being an active, walking, striding, loitering, observing, smelling, listening participant in Indore's daily life, whether at the key crossing points of its river, amidst the manure of its cows, or among the trees and botanical life of the area" (Srinivas, 2015, p. 29).

Democratic streets / street democracy

The most important contribution to this issue of *Contesti* is the republication, with the author and publisher's permission, of an essay by Mark Francis, which is fundamental for our topic. Francis's essay has a characteristic that is not frequent in our field of studies: it is simple, tidy and didactic on one hand, and at the same time it is profound, stimulating and original. It is certainly a small classic in literature on cities. Right from the title, *The Making of Democratic Streets*: how to 'make' democratic streets, but also how they 'are made', how they form spontaneously at times, upon the

Democratic streets reflect the neighbourhood and city's history, local identity, but also the neighbourhood's economic and social diversity; they are spatially and socially 'just', healthy, ecological and environmentally acceptable.

broad, plural initiative of inhabitants, walkers and users. The essay explains how to recognize the characteristics of democratic streets, teaches how to make democratic streets out of ones that are not, and how a first, basic street democracy can lead to a more impelling democracy for the city: lastly, how everyone's right to the street is the first step towards the universal right to the city (this topic is taken up by Mazza in the part of his essay dedicated to Lefebvre, and also echoed in the article by Belingardi).

Francis works on some classic pieces from our literature (in particular Lynch and Jacobs – Camilla Perrone focuses on the latter in her essay) to go beyond these studies, and propose a complete and 'holistic' definition of *democratic street*.

Democratic streets are not simply *liveable, pedestrian or good*: they feature a complex blend of social, economic and ecological qualities. Democratic streets reflect the neighbourhood and city's history, local identity, but also the neighbourhood's economic and social diversity; they are spatially and socially 'just', healthy, ecological and environmentally acceptable. They welcome a whole range of users, as well as things and objects, even some of those dangerous objects like cars, and naturally bicycles and many other artificial limbs enabling our itinerant bodies to get

around. Democratic streets are (relatively) safe and comfortable, transmit a feeling of well-being in the open air, and in the city. They are also open, accessible, permeable, linked to the neighbourhood, city and the rest of the world. Democratic streets are not frozen, predictable or boring; on the contrary, they challenge their users and the people who live there, encourage active behaviour, surprise us, invite us to make discoveries. They are the chosen dominion of *serendipity*, we could say.

Francis uses a dense and important concept to indicate the essential characteristic of democratic streets: they are the place of *publicness*. Francis defines it thus: "Publicness is the foundation of street democracy, providing the framework in which a true public culture can develop and flourish".

Publicness goes beyond the public/private distinction or dualism. Democratic streets are never completely or necessarily *public property*: however, they always have a *public dimension*, they are characterized by a prevailing public culture, which the individual (therefore private, self-interested even) behaviour of people, as well as the private owners' requirements, contribute to.

In every democratic street, the facades, to make an elementary example, are boundaries of both the public space and private spaces, and it is precisely this characteristic, or this fertile



ambiguity, that makes them so important in determining the characteristics of *publicness*. As internal walls of the ‘public rooms’ of the city, the facades need to be composed following some collective rules, some common discipline (which does not necessarily have to be imposed from above, but can be built socially). As the outside walls of private houses, facades can complete and improve the public dimension of streets, even through the simple addition of a pot plant.

So, democratic streets are locations in transformation, populated, inhabited and produced by individuals and communities. To use some considerations by Kevin Lynch, quoted by Francis and taken up in the essay by Perrone, urban space is the result of the citizens’ “presence, use and action, appropriation, modification, and disposition”. *Democratic streets* therefore require an

effective form of *street democracy*, so that they can maintain or gain a democratic nature. To use Mark Francis’s words: “Democratic streets are not possible without a democratic process charged with shaping their character and form. [...] Streets, in other words, cannot be successful without a new form of street politics that requires users and interest groups to negotiate directly with one another and share power in a continuous and open process”.

“Streets need to be loved”

Towards the conclusion of his essay, Francis writes something that may seem risky, or not very scientific or useful for the work of planners and urban policy builders: “streets need to be loved”. I will come back to this statement, but first, among the endless possible examples from the literature, I would like to recall another great lover of streets (and cities).



The novels of Honoré de Balzac are populated by the city, public spaces and collective places, and perhaps *Ferragus* is a street novel more than all the rest, with that dazzling start (“Il est dans Paris certaines rues déshonorées”⁴), followed by a catalogue of streets, each with its own physical or moral connotation: noble, respectable, cutthroat, old, estimable, clean, dirty, “place de la Bourse est babillarde, active, prostituée”⁵ and other streets still are working, mercantile, narrow, majestic, gloomy, nervous, villainous, and so on (Balzac, 1833). Each street therefore has its own distinct personality, a recognizable identity, a character, an atmosphere, all streets, not just the famous ones, but also the most insignificant ones in the outskirts.

In the spatial organization of a street, a story, a host of stories mineralize so to speak, and fears, hopes and expectations condense. While walking (living and inhabiting) a street, we encounter the palimpsest of meanings which form its make-up. Streets are also emotional, spiritual places (Hoch, 2006; Sandercock, 2006; Nussbaum, 1990), complex and surprising psychological locations (as psychogeography was able to highlight many years ago; Coverley, 2006).

Therefore, we can love and hate a street, and even feel loved or hated by a street, by a particular place in a city’s public space – we can feel welcomed or rejected, tranquilized or frightened (*on place attachment* and the relationship between *love* and *planning*, see Hidalgo, Hernandez, 2001; Porter, Sandercock, Umemoto, eds, 2012). Mark Francis’s statement therefore acquires a pertinent meaning, a pragmatic function, a scientific value: streets need to be loved, and that is looked after, cared for, respected, so that their personality can become welcoming, comforting and reassuring.

Street agency: “Sites speak louder than words”

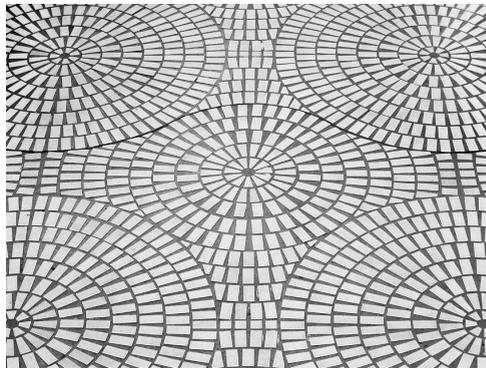
City streets are or can be a shared and at the same time disputed space. They come about from sharing and dialogue, as the product of an (often tacitly) accepted plan or rules, but they are also the result of opposing user interests and options. Among the essential characteristics of every democratic street, immediately after the section dedicated to love for streets, Francis considers precisely the role played by conflict: “Efforts to make streets democratic will unavoidably invite conflict because democratic streets, by their very definition, require greater user participation and negotiation”.

Urban spaces, in particular streets and squares, are the places where social conflicts take place, but they are subject to contrast and dispute in themselves too.

Urban spaces, in particular streets and squares, are the places where social conflicts take place, but they are subject to contrast and dispute in themselves too. The architecture, morphological layout, material organization, functions, activities, surveillance and control regimes, rules for use, historic identity, desired or threatened transformations, access rules, public or private nature, as well as many other aspects, can be subject to dispute.

In reconstructing the *Occupy Wall Street* movement, Samuel Stein starts right from the characteristics of *Liberty Plaza*, the place that gave rise to the movement, to analyse its material and symbolic meaning (Stein, 2012). The article has a particularly effective title, one of the slogans used by the no-global movement in New York: *Sites Speak Louder than Words*. It is a suggestive slogan which can have at least two important meanings for the themes under consideration in this issue of *Contesti* (for example in the article by Marvi Maggio). The first is the most simple to define; it concerns the role exercised by some places in cities in the symbolic and communicative sphere, and how this role attributes an effective meaning to the events that happen there: in Tienanmen or Tahrir Square, in Taksim or

Times Square, in Piazza San Giovanni or on the Promenade des Anglais, in Syntagma Square or Zuccotti Park, demonstrations, concerts, occupations, terrorist attacks – and any other possible happening – acquire a particularly strong significance, both in the city where the events happen (the local population recognizes the symbolic value of those places), and on the global level (for the historical, religious, political and mediatic meaning that those places can have, or achieve, in a vaster communicative arena). The (tangible and intangible) personality of places naturally counts in this process and points the possible significances in a particular direction: what counts is the size, location, centrality, role as a hinge or large urban room, architecture, natural or artificial environment, and many other things besides. Instead other times, and this is the second meaning to be analysed, the streets and urban spaces themselves are the stake in the dispute, conflict or complex negotiation/participation dynamics. Stein recounts the vicissitudes of the *Occupy* movement in New York, which came into being in Liberty Plaza, precisely because of its vicinity to Wall Street. Here, in a first instance at least, the street therefore takes on a global value, in the sense specified



by Saskia Sassen: "I would argue that the street, the urban street, as public space is to be differentiated from the Classic European notion of the more ritualized spaces for public activity, with the piazza and the boulevard the emblematic European instances. I think of the space of 'the street', which of course includes squares and any available open space, as a rawer and less ritualized space. The Street can, thus, be conceived as a space where new forms of the social and the political can be *made*, rather than a space for enacting ritualized routines" (Sassen, 2011, p. 574). Stein nevertheless develops a different, perhaps more interesting perspective, showing how the Liberty Plaza movement then spread to many other squares in New York and in particular to POPS (Privately Owned Public Spaces), often extrapolated in Manhattan as a by-product of real estate speculations, to dispute their fictitiously 'public' nature and introduce them to the collective circuits of appropriation and transformation (Stein, 2012). The voice of places, their possibility to 'shout' and influence reality does not only involve the squares or *global streets* of the big metropolises. Places strongly request to regain a *public dimension*, Francis might say, in every corner of all towns and cities around the world.

The collective self-production of public space, or simply common places (Chiara Belingardi and Enzo Scandurra write about this in different ways in this issue) feature in the social metabolism of every city.

More generally, the relationship between places and people can be interpreted as a mutually formed dialectic, in which streets exercise a form of agency: city streets and squares act on our lives, helping to make them what they are (Kallianos, 2013; Paba, 2011). In reconstructing the history of Italian piazzas, Niall Atkinson remembers the initial emotion produced by the beauty and harmony of the architecture and urban spaces, before finally formulating this observation: "What was less immediately apparent, however, was that while I was consuming this spectacle, the square itself was subtly performing modifications to my bodily and social behavior – leading me in certain directions and forcing me to confront the movement and presence of others who filled the square with their own desires and reactions" (Atkinson, 2013, p. 561). Atkinson grasps the two relevant aspects of the question, which are closely linked to each other: our body and our behaviour change in the city, due to the effect of both its tangible organization on one hand, and the



unpredictable and open social interactions on the other.

The articles in this issue of the journal develop some of the topics focused on in the previous points in different ways and directions. I shall briefly point out some aspects from the different essays, with observations that add to those made on the articles by Mark Francis and Luigi Mazza.

Camilla Perrone has reconstructed some aspects of the figure and work of Jane Jacobs, also in the wake of new research into the great American scholar and militant prompted by the one hundredth anniversary of her birth (and tenth anniversary of her death). Perrone places Jacobs's work in the tradition of our discipline, but today reinterprets it within the debate on the destiny and meaning of cities, on cityness, on the concept of urbanity, on the role of diversity and density in the post-metropolitan dynamics, with particular reference to studies on urban complexity and self-organization processes.

From different viewpoints, Silvano D'Alto, Chiara Belingardi, Marvi Maggio and Enzo Scandurra deal with the topics of public space, the right to the city, urban conflicts and self-organized city and community production

processes. While D'Alto reconstructs Giovanni Michelucci's vision of the city and public space, Belingardi attempts a new reading of the works of Lefebvre and the right to the city concerning the topic of commonalities, Maggio analyses some developments in urban conflicts and the Occupy movement in cities around the world, and Scandurra recounts a case of urban resistance and reappropriation of a forgotten space in the outskirts of Rome.

In another two articles, Giulio Giovannoni reflects on the meaning of walking as a strategy for reading and interpreting/transforming the city, while Maddalena Rossi builds an original typology of marginal spaces, and in particular in-between spaces, in the developments of the contemporary city. The issue also includes two important original contributions that extend the research plane to other cities in the world, Peking and Tokyo in particular. Anna Laura Govoni deals with a topic that seems bizarre and impertinent: the city-dwellers' habit of hanging out their washing to dry in the open, in all parts of the city. Govoni performed in-depth research on this topic for her PhD thesis. By studying such a basic and widespread habit it is possible to read the complex weave of urban politics and molecular everyday behaviours, to analyse



informal modes of communication in the public space, to study the way that the physical and symbolic figure of the city is completed/ changed by its population's tiny gestures, and also to understand how such a simple social practice in reality differs immensely in different urban cultures.

Finally, Darko Radović presents the results of on-site research work with the co+labo workshop from Keio University in Tokyo. It is original and complex, and particularly interesting research: Radović studies the smallest details of a street in Tokyo, while analysing how physical and social space, objects and behaviours combine, and singling out the

strategies of appropriation, control and (self) transformation. Physical space is seen as an "agent of social change" and the inhabitants, consumers, and street and square users in turn are considered builders of the city and urban environment. "Cities need prudent (self) organisation", concludes Radović: cities need the contribution of social self-organization by the population living in them. In other words, they require prudent self-transformation which can combine the range of interests at stake there on one hand, and interact with planning and urban governance processes on the other.

Endnotes

¹ "If there is nothing in our intelligence, [...] that has penetrated the gates of our senses, the lowest of all, touch, is the one which supplies us with the first news, and, being the first, the most fundamental of all information; and within the sense of touch, pedestrian palpation [palpación pedestre], the lowest of all, is the base supporting the buildings of our knowledge."

² "Citizenship practices are linked to the places where they occur, to the traditions and knowledge that have settled in those places, and knowledge of places and history is decisive in building citizenship and representing it".

³ "The survey results need to be gathered in the city museum, and represented in the space of public parks and processional streets. Public parks are a tool for

civic formation and for building and representing citizenship. The paths in parks celebrate the city's history, they are itineraries of initiation, formation, re-education, investigation, they are processional streets along which to celebrate civil processions".

⁴ "Certain streets in Paris are [...] degraded".
"The Place de la Bourse is voluble, busy, degraded".



References

- Atkinson N. (2013), *The Italian Piazza: From Gothic Footnote to Baroque Theater*, in Bohn B., Saslow J.M. (eds), *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK.
- Balzac H. de (1833), *Ferragus* [trad. it., *Ferragus*, Einaudi, Torino, 1973].
- Coverley M. (2006), *Psychogeography*, Pocket Essentials, Harpendern.
- Hardin R. (2002), *Street-Level Epistemology and Democratic Participation*, "The Journal of Political Philosophy", 10 (2), pp. 212-229.
- Hidalgo M.C., Hernandez B. (2001), *Place Attachment: Conceptual and Empirical Questions*, "Journal of Environmental Psychology", 21 (3), pp. 273-281.
- Hoch C. (2006), *Emotions and Planning*, "Planning Theory & Practice", 7 (4), pp. 367-382.
- Ingold T. (2004), *Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet*, "Journal of Material Culture", 9 (3), pp. 315-340.
- Ingold T. (2007), *Lines: A Brief History*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Kallianos Y. (2013), *Agency of the Street: Crisis, Radical Politics and the Production of Public Space in Athens 2008-12*, "City", 17 (4), pp. 548-557.
- Lorimer H. (2013), *Walking: New Forms and Spaces for Studies of Pedestrianism*, in Cresswell T., Merriman P. (eds), *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, Ashgate, Farnham.
- Nussbaum M. (1990), *Love's Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Paba G. (2011), *Le cose (che) contano. Nuovi orizzonti di agency nella pianificazione del territorio*, "Crios", 1, pp. 67-80.
- Porter L., Sandercock L., Umemoto K. (eds) 2012, *What's Love Got To Do With It? Illuminations on Loving Attachment in Planning*, "Planning Theory & Practice", 13 (4), pp. 593-627.
- Sandercock L. (2006), *Spirituality and the Urban Professions: The Paradox at the Heart of Planning*, "Planning Theory & Practice", 7 (1), 65-97.
- Sassen S. (2011), *The Global Street: Making the Political*, "Globalizations", 8 (5), pp. 573-579.
- Soria y Mata A. (1926), *Filosofía barata*, Imprenta de la Ciudad Lineal, Madrid.
- Stein S. (2012), *Sites Speak Louder than Words: Occupy Wall Street in New York City*, "Progressive Planning", 190, pp. 2-8.
- Srinivas S. (2015), *A Place for Utopia: Urban Designs from South Asia*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London.