

Learning in Action. Mapping San Siro: an Exploration into City/University Collaboration

Francesca Cognetti and Ida Castelnovo¹

Politecnico di Milano

Introducing Polisocial. From New Challenges for the University, Towards a Model of Public Engagement

At the beginning of 2012 the Politecnico di Milano, in collaboration with the Fondazione Politecnico di Milano, launched Polisocial, one of the first public engagement programmes with an academic nature in the Italian context. At the end of 2011 a political change within the institution favoured this launch: the new Rector presented an innovative work plan introducing new issues in the political agenda that will guide the development of the university in the coming years.

The political programme is based on three main challenges: 1] internationalisation, aimed at achieving a higher degree of competitiveness in education at the global level; 2] cross-disciplinarity, intended to foster the interfaces among the different disciplines existing inside the Politecnico and, beyond that, in the broader system of universities in Milan; 3] public engagement, aiming to enhance and reinforce the culture of social responsibility and public commitment, thus creating an academic institution more and more able to serve communities and deal with emerging social issues.

Unlike others in the international context, Italian universities find it hard to identify themselves as actors in the city and to define their role in urban development and regeneration (Pasqui, 1998; Martinelli, 2012). Traditionally, Italy lacks a solid national tradition in public engagement and can only count on individual commitment and efforts of teachers and researchers.

In this picture, the ambition of Polisocial is to set up a programme capable of becoming both a framework policy for the many experimentations running at the Politecnico and also a "producer" of new collaborations and project opportunities, balancing the "top down" policy of the Politecnico and the "bottom up" voluntary commitment of teachers and students. Polisocial aims to place the university in close contact with the dynamics of change in society, extending the university's mission to social issues and needs that arise from the territory, on both a local and global level (Balducci, 2013; Castelnovo Cognetti, 2013). Therefore, the Politecnico has to pursue a higher level of academic excellence in line with the third mission: building a "model" of public engagement while keeping the social role of the university at the heart of the educational and research processes.

Polisocial and the Double Responsibility of the University. Towards a New Relationship with the City

Through the development of Polisocial, the Politecnico di Milano intends to take part in the dynamics of the city and territory, by developing a third field of applied knowledge at the service of the community. To reach this goal, Polisocial actively works to rebuild the link between university and territory. As a matter of fact, over the last thirty years, Milan has struggled to recognise its universities as an important resource for the production of new ideas for urban management, while, on the opposite side, universities have only tentatively looked at the city as a major field of reflection and research/education practices (Balducci, 2010).

Looking specifically at the Politecnico di Milano, it often happens that teaching, research and consultancy carried out on behalf of public and private institutions, focus on urban issues and social problems, but those activities stop at simulation when teaching; are largely self-referred in the case of research projects; and are generally fragmented and barely visible when it comes to advice given by faculty experts to public actors. In the name of its autonomy, the university sees itself as an isolated body and is likely to remain alone within its borders, unable to affect major changes and to generate common goods and public debate. To refocus the "missing" link between university and city, Polisocial has based its vision on the idea that university, as a leading institution actively involved in addressing social changes and in producing collective learning, has to take on new social responsibilities.

The experimental programme "Teaching in-the-field" ("Didattica sul campo") is the action-based initiative set-up in the wider framework of Polisocial and it has been designed and "used" as a strategic tool to initiate developing the broader public engagement programme. The basic idea is to establish a link between teaching activity developed at the University and intervention and experience in the field, opening the perimeter of the classrooms and bringing students and teachers outside. The aim is to involve and engage students, teachers and academic staff in real situations, putting them in very close contact with social actors and concrete problems. Through interaction and commitment, individual and collective abilities can be compared with reality and a process of knowledge production can take place; by this process, individuals

can gain new skills and capabilities, new critical perception and awareness of the world where we all live and operate. These skills are complementary to the competences acquired in the standard courses and become increasingly necessary to face complex and multiple social needs (Gronsky & Pigg 2000). This given, a key condition for the educational process takes shape and has to do with the need to act in the sphere of practices, contributing to their course and their change, in order to develop a major awareness of one's role as professionals and responsible individuals and, at the same time, to generate virtuous processes of active citizenship and civic growth. Starting from these considerations, the "Teaching in-the-field" programme is based on five principles which are:

1. Assuming a double responsibility. The vision is based on a twofold responsibility. Whereas the first and most apparent form of responsibility is directed outwards and is aimed at establishing new spheres of relationship between academia and the wider society, the second is primarily orientated toward students and the academic community and entails the thorough revision of the structures and methods of education and research. 'Responsibility' is the recognition of the role that one plays as a professional in the social dynamics of others and the development of a sense of social duty and ethical/political intent which arises from the direct engagement with concrete real situations and problems.

2. Instilling the ethical value of public commitment. This second principle assumes that the programme will contribute to build a social environment (school, teachers, administrations, institutions, associations, ...) , collectively engaged to contribute to the construction of public goods. Living in such an environment, new generations can be educated to develop a new ethic of responsibility and social commitment, preparing a future generation of capable, aware and responsible citizens and practitioners.

3. Applying cross-disciplinarity to social issues stimulating exchange and interaction among disciplines and among different competences, sharing them during the experience in the field; this third principle has to do with the extension of the multidisciplinary approach to social issues. The multidisciplinary is becoming a common topic at Politecnico among the four branches of knowledge of the academy (engineering, architecture, design, planning).

4. Looking at the city as a platform means to consider the territory as a complex environment made by various interacting components (actors, visions, projects). From this perspective, the city is not just a field in which to apply and experiment with knowledge production, but primarily it is the environment within which co-design projects and policies exist. This reflection entails that we need to find new forms of interaction between the university and the territory able to reverse the one-way relationship traditionally conceived: from the idea of the

city as an object of study, to the idea of the city as a partner with whom we can build a co-design path to better understand social and urban changes.

5. Renewing the forms of learning. This means to encourage students and teachers to rethink the way we learn, exploring new types of knowledge production by changing the very codes of education, in a process of continuous learning taking place through reflection, before, during and after the action. It means also to create new learning opportunities in order to experiment with disciplinary competences and build new skills that are shaped "in the field" and "in practice". The aim is to training professionals and researchers capable of producing changes in society and carrying out applied and responsible research to contribute to increasing quality of life and to the reduction of poverty and inequality in the communities within which they operate.

In summary, the "Teaching in-the-field" programme is the tool made available by Polisocial to restore and strengthen the relationship between action and learning with the result of giving teachers and students a concrete "ground of work" where they can apply, exchange and develop new knowledge.

An Action-Learning Project: "Mapping San Siro. Exploring Projects and Policies in a Public Housing Neighbourhood"

Mapping San Siro (MSS) is a research action project taking place in the public housing neighbourhood of San Siro in Milan. This experience is included in the experimental programme "Teaching in-the-field" and it is one of the most interesting cases of action-learning, allowing us to reflect on the development of the programme and its contents.

The context

San Siro neighbourhood is one of the biggest public housing districts in Milan, built between the 30s and 40s of the 20th century and composed of about 6000 apartments held and managed by the Regional Agency for Public Housing of Lombardy (ALER). Around 10.000 people live in the neighbourhood, of which around 40 percent are immigrants (doubling the city's average) and a consistent percentage are elderly people (mostly living alone) and people with psychological disabilities. It is a context characterised by strong socio-spatial inequalities and intercultural/intergenerational conflicts. San Siro is an example of the problematic dimension of the management of public housing stock and housing policies in Italy and their effects on people's lives. Indeed, ALER is facing a financial crisis caused by a mismanagement of the agency in the past years. The lack of financial resources leads the agency to a progressive neglecting of its properties: on one hand, when possible, the agency tries to sell them,

encouraging the right to buy and the consequent shrinking of public housing stock; on the other hand, since it has no resources to rehabilitate the stock, it often leaves it empty (for instance, San Siro is characterised by urban decay; vacant and abandoned dwellings, squatting by people in need. See figure 1). For these reasons, even if San Siro is located in a quite central and connected part of the city, it is a marginal and problematic area in terms of living conditions, mainly because of an urban blight that exacerbates problems like disadvantage, poverty and co-existence of different populations. In addition, even if at a first glance the neighbourhood seems to be an homogeneous part of the city, characterised by a strong and fixed urban and architectonic structure, it is indeed a spatially and socially fragmented space, a constellation of different formal and informal ways of inhabiting, coexisting and managing both spaces and relationships.

In this multidimensional, and of course multi-problematic frame, particular attention should be paid to the strong and connected network of local actors, a rich array of community groups, non-governmental organizations and institutions that work towards the amelioration of living conditions in the area, promoting social inclusion and social cohesion and also trying to build a different and more complex representation of a very stigmatised neighbourhood. However, with scarce resources, it is difficult for them to face both an everyday-action-centred role and a role of production of alternatives; locally produced and shared forms of representation. Moreover, richness and diversity do not have a place in the current and dominant representations of the neighbourhood produced by both institutions and media, which tend to criminalise it and reduce it to a problematic and marginal context.



Fig. 1. Housing stock and urban decay

The action-research project

Being aware of this framework, the first part of the action-research project MSS was started in January 2013

with a two-month workshop that took place in the public-housing neighbourhood San Siro, promoted by Beatrice De Carli and Francesca Cognetti, researchers at Politecnico di Milano and active in Polisocial Programme, based on the idea to study the complexity of this context by using an approach able to keep together the several dimensions of this reality: social, cultural, spatial and political. Through the involvement of over thirty students and ten teachers, coming from several different disciplines and universities, and in partnership with several local organizations, the workshop aimed to expose and examine the underlying conditions, policies, and physical and institutional spaces that enable or constrain changes in the neighbourhood. Central to the approach was a focus on the degree to which the co-construction of a situated knowledge of the place, interactively built by students/researchers and local residents, can contribute to identifying avenues for more inclusive forms of urban transformation. At the same time, through a multidimensional, intercultural and cross-disciplinary path, the experience aimed to consolidate the educational process of students, by exhorting them to develop new social competences and stimulating them to operate as critical thinkers, able to embrace the complexity of the urban and social contexts in which they normally operate. The activity of the group within the workshop was useful for questioning the current and consolidated forms of representation of the neighbourhood and to activate local actors and inhabitants, involving them in the process of critical analysis of three main core themes: coexistence and conflicts; private and public properties; under-used spaces (inactive and vacant flats). We understood that often there is a lack of information that impedes facing up to problems, changing situations and making dynamics comprehensible, because of a diffuse difficulty in interacting with local institutions and having access to information. Starting from this idea, we decided to build a shared knowledge for San Siro, conceived as a knowledge useful to tackle problems but also as a tool for change.



Fig. 2. Mapping San Siro group. Meeting in the neighbourhood.

After this first experience, a group of about 20 people (students, researchers, professors and practitioners. See figure 2)² decided to stay in the neighbourhood and conduct further research and activities. The need comes from a question: how their knowledge and competences

could support inhabitants' and local partners' activation, with the aim of producing shared and critical knowledge about certain relevant phenomena. Starting from this aim, we set up a sort of live lab, in which to experiment with knowledge-sharing between academia and neighbourhood³, through which we are able to enhance teaching and research activities through civic engagement. The action-research activities were focused on three main issues: living conditions and home; courtyards as new common spaces; inactive and vacant commercial and social spaces. The team collected data, stories, interviews, etc. with the aim of understanding and giving voice to people, interpreting facts about and the dynamics occurring in San Siro, but also with the aim of building new representations of the area; we are developing an approach that is based on three main lines of work:

1) Creating a 'multiple sources' observatory on processes taking place in San Siro: this activity includes quantitative and qualitative research on living conditions in the neighbourhood, including not only work on formal and informal data, but also work on inhabitant perceptions (as particularly problematic because they are not faced in public debate). The observatory in the field work is a platform for: listening and emergence of under-represented voices (immigrants, immigrant women, elderly, people with mentally illness) and their view of the neighbourhood, through the mediation of local actors; encouraging dialogue about relevant and problematic-conflicting issues, such as squatting (related to social movements but also to criminal organisations) and coexistence of different populations (especially young immigrants and elderly Italians); supporting access to certain knowledge, such as knowledge about the public housing stock. The platform is also a concrete tool/product because its aim is to provide a manageable and usable knowledge that could be used by local actors to create further spaces of dialogue with institutions and among themselves. The multiple-source observatory experiments with a mobile overlook, inside and outside the neighbourhood, holding together different perspectives and questioning established visions, especially related to the imagined periphery.

The set of tools includes: work on maps produced both with quantitative and perceptive data, life stories, interviews both with institutional and organised entities and with inhabitants who offer a relevant perspective (see figure 3). The process of mapping is collective and strives towards gathering a multiplicity of visions of the territory.

Within this framework, maps are conceived as tools for dialogue between different interpretations of the territory and of certain dynamics. Mapping therefore becomes a process in which even weak and under-



Fig. 3. Mapping the perceptions of inhabitants

represented voices and visions are able to emerge. Working on a collective production of representation that involves both researcher and activist and their different competences, by using different and complementary tools, is a way of critically revising established and "imposed" forms of representation, exploring the possibility to represent complexity. Working on mapping as a complex and open process also enables researchers to question themselves about which tools are more appropriate to represent different voices, perspectives and phenomena, criticising the way in which traditional ways of mapping "reduce" and simplify diversity when it comes to representation.

2) Building new scenarios for steering the transformation process and projects. The scenario is a possible concrete way towards a real transformation. It has a design nature and is made by different actions, which, when combined together, may permit change in the direction of processes and reorientation of practices and policies. We wonder which will be the future of San Siro in terms of possible changes and transformation exploring elements and processes that can enable or constrain these transformations. We started from the assumption that nothing will change in San Siro, depicting an inertial scenario in which different dynamics remain untreated. We design an inertial scenario also as a tool to provoke reflections and reactions on this future. Then we tried to imagine how this scenario could change, acting on a set of levers (actions) which could enable a move from the ongoing path and we defined a possible alternative scenario in which the trajectory is reorientated.

3) Acting on concrete projects and activities co-designed with local actors (formal or not) and inhabitants. In particular, the Lab wants to share experiences with the local community with the aim of developing concrete actions and projects in a process in which skills, competences and knowledge are shared. The main purpose is to define and develop some concrete actions (see figure 4), suggesting how it is possible to trigger changes in the frame of urban policies at local and city level and how it is possible to ameliorate living conditions, recomposing spatial and social fragments.

What is the Link Between University and City? The First Reflections on Outcomes

The question posed in the title suggests the vision of Polisocial. It moves from a double assumption of responsibility, both inward and outward regarding the university: the first responsibility is orientated towards students and is aimed at experimenting with new concepts in producing and applying knowledge; the second responsibility is orientated towards society and is intended to establish new forms of relationships, experimenting with new approaches to usability and knowledge sharing. Indeed, "taking roots" in a real context generates new learning environments and practices of learning developed "more closely to" real situations (Crosta, 1998), and it is an approach to "make a classroom a real-world space continuous with the world outside - a place where real problems are debated, real practical skills evoked" (Nussbaum, 2010:65,66).

Having this statement in mind and looking at the Mapping San Siro (MSS) experience, we recognise that this project works in a twofold direction searching to reach two different types of outcomes: the first ones are concerned with territorial outcomes, the second ones are related more specifically to the role of the university. Regarding territorial outcomes, MSS aims to:



Fig. 4. Workshop activity. Working on empty and vacant spaces.

- increase the awareness of local actors in relation to their capability of re-interpretation and activation of the context, supporting their action with a renovated and reinforced knowledge;
 - produce a common heritage of shared visions and scenarios for the future development of the area;
 - identify "levers for change" understood as "concrete steps", actions that may interact with undesired changes, drawing a different picture of the future of San Siro;
 - de-construct the homogeneous and negative image of the neighbourhood and build a new interpretation of the territory, recognizing and showing complexity, by introducing different levels and scales of observation.
- With reference to the second set of outcomes, the Mapping San Siro experience is able to question the forms of learning and the role of the university. We can

say that this experience works on:

- exploring the ways in which the university can interpret its public role, by seeking to activate new fields of research;
 - reflecting on the ways in which the university takes a stand and actively supports the dynamics of development of local contexts;
 - providing more usable knowledge that could help local actors to legitimate their actions;
 - promoting spaces of interaction between the local context and institutions in which the university may act as an intermediary and enhance a positive dialogue.
- Surely, one of the purposes of Mapping San Siro is to "transfer" the university into a specific local context trying to "contaminate" the academic world with other perspectives, by encouraging direct interactions between activists and local actors and researchers, all equally involved in the production of knowledge. For students and teachers this situation entails a change in perceptions, attitude and sensitivity. Through the development of these new abilities, we hope to foster interaction active and critical intelligence able to face the complexity of urban events and to promote a new civil growth. Moreover, for urban studies, working directly through practice is a fundamental tool; it allows the development of reflective knowledge, a necessary component of a good technical competence (Balducci & Bertolini 2007).

Similarly, with a medium- to long-term perspective on the process, the possibility of creating new areas of expertise and new "competent profiles" emerges. These profiles shall be able to use their technical competences to act effectively in support of local communities, especially the most vulnerable groups. Finally, all these factors are seen as chances to change the code of education and explore new forms of knowledge co-production: on the one hand, students can be seen as part of a dialogue and not as "passive recipients", in which knowledge is just transferred, while produced elsewhere; on the other hand, the development of a project "in the field" offers the opportunity to deal with many forms of knowledge production, preparing students to better understand the design process and contexts in which they operate as practitioners; that means, simultaneously, fostering both professional growth and civil growth (political, cultural, social), while implementing, within the university, awareness of social issues which becomes a constituent component in the educational process.

In conclusion, if we look more in general at the whole “Teaching in-the-field” programme, we can say that the MSS experience also allows us to reflect on which outcomes could achieve this type of initiative in terms of “academic utility”, towards students and teachers, and in terms of “social utility”, towards the city and communities. Indeed, it seems possible to identify at least two spheres in which the outcomes are (or have to be) articulated: the first one, internal to the academic world, in which the aim is to bring into the classroom,

in the teaching activity, relevant social issues which students can confront. In this sense we may identify internal outcomes dealing with:

a. The development of new awareness (sensitivities).

This type of outcome refers to the potential that the field-work has, in relation to complex social issues, in an educational process that aims to train future professionals and individuals able to observe and interpret the social dynamics in a critical way. The development of the “Teaching in-the-field” projects, through the construction of possible responses to the demands posed by external stakeholders, gives students the chance to develop new feelings and awareness of their role in society, new ways of looking at urban and social issues and new cultural values.

b. A teaching activity more focused on social content.

This type of outcome refers to the nature of the didactic activity and its contents. The teaching activity is organised and planned starting from the demands and needs of stakeholders and it proposes a diversity of design elaborations. Ideas, design explorations, activities and materials, produced during the teaching activity, face specific issues and themes which arise from specific needs and they intend to produce concrete and usable tools for transformation and possible actions (see figure 5).

c. New resources for research. The themes and projects developed within different teaching contexts can be considered as new opportunities for academic research. High quality research and teaching feed off each other in an effective academic community that sees the “Teaching in-the-field” initiative as an opportunity to strengthen and/or open up new areas of investigation informed about urban and social changes. In the “Teaching in-the-field” initiative, the themes developed offer, on the one hand, new ideas and lines of research and, on the other hand, more structured research paths, which can guide the content of the teaching activity.

The second group of outcomes, instead, work outside the university, in practice. They are tangible and intangible, activating a “trespassing” action that leads to a blend between academic knowledge and practical knowledge. These external outcomes deal with:

A. Opening-up toward the city. The results produced open a reflection on the role of the university as a scientific and cultural institution. Developing “in-the-field” proposals, the purpose is to make the knowledge produced in the university more understandable and

reachable involving communities in activities, initiatives and cultural events, exhibitions and debates open to the public. In some cases, the university opens its borders to the city establishing itself as a cultural resource for public use. In other cases it comes out through the territory creating chances to exchange with the city, animating a large public debate on urban issues and social issues.

B. Creating new networks and synergies. In the process of interaction with local actors and in the co-design process of visions and strategies for a territory, the university becomes an actor among others and it builds up its role as a subject able to provide expert knowledge to tackle social problems.

C. Developing design tools. The design elaborations developed in the teaching contexts are a real support for communities and local actors. The collaboration with the community is seen as an opportunity to support local actors' works and projects in order to help them develop several aspects of a design process.

D. Supporting community. This has to do with how the university offers and provides service to the community. It refers to those tools useful to activate a process of real transformation of a given condition or, in other cases, it has to do with direct and voluntary involvement of students and teachers to serve communities and direct their energies towards a better society through service-learning activities. Design explorations can contribute to guiding the action of social realities in the construction



Fig. 5. Common spaces and inhabitants' desires.

of 'models of intervention' aimed at strengthening practices that are often fragile and fragmented. This contribution deals with the production of knowledge in order to generate a common framework (shared visions and scenarios) for practices and actions and it has an important role especially in reference to the possibility of supporting those experiences that show a high degree of social innovation and leading local actors to start a self-reflection process. That means also that the university can play a role of activator, giving voice to those who currently have no voice and pointing out re-framed issues and problems; also activating a capacity-building process.

Therefore, to some extent, the Politecnico is designing a path to rethink its “social utility”, seeking ways to achieve a concrete re-approach to the big issues of urban development, creating a virtuous circle among research, teaching and “the world of policy and practices” (Hambleton 2006:77). Indeed, the Polisocial programme is not just a window on social issues and problems emerging from communities; primarily, it is an important tool to refocus the contents of research and teaching activities and to keep informed about urban and social changes – both academic tasks – with the result of favouring the relationship with communities and stakeholders as partners bringing their own knowledge and assets (Ostrader, 2004; Harkavy I., 2006).

A question remains in the background of Polisocial, but it is constitutive of the approach: the capability to bridge the gap between academy activity and the large set of urban policies and social practices, which are the channel of urban changes. Indeed, we have to rebuild the link among universities and society, recovering that essential relationship which, at the beginning of the 20th century, was the basic factor for the birth of the universities of the Milanese urban region (Balducci, Cognetti, Fedeli 2010) and for other important moments of cultural and social innovation. This condition entails that we need to find new approaches to interaction between the university and society able to overturn the one-way relationship traditionally conceived: from the idea of the city (and the territory) as an object of study for the university, to the idea of the city as a partner with whom we have to build a dialogue useful to refresh academic reflections and to enhance our collective understanding of urban practices.

Seen from the viewpoint of the university, the situation implies the identification of new lines of action, with the purpose of sharing competences and approaches outside academic boundaries, interacting with different stakeholders, not strictly academics. Working on this relationship between “inside and outside”, Polisocial intends to redesign this threshold (Cognetti 2012), innovating the sphere of interaction between “academic utility” and “social utility.” Inside and outside goals do not necessarily coincide. Their relationship is not to be considered as a fully accepted and agreed upon bond: academic reflections will be nourished, gaining from direct interaction with practice, while experiences in-the-field will take into account questions developed within the academic world. Therefore, it is not a radical overlapping between two fields but rather the search for a “shared space” between the university and the city, with a good degree of significant interactions, understanding and mutual enrichment.

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