Community Hubs as Spaces of Contemporary Participation

Studying participated management through observation and engagement

Doctoral Dissertation
Doctoral Program in Urban and Regional Development (32th Cycle)

Federico Piovesan

Summary

In this thesis I study community hubs as multi-purpose spaces that aggregate people, ideas and energies to provide activities and services that are both targeted to their local community and provided by it. Like other contemporary participation practices, community hubs are in dialectic with the context in which they exist; people experience them in different ways and attribute different meanings to them. However, no community hub is like any other. Each can host different uses while having a governance structure that depends on a diverse array of actors. While community hubs are containers of participation, they also exist because of participation. Spaces, in other words, are constitutive of their social reproduction. I explore community hubs through the question: how do humans and non-humans participate in the management of community hubs?

Community hubs are rooted in their territory – which means that they are contingent to their context, and depend on but also support their urban and social fabric – and in continuous evolution – because every community hub must strive to balance between having enough structure to function consistently and remain flexible and permeable to integrate the external contributions it needs to thrive. To dive into the controversies, contradictions and paradoxes of community hubs, I combine participant observation and direct engagement in three case studies. Two of them were top-down structured participation processes in Chieri, Italy, while the third revolved around a self-managed hybrid between co-working and community hub in Valencia, Spain.

I use actor-network theory to explore each process in terms of concentric networks of interaction between humans (people and groups) and non-humans (built space, digital tools, and text documents). This approach allowed me to frame the role of human and non-human entities, trace how they transfer their influence across concentric actor-networks, and highlight the

challenges of starting and running a community hub. As multipurpose spaces of participation, community hubs need to integrate different needs and uses, craft a shared narrative, find economic sustainability, and continuously experiment with their governance. However, being multi-purpose is both a social mission and a necessity for survival. Community hubs then need to maintain a negotiable definition of what they are and what makes their community, while devising ways to let outsiders permeate their spaces of decision-making.