

UNDISCIPLINED EXPERTISE

Reflections on an emerging profession within Tactical Urbanism

Summary

In 2012, at the 13th edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale, one of the most prestigious architecture events in the world, the U.S. Pavilion “Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good” got a “Special Mention” from the jury. The pavilion presented a collection of pictures of a variegated range of unsolicited, temporary and improvised initiatives. Among the images, you could see wood benches popping out in unconventional spaces, artistic interventions in abandoned areas or groups of people cultivating vegetables on a public flowerbed. “Is that architecture?” someone could argue.

In 2015 a London-based collective of architects, Assemble, got awarded with the prestigious visual art prize known as “Turner Prize”. The awarded project revolved around the requalification of the abandoned buildings of a street in Liverpool in collaboration with its residents. “Is that art?” could be argued.

These examples have the function of highlighting two premises of this study: the porosity and instability of disciplinary domains and the growing popularity and visibility that a certain way to approach the urban is getting in the last decade.

This “certain way to approach the urban” is throughout this dissertation referred to as *Tactical Urbanism*, despite acknowledging how it remains a poorly defined term in the scientific literature (Mould, 2014).

Displaying a strong interdisciplinary character, this study aims at providing new insights into the encounter between urban practitioners and urban tactics. More specifically, the attention is drawn on the process of assemblage of a new expert authority. Indeed, all around Europe a growing body of new professional realities started to deal with unplanned and spontaneous interventions and saw in this way of acting a new potential entrepreneurial path.

This investigation aims to explore how this emerging trend in planning theory and practice helps in questioning sharp analytical dichotomies and how it relates to broader geographical debates. The analysis is supported by an interview-based approach, which allowed to draw out the voices and the reflexive reasoning of the key players of such *practicing architectures* (Jane M. Jacobs & Merriman, 2011).

Keeping the focus on this emerging expertise, the main issues addressed in this study are: (I) the construction of a blurred collective identity, (II) the complex relationship between relationality and territoriality within the mobilities of urban ideas and practices and (III) the paradoxes and ambiguities of what I have called “entrepreneurial urban activism”, an in-between status among self-precarization and emancipation. Briefly, the first issue (I) implies a constructivist understanding of expertise and the focus is put on the demarcation strategies applied by the practitioners themselves. The dissertation will then go on investigating (II) the mobility channels of urban tactics, framing these professionals as transfer agents. This unveils a geography of informal links and self-managed events, that resonates with what Doreen Massey called “the local production of the global” (2011, p. 9). Finally, (III) the controversial political potential of this emerging category is explored in light of the claims for “a more STS-informed politics” (Farías & Blok, 2016, p. 540), questioning and softening the paradigm of neoliberal co-optation of subversive micro-spatial practices.

In conclusion, this research results into a non-romanticized overview of this embryonic profession and on the contradictions, ambitions and strategies characterizing such a profile.

Although the phenomenon could be considered marginal in relation to its size and the scale of its impacts, this research argues that these new urban actors are especially emblematic of some contemporary trends in urban transformation and urban studies and they are therefore worthy of being further scrutinized.