5. Bottom-up and top-down social innovations for city governance transformation

Abstract.

The (social) innovations that are currently contributing to changing our cities are taking place in an increasingly diverse range of ways, generating a multifaceted phenomenon that originated from different actions, policies, and social partners. In this heterogeneous landscape, the traditional division between top-down and bottom-up actions seem to lose its meaning, at least in its most polarized sense. This chapter presents two applied research projects developed by Polimi DESIS Lab of Politecnico di Milano: Creative Citizens, that can be viewed as a community-based initiative from the 'bottom-up' and The School of the Neighbourhoods, a social innovation programme launched from the 'top-down' by the municipality of Milan. By describing these two projects, we discuss the role of design in connecting government and community-based initiatives especially by the adoption of co-design. We believe that co-design is key to empower the actors of a social innovation ecosystem, public administrations included. Co-design can be an asset to build a more collaborative and human form of governance that combines multistakeholder, bottom-up and highly differentiated processes especially compared to traditional governance models. More specifically, we highlight the opportunity to include university design's research labs into the dynamics of a city government in a more established way and we propose the draft notion of 'design-centred governance', i.e. a way of steering public organisations by relying on the envisioning power of design to create public value, better connecting actions from the bottom-up and the top-down, and, by doing so, sustaining the whole social innovation ecosystem of a city.

1. A complex social innovation ecosystem

The notion of a 'social innovation ecosystem' is starting to be more diffused and shared in the social innovation discourse [1]. As a locally rooted combination of conditions, stakeholders, people, relationships, and resources working together to achieve a shared purpose and generate public value, it is critical to understanding the multifaceted nature of social innovation, which can originate from diverse actions, policies, and social partners. In fact, the conventional opposition between top-down and bottom-up, and between public policy and grassroots movements to produce social innovation is blurring in favour of a more complex understanding of a phenomenon that results from a combination of cultural circumstances and governance strategies. Design as a discipline and practice, through design experts, is demonstrating a role in connecting government and community-based activities and igniting transformational initiatives: this chapter discusses a possible scenario by which design can be part of a

city governance that places social innovation at the core of its strategy to generate social impact.

Starting from the 2000s, the scholarly debate around social innovation has been wide, as it is an umbrella concept subject to a variety of interpretations [2,3,4,5,6,7]. One of the very first definitions described social innovations as "new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act" [2:3]. Since this definition by The Young Foundation, other conceptualizations have been developed, and, despite the lack of a commonly accepted definition, social innovation may refer "to both a process of the transformation of social practices (i.e., attitudes, behaviours, networks of collaboration) and to the outcomes in terms of new products and services (i.e., novel ideas, models, services, and new organizational forms)" [8:2]. This twofold description of social innovation that implies both process and outcome is particularly meaningful for this chapter that illustrates a selection of co-design processes engaging different actors and identifies its outcomes as a set of solutions and services. We move indeed from an intellectual position "in which the purpose of social innovation of meeting social needs, creating public value and social relations, is achieved not only through the services and practices actually implemented, but also through the collaborative process that takes place to design them" [9:13].

As stated, such process can be shaped in different ways and can originate from diverse actions, arising both from the bottom-up and the top-down. There is a consistent literature about the emergence of social innovations from grassroots movements [10,11,12,13]: whatever you call them, activist groups, social movements, creative communities, they arose from groups of people that decided to solve problems from the bottom up, starting to innovate what was already there, inventing solutions for new ways of living. On the other side, especially in the last 10 years, many public policies and programmes have been implemented across the world to encourage and steer citizens and organisations to be more eager and ready to experiment with sustainable and inclusive ways of living [14,15]. The spread of these initiatives does not deny, but rather acknowledges, that social innovation processes may be conflictual: in fact, different and opposite interests and aims of heterogeneous actors need to find a way to co-exist in complex systems where a full alignment and sharing of visions is not always possible. Here comes the role of design: on one side, fostering activism [16,17], on the other, advising policy-makers and helping them in shaping such processes, especially by adopting co-design methods and tools, testing different models and structures of creative collaboration [18].

Hence, for the purposes of this chapter, it appears as fundamental the idea that social innovation is an activity that requires collaboration, also because, as Manzini states [19], basically any social innovation is actually co-designed.

To implement the background knowledge on co-design processes, we assume here the connection of the notion of 'co-design' and 'participatory design' as formulated by the Scandinavian School of Participatory Design [20,21,22], acknowledging the different roots of the two concepts, their different degrees of political-ethical load and their diverse emphasis on designers-stakeholders engagement, we also recognise that

they blur into broadly defined 'participatory co-design approaches' that become relevant when design has a social purpose and aims to impact [23,24]. Therefore, we use both participatory design and co-design to refer to collaborative creativity applied across the entire span of a design process aiming to produce social impact, through and beyond the outcome of the solution. In this sense, it is particularly meaningful to consider social innovation as a process that implies and results from empowering people to overcome difficulties by using creative thinking and problem solving, looking at problems as opportunities and becoming open to change. In other words, it can be viewed as a co-design activity to strengthen the resilience of a community and to encourage its capability to act and make things happen [25, 26].

2. Two social innovations case studies in Milan

The applied research projects that we are presenting in this chapter occurred (and to some extents are still taking place) in the city of Milan. Firstly, we wish to add some information about the context, focusing both on the importance of the city scale and on some specific features of Milan in the last decade.

2.1 The city as place for (social) innovation and the Milanese context

There is a wide literature that places cities at the core of the innovation process: Jacobs [27,28], Florida [29,31], Duranton and Puga [31,32,33], and Landry [34,35,36] all recognize that cities are a fertile environment for making ideas grow and transformed into new organisational forms and new enterprises. The high level of provision of education, services and leisure activities, connected to a high population density and the high frequency of interactions notably found in cities, favour technological and social innovation, entrepreneurship and creativity [37]. This is why most people choose to live, work and interact with others within a common urban environment: currently more than 4.3 billion people or 55% of the world's population live in urban settings, and the number is expected to rise to 80% by 2050 [38]. Hence, cities grow basically because they are a focus for opportunity. However, this growth, according to the Future of Cities report [38] brings currently three main macro-challenges: one is about managing migration, the second is about countering inequality, and the third one is about sustainable scaling.

According to Ardill and Lemes de Oliveira [39] social innovation is recurrently positioned as an important collaborative element in helping cities to transition and address the societal challenges previously mentioned. The incorporation of social innovation into the discussion about the growth of the cities can bring an alternative perspective that focuses on a shared learning process in the search for socially innovative solutions, in which both civil society and a variety of entities and institutions are involved. We think indeed that cities can offer a fertile environment for making flourish a social innovation ecosystem, that is precisely composed of a combination of conditions, stakeholders, people, relationships, and resources having a common local root in specific place that will benefit from the public value collaboratively generated.

The city of Milan is a place in which this ecosystem has begun to grow: in the last decade, according to different observers, Milan is living a period of 'renaissance' [40,41] supported by Expo 2015 and by a changed city government and by public/private projects that have contributed to increase its capacity for innovation [42].

The mentioned public/private projects are very diverse each other, as they emerged both from top-down and bottom-up, in a sort of mutual process in which citizens and institutions met halfway. Using the words of the former councillor Cristina Tajani in the 'Milan white paper on Social Innovation': "we must reconsider the relationships between wellbeing and development as well as between social value generation and production of economic wealth, focusing on people and their capability to improve their own condition. If we want to reconsider our development model – that is what this is all about – we need to find out solutions to successfully tie together inclusion and innovation" [43:2].

Hence, the municipality of Milan has consciously supported and launched projects able to stimulate the emergence of social innovations, among the many we can mention civic crow-funding, collaborative agreements, participatory budgeting, start-up incubation processes, maker spaces and co-working spaces. At the same time, from the bottom-up, numerous initiatives emerged thanks to citizen activism: 'social streets', neighbourhood groups and associations, new forms of welfare and social enterprises that are connected to the established Milanese tradition of civic participation and volunteering.

As Polimi DESIS Lab we participated in some of these initiatives, bringing our approach of design experts in methods and tools of co-design, design thinking and service design. We here present two case studies from our applied-research projects in Milan, that can be approximately identified one as a bottom-up action and the other as a top-down one.

2.2 Bottom-up actions: Creative Citizens

Within the described context, we leveraged our role as a research lab of a design university to ignite the fertile environment of so-called 'creative communities' [13] in a neighbourhood located in the Municipio 4 of Milan: in 2013, through the Creative Citizens project, we conducted a co-design experimentation that can be considered seminal for our subsequent research work and for parts of city governance. Together with a group of residents, we set up a civic lab for future services for everyday life, applying co-design methods and tools and connecting citizens with a broader network of stakeholders. While acting without a public mandate, this group of bottom-up innovators was able to design services that scaled-up, finding their way into the service offerings of a local civic centre and receiving public recognition from the city government.

This co-design experimentation could happen thanks to one-year immersion within the selected neighbourhood: we built upon an existing community of active citizens and upon a place that symbolises Milanese activism – the Cascina Cuccagna, one of sixty farmhouses owned by the municipality of Milan that have been saved from decay and neglect by a group of residents.

Creative Citizens consisted of a programme of two-hour-long weekly meetings at Cascina Cuccagna from February to June 2013: they were workshops dealing with different service areas such as administrative advice, sharing of skills and objects, cultural activities, and food services, all of which were connected to existing solutions and places (time banks, purchasing groups, local shops, etc.). This link to local entities was crucial in laying the foundations of a social innovation ecosystem rooted in the neighbourhood, in which various resources were combined differently each time according to the scope.

Every service area was explored within a cycle composed of three different workshops: the initial meeting was a warm-up session, to familiarize with the topic by describing good practices from all over the world. Participants selected the most promising elements of the presented cases, which would then be combined in the following workshop. This second meeting was a generative session, a collective brainstorming bringing together the citizens' desires and good practice insights. In the third workshop, the purpose was to move from an ideal service to a real one, identifying the resources that could be involved in the development of the solution. It was a real prototyping workshop using physical mock-ups to shape a service truly suitable for neighbourhood. Strategic players were invited to attend this last meeting: local associations and committees, representatives of institutions, and professional advisors. They were all already active in the neighbourhood and were included in order that they might join forces and produce synergy, receive encouragement, and draw inspiration.

At the end of this path six services were created and presented to the Municipality of Milan in a final open event: the former welfare councillor Pierfrancesco Majorino attended the presentation with his staff. This 'movement' from bottom-up to top-down was something that happened just when the experimentation was concluded: participants expressed interest in showing their ideas to the municipality, therefore we organised this encounter to establish a first contact and open a possible collaboration between the creative community of Muncipio 4 and the municipality of Milan. After 10 years we can state the main 'legacy' of this project is that it has inspired subsequent inclusion and participation policies: having been a pioneering experiment for those years, it worked somewhat as a pathfinder and had a primarily cultural legacy.

Fig. 1 Creative Citizens workshops.

2.3 Top-down actions: The School of the Neighbourhoods

Five years after Creative Citizens, in 2018, the city of Milan launched a project to enable social innovation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Called The School of Neighbourhoods, it is a 4-year programme encompassing 4 cycles of scouting and incubating social innovators. As Polimi DESIS Lab we are integral part of the consortium developing the project, whose logic is reversed from the previous one: the initiative moves top-down with the aim of building capacity in citizens to face challenges, solve problems, shape solutions, and acquire entrepreneurial skills. To do this, design thinking and service design are key to forming the technical skills of innovators. However, a decisive boost to grow the social capital of potential innovators, which is crucial for the effective launch of their initiative, comes from adopting a co-design methodology that allows them not only to develop their idea with a stronger connection to beneficiaries, but also to build bridges with local organisations that can contribute to the success of their initiative, and, thus, attempting to create a local social innovation ecosystem.

Each cycle of The School of Neighbourhoods encompasses three main phases:

1. Scouting: this stage starts with a call for ideas in which the aim is to involve groups of individuals who are not associated in any legal form (nor companies or third sector associations), hence ordinary people with the

only constraint to form a group of at least two people. Citizens attend a free and open programme of encounters such us workshops, seminars, and interviews to make emerge needs and opportunities expressed by the neighbourhoods, identify prospect social innovators, and guide them in submitting their ideas to the call.

2. Training: in this phase, which is the actual school, selected groups of participants attend an intensive training programme lasting about 10 weeks (for a total amount of 100 hours) in which they learn how to transform their idea from an initial concept into an actual solution. The ideas are deepened in all dimensions: from the value proposition to the user journey, identifying possible business models and legal forms, until a phase of defining an action plan for the first year of development.

3. Prototyping: the groups who attended the school must re-submit their idea to receive a personalized support (coaching) and a project grant up to a maximum of 25.000 euros to co-finance the first year of activity. The scope of this stage is to prototype the solution, adapting it to the changing conditions and involving the neighbourhood in a process of collective experimentation and often co-production of the activities, that contribute to build an emergent local social innovation ecosystem.

In all these phases, our contribution as the Polimi DESIS Lab spans across different areas of the design discipline: service design, as the majority of the ideas are service solutions that need to be framed by using service design tools, but, as stated, also co-designing and prototyping, because engaging multi-stakeholder communities is part of the process as well as the ability to transform a solution into a prototype easily actionable and adjustable.

After about 5 years The School of the Neighbourhoods involved 4 disadvantaged neighbourhoods, there were around 255 submitted ideas, 68 selected ideas and 56 new 'ventures' that are literally 'populating' and activating the neighbourhoods. Moreover, other cities all around Italy have started to build something similar, in a way replicating the model, such as, to mention a few, 'The School of the Neighbourhood' in Bologna and 'The Neighbourhoods of Innovation' in Naples.

Fig. 2 Scouting and training phases within The School of the Neighbourhoods.

Towards a design-centred governance

Building upon the two case studies presented, we started a reflection of the possible ways by which design can be part of a city governance and create public value.

On one side, as a university's design research lab we had a role in connecting community initiatives with local government, on the other we contributed to shaping and applying a public policy on social innovation, essentially by using and adapting our expertise on co-design methodologies. We believe that co-design is key to empower the actors of a social innovation ecosystem, be they citizens, stakeholders of various kinds, public administrations themselves.

–   Empowering citizens means to recognize people's capacities to be innovative and to support them through a collaborative interaction in which, as design experts, we bring our capability to make things happen, acting as a sort of 'design thinking advisor'.

–   Empowering stakeholders, especially on a neighbourhood level, means to connect them by organizing purposeful encounters: this can be viewed as part of to the so-called 'infrastructuring' process, i.e., a continuous process of building relations with diverse actors, to foster social innovation in the society at large [44]. Infrastructuring indeed is aimed to enable stakeholders to act and to create networks: the intrinsic value of this practice, which acknowledges the

design agency is not limited to designers but distributed among different stakeholders, lies in this enabling factor that can bring about collective experimentations and reflective thinking on communal issues.

– Empowering public administrations is related to a broader idea of governance empowerment, as co-design is claimed to be a pre-condition for governing a city in a more collaborative way: including citizens and civic organizations in the co-design of solutions with social impact is a way to co-produce and co-manage public value through a bottom-up alliance. These actions have the potential to change the way in which cities are governed, sharing and shifting the decision-making seat from inside to outside. Not by chance, Bason and Austin [45] proposed the notion of 'human-centred public governance' highlighting the need for multistakeholder, bottom-up and highly differentiated processes compared to traditional governance models. This can be achieved also by bringing co-design methods into play: by doing so, policy-makers and public managers can lead change with citizens at the centre, steering their organisations by applying a governance model that places more emphasis on future making, and adopts a more radical perspective to achieve public outcomes that starts with the experiences of societal actors.

We believe that including university design's research labs in these processes can be a valuable strategy to better exercise a human-centred public governance: the use of co-design methodologies expands the sphere in which citizens and stakeholders can exercise influence while fulfilling other democratic functions, such as educating, integrating individual voices, deliberating and legitimating.

It broadly contributes to shape the identity of a city that makes participation and social innovation structural in its policies and help create a cultural humus in society making people more receptive to innovative proposals and improve their own agency to adopt a problem-solving approach in the future.

Such emphasis on future building is a key feature of co-design methodologies and of design in general: we think that a form of more established and codified inclusion of university design's research labs into the dynamics of a city government can help to assume a longer-term perspective and overcome choice between old alternatives already formed. Co-design helps citizens, stakeholders, and public administrations to envision a shared idea of future and at the same time helps to make such future more concrete, through visualisations, prototyping and making things happen. Here is why we wish to conclude this chapter by proposing the challenging idea of 'design-centred governance', i.e., a way of steering public organisations by relying on the envisioning power of design to create public value, contributing to the emergence of shared solutions with intended social impact in a long-term perspective. 'To design' means precisely to plan, prepare, decide on all the details, it is a naturally forward-looking activity: we think that an explicit inclusion of university design's research labs in city governments can foster the adoption of such future building approach, can help to progressively adopt co-design methodologies and better connect actions from the bottom-up and the top-down, and, more in general, to sustain the whole social innovation ecosystem of a city. Here there is room for further research, as we believe that we

need more experimentation to better identify and exercise such role and to proactively contribute to shape the next city governance transformation.

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Scenario: A design-centred city governance

Think about a city that is constantly turned toward its future: all its societal actors are focused in collaborating to creatively produce a public value that falls to the younger generation and on a fruitful intergenerational coexistence. They benefit from a design-centred city governance, meaning a codified set of strategies and practices of steering public organisations by relying on the envisioning power of design, adopting a collective future building approach. Imagine an established team of designers engaged in a variety of permanent and transient co-design activities supporting the whole city ecosystem of societal actors. Imagine also that this team has a role in a process of design capacity building for policy-makers who have to generate visions and share them in a dialectic and fertile environment, leaving room for disagreement but also for positive proposal building, as a design-centred governance is essentially a propositional form of exercising the power and of sharing the decision-making process among all societal actors.