

Silvana Segapeli  
**Pandemic versus collective space?**  
**Towards a topology of care**

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Abstract

During this health crisis a miracle has occurred. Beyond its tragic and painful aspects, the breach of confinement rules has led to unexpected changes, profoundly altering urban scenarios that were believed long established. With the lockdown over, attempts are now being made to design new biopolitical scenarios and define priority themes for a post-crisis urban regeneration, in terms of the constitution of social innovation practices and regarding the stimulation of urban cultures and policies, aimed at a greater care of the multitude of subjectivity of which the *civitas* is made up.

Within this framework, the theme of care represents an important challenge for a new epistemology of the crisis, on which to implant experimental policies of shared administration, new visionary capacities and renewed practices of communing.

Parole Chiave

Commons — Common spaces — Urban design — Urban regeneration — Care

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**Collaborative urban spaces**

«It's a miracle», Hartmut Rosa begins without ambiguity:

«(...) all the evidence of a climate crisis, often physically felt in many parts of the Earth in recent years, all our political intentions, have done nothing to stop or at least slow down these inner workings. Not even two hundred years of powerful criticism directed against capitalism and its engines of accumulating wealth. But now, they are at a standstill. And we are still alive! We can do it! We have done it!»<sup>1</sup>.

Yes, during this pandemic a miracle has occurred. Beyond its tragic and painful aspects, this enormous, terrible, planetary plague has had an extraordinary transformative power.

In the daily life of cities, the onslaught of the health crisis has brought about unexpected changes, profoundly altering urban scenarios that were believed long established.

In this general slowdown, urban practices have been called into question and many of the observed mutations do not fall within a sphere of loss, quite the opposite: the rediscovery of neighbourhood life, the strengthening of closeness networks and different forms of solidarity, the reactivation of pedestrian and bicycle circuits, the renewed perception of environmental systems and ecotones, etc. All elements that have emerged from the experience of confinement and that represent precious resources for a post-crisis urban regeneration, in terms of the constitution of social innovation practices and regarding the stimulation of urban cultures and policies, aimed at a greater care of the multitude of subjectivity of which the *civitas* is made up. (Hardt, Negri, 2009)

The shapes, meanings and roles of the urban space had already changed



**Fig. 1**

Saint-Etienne, “Saint-Roch s’éveille”, project. Active citizenship actions (Photo Silvana Segapeli).

over time; in recent decades the opening of a post-capitalist future, the constitution of common assets as forms of resistance to the intensified privatisation of capitalism and social structuring following a heterarchical form (Citton, 2018) – thus endowed with a plurality of value systems – had already begun to configure new scenarios.

With the lockdown over, a different consciousness of urban space is gradually taking root; public spaces and common spaces are conceived by the most mindful as places of exploring different ways of co-constructing and living together, as fields of experience of civic action and platforms of diffusion for the new maieutics of active citizenship.

The experience of confinement has taught us the city is a place full of “*especies d'espaces*”<sup>2</sup>, namely a variety of spaces of relating: from the apartment block terrace to the entrance hall, from the collective *parterre* to the semi-private garden, from the common courtyard to the shared patio. The heterotopia<sup>3</sup> discovered as a result of physical distancing are spaces of resistance that could remain, perhaps in new ways, in the design of a post-crisis city.

What has been understood, clearly and unequivocally, is that organising the urban space must be opportunely correlated to the framework of social relations and to the system of common assets – inappropriable, material or immaterial. This node cannot and should no longer be dissociated, nor should it be considered a marginal parameter in conceiving the urban project, «(...) to use does not simply mean to utilise something, but to stay in relation to an inappropriable» (Agamben, 2017).

### **Place/Work/Folk , towards a topology of care**

«What people can do is begin this process of change themselves. It is a process which should both examine the cause of our present condition and pose new ways for building more humane places to live.» (Robert Godman 1973)

In the careful analysis of the ongoing mutations, among the most important issues coming to the fore emerges the theme of care, a Geddesian (Tyrwhitt 1947) metaphor that is well suited to the experiential picture of urban phenomena in times of a health crisis.

It was 1946 when Lewis Mumford, in the introduction to the collection of Patrick Geddes' reports from India<sup>5</sup>, as though a kind of premonition, described the eminently pioneering nature of the approach presented in those writings, underlining the scholar's ability to anticipate areas of investigation that would in the future become pivotal subjects of collective reflection on urban issues: solidarity, collaborative action, cooperation, man-nature reconciliation, community, common space. These are the same instances manifested – often in the form of urgency – during the months of crisis, as an unexpected humus, a precious substratum favouring the blossoming of that universe of possibilities (Rancière, 2009) of which the city, with its frame of unresolved common and public spaces, has a pressing need today. During the lockdown, the media and social networks never ceased talking about alternative uses, urban spaces regained from vehicular traffic, re-conversions of use as common meeting spaces, arising from new ways of living, especially between neighbours (respecting the rules of physical distancing). In other words, it has emerged that the capacity for transformation of collective action (Harvey, 2012), the power of the community (Sennett, 2020) and the constituent praxis of common assets (Dardot, Laval, 2014), considered as synergic forces, make it possible to rethink the weave of the city, starting from the common spaces of relationship, in the 'micro' dimension of the neighbourhood and the scale of the neighbourhood's contact spaces (Choay, 2003).

Within this framework, the theme of care represents an important challenge for a new epistemology of the crisis, on which to implant experimental policies of shared administration, new visionary capacities and renewed common practices.

What forms of planning intervention should be encouraged to favour the creation of care communities in urban spaces? Co-design round-tables, think tanks for orientation and reflection, assemblies, communities of inquiry, etc. seem in many places to be configured as collaborative scenarios within which to conceive the necessary transformations of neighbourhood spaces. It is precisely in these spaces that the metaphor of Geddes is embodied and becomes current: observing, caring for, healing the city's nodes of vulnerability are the phases of a collective process that serve to regenerate neglected or abandoned urban spaces (Tyrwhitt 1947). At this point it is worth dialectically comparing the two perspectives: on one hand, that dictated by a need for *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies, 1887), a sense of community, made up of warm social relations, of contact, and is linked to the scenarios of reception (Sennett, 2000). On the other, the one oriented by the need to review the terms of social interaction, according to the rules of the pandemic, whose regulations impose a redefinition of the notions of accessibility and distance. In concrete terms, it would be difficult to try to resolve the antinomies at the crux of the health crisis without rethinking the way in which space is designed and governed and the types and times of interrelation that this will determine. Following in the footsteps of Geddes' legacy, we can analyse the question of what the treatment and care is at the moment, setting these in terms of a right/duty to configure effective design lines:

1. Care means equipping oneself with the theoretical and practical tools necessary to build an adequate, eco-responsible and sustainable environment, beyond the oppressive logic of the society of abundance: the concrete "eutopia" of Geddes, in other words.
2. Care is pursuing an «intelligent and responsible frugality» (Magnago

Lampugnani, 2020) in planning interventions, a sobriety that resembles conservative surgery<sup>6</sup>, in a house-to-house mode, case by case. In some way this same course includes all the design actions aimed at unhinging the logic of standardisation, such as tactical urban planning or urban acupuncture.

3. Care is to activate and innervate “attention regimes” (Boullier, 2014), through preliminary investigation, physical exploration and walking as a cognitive practice – the survey before planning<sup>7</sup>. in Geddesian terms. Only through in-depth observation of the places and communities that inhabit them can new ways of accessibility and distance be defined.
4. Care means building inventories, through community mapping (of which Geddes mentions the prodromes<sup>8</sup>), to read and interpret the city through a mapping of social infrastructures, of places that configure a system of relationships, that coordinate networks of collaboration and solidarity<sup>9</sup>.

Through these principles, centred on the concept of care, there is no attempt to impose the features of a new localism, which would be burdened by the risks of incongruous consequences – such as the intensification of exclusion mechanisms and the proliferation of uncoordinated micro-interventions. Policies of social cohesion and social innovation should underlie the logic of intervention to be set up. To this end, new forms of governance remain to be fine-tuned, articulating experimentation at different scales, in order to increasingly move towards a horizontal and participatory management of places of urban communal living.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hartmut Rosa, “Le miracle et le monstre – un regard sociologique sur le Coronavirus”, in AOC media - Analyse Opinion Critique, avril 2020. «C’est un miracle (...) toutes les preuves d’une crise climatique, souvent ressenties physiquement dans de nombreux endroits de la terre ces dernières années, toutes nos intentions politiques n’ont rien pu faire pour arrêter ou même ralentir ces roues. Pas plus que deux cents ans de puissantes critiques du capitalisme face aux moteurs d’accumulation du capital. Mais là, ils sont à l’arrêt. Et nous sommes encore en vie! Nous pouvons le faire! Nous l’avons fait!» .

<sup>2</sup> Georges Perec, *Espaces d’espaces*, Galilée, Paris 1974. «Le problème n’est pas d’inventer l’espace, encore moins de le réinventer (trop de gens bien intentionnés sont là aujourd’hui pour penser notre environnement...), mais de l’interroger, ou, plus simplement encore, de le lire.»

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, “Des espaces autres”, Conference held at Cercle d’études architecturales, 14 march 1967, in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no 5, october 1984

<sup>4</sup> On geddesian triad “Place, Work and Folk” Cf. Patrick Geddes, “Civics: as Applied Sociology”, conference held at School of Economics and Political Science, University of London, 18 july 1904, <https://www.gutenberg.org>

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. J. Tyrwhitt, op.cit. «The life and work of Patrick Geddes prefigure the age in which we now live. The tasks that he undertook as a solitary thinker and planner have become the collective task of our generation», p.7

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. J. Tyrwhitt, op.cit. «The best way in which congestion can actually be reduced is by the creation of open spaces. Whereas the new street will only too readily destroy any remains social character within an area, the new open space will do much towards renewing the values of village social life.», p. 85

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. J. Tyrwhitt, op.cit. «The conservative method, however, has its difficulties, it requires long and patient study. The work cannot be done in the office with ruler and parallels, for the plan must be sketched out on the spot, after wearying hours of pe-

rambulation (...)), p. 44

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. Tyrwhitt, op.cit. «One of the parts of a city survey that can easily be undertaken by any interested and intelligent person of active habits is to mark on a map those vacant plots of land that are used for cultivation.», p. 89

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. J. Tyrwhitt, op.cit. «How very different from the present state of affairs would be a city in which such active co-operation could arise spontaneously between the citizen and their town council!», p. 65

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