

## Can institutions learn? A conversation with Laura Lieto

Edited by Elena Ostanel

*Laura Lieto is a planning theorist and an urban ethnographer. Her work is about urban informality, trans-national urbanism and planning regulation, with a socio-materialist orientation inspired by Actor Network theory and assemblage thinking. I met Laura when I had the occasion to invite her to the U-Rise Master at University Iuav of Venice. I had the chance to listen to an inspiring lecture on how local governments and institutions work. Her capacity to see the complexity of decision making processes is obviously given by her theoretical thinking, combined with the actual position she holds as vice-mayor in the City of Naples. But I'm sure this depends also on previous ethnographic work she conducted observing local institutions from within.*

*This is the reason why we decided to interview Laura Lieto beside Kenneth Reardon. To convey how much local governments matter if we believe that communities really matter. In this conversation we mainly discuss the process of reciprocal learning between community based practices and local institutions. Can Institution Learn? is the title of a seminar I organized at University Iuav of Venice in 2018. After many years of field and action research, the question is still open. Or more precisely, the question is broader: we are interested in understanding weather and how the community based action-local institutions nexus can positively impact planning mechanisms and systems to enhance processes of public innovation.*

**Elena Ostanel:** Many of the articles in this Special Issue tell of grassroots, self-organized, agonistic practices aimed at re-use, and re-activate spaces to give back to the communities. In some ways these practices challenge the rationalist model of planning, triggering processes of co-production, thus impacting on how planning is designed and implemented as well on how institutions organize. Practices that work at territorial level, based on civic participation, that can structure hybrid forms of governance, test incremental approaches, and last but not least

can take failures and conflicts as generative elements/factors. In your opinion, how can we read these phenomena from the perspective of planning? Which kind of innovation can we infer both in planning theory and practice?

**Laura Lieto:** I think that grassroots and self-organized practices are extremely important for planners as they typically complement general planning frameworks with the fine-grain knowledge of places and communities that often exceed the general understanding of urban processes provided by one-fits-all models that are also in use in planning. In such a complementarity, innovation spurs from conflicts and controversies that rise in the space between “the specific and the general” provided by the interplay of grassroots practices and general political frameworks. These both belong to planning practice: I don’t see self-organization practices as detached from the world of planners, and neither I see rationalism as detached from, or opposed to grassroots worlds. I see a co-productive process as an open dialogue in which conflicts as well as different values and power relationships should be taken into account and addressed, not avoided.

The interaction and new forms of collaboration with grassroots practices is also stimulating a rethinking of the role of institutions in a planning perspective. From a regulatory role institutions are asked to change their approach and embrace a more open perspective, an “enabling” role. The institution as “enabler” means making contact with and getting to know the resources and actors that are already present and working in the territories, stimulating the birth of new ones, supporting them and being able to channel them towards a common vision and within a broader framework, such as that of the plan.

**EO:** I would like to talk a little more about the role of community base actions. Starting from your current experience of Deputy Major on Urban Planning in Naples, while taking the perspective of your theoretical background, what’s the role of communities in city-planning and more in general in the process of production of the city? Actually, we know that “community” is a tricky/critical/risky term since we are dealing with a plural, constantly changing and undefined concept. On this premise, what kind of risks we can encounter in a community engagement process and

what's the role of conflicts in a process of community planning?

**LL:** Communities can be phenomenal agenda setters, as they help planners and policy-makers to see what's going on in neighborhoods and how people cope with everyday problems. Of course, there's no such a thing as an established community: issues of gender, class, race, culture constantly reshape our belonging to different groups and sub-cultures, that is simultaneous and heterogeneous. From a governance perspective, community engagement works as long as we make sure to keep broad access to decision-making and public conversation for agents and issues that are not yet on the agenda. Inclusiveness is central to political work. As planners, we understand that citizens are not equal and communities are not homogeneous groups, immune from power asymmetries. In that sense, inclusiveness is about dealing with differences and intersections, is about agonism, shifting between closure and openness, naturalization of identities and insurgent subjectivities.

This reasoning holds on the idea that it is important to explore the dynamic relation between planning systems and societal context, elaborating a perspective that situates planning systems in the dialectical interaction of actors and social and political institutions. A perspective that sheds light on institutions not as the mere result of actors' practices and utility-seeking negotiations, but as socially constructs.

Working closely with territories and different communities takes time to build relationships of trust and trigger empowerment processes. This type of work requires strengths, time, adaptability and skills that a public administration can hardly make available. This is why it is important, for institutions, to maintain an open dialogue with place-based communities, rather than spot activations through participatory initiatives.

**EO:** In our discussion we are often referring to institutions and we are stressing that community-based actions can challenge the local governments' mechanism, routines and functioning, sometimes leading to innovation and change. You are now part of an institution, but you have also for many years studied them from an inside perspective. Can you tell us what you see when referring to an institution? How can an institution learn? Is it possible for a complex machine as a local government to learn?

**LL:** Institutions – in the broadest sense – are sets of (written or unwritten) norms of conduct. We have formal and informal institutions, state and folk institutions, traditional and temporary, the list could be longer. I see formally established institutional structures developing, thriving and declining within an institutional ecology that is not separated from life worlds. I see institutions all over my everyday landscape, but of different kinds.

Community-based actions can provide strong ground for institutions to learn, change and evolve. And, they do so by triggering conflicts, emphasizing injustice, rising controversies that formal institutions fail to address properly. Innovation and change come around when we find ourselves with our backs against a wall. And, these processes unfold in a heterogeneous and yet tightly-knitted space, not standing on the opposite sides of a track. In other words, change is the outcome of complex interactions. That is how ethnographic work comes very insightful when addressing institutions as life normative worlds. In some of my work I've used the notion of an assemblage along with additional ideas drawn from actor-network theory to dissolve the artificial divide between culture and nature and formality and informality, two assumptions that have been operating in institutional studies for a long time.

When I wrote 'Planners as Brokers and Translators. On Regulation and Discretionary Power', based on ethnographic work conducted in Napoli's city planning department, I described norm implementation as a process «during which the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction and the margins of maneuver are negotiated and delimited» between agents provided with different degrees of power, authority, knowledge and interest. Ethnographic work was useful to envisage how discretionary power comes in the form of a mediation between the abstract power of regulation (general principles, values, norms of conduct, and professional cultures) and the concrete demands and stakes coming from the everyday life of neighborhoods and communities. As a practice, social ties, regulatory technologies, moral considerations, material objects and places influence how decision-making processes occurs. Beside this also planners can impact with their role of broker and translators.

**EO:** What are the risks of these processes, if any?

**LL:** There's no particular risk, if we understand public action (planning policies included) as democratic agonism, as the result of disagreements that can be progressively worked out onto common grounds. The main concern, if any, is how time-consuming and challenging these practices of agonism can be.

**EO:** In addition to civil society, another actor that is increasingly taking an active role in planning processes is the University, which is an institution too. In particular, your academic work has built bridges, promoting reciprocity and service learning, between communities and universities through the creation of multi-actor partnerships. How can public institutions grow by learning from these practices and from the critical perspective the University offers?

**LL:** I believe that universities can play a great role in public service by increasing their "third mission" programs, both emphasizing innovation in teaching and research. As far as I can see from my own, partial perspective, this third mission issue is still underrated and deserves more investments and focus. Overall, relationships with the academic world – as seen from within city government – help building critical knowledge, challenge political assumptions, overcome silo mentality and have a better grip over complexities.

In addition, in the last few years, we are witnessing the involvement of Universities as intermediate bodies to connect grassroots practices/actors and institutions. Researchers are asked not only to generate collective and usable knowledge, but to stimulate networking and processes of collaboration among different actors (e.g. third sector organizations, informal groups, citizens, etc.) and with the institutions at different scales. Researchers/Universities as third parties are therefore experimenting an intermediate role of translation and mediation within the territories.

Once again, we have to remember the complex theoretical framework to observe but also plan these collaboration processes: the University as an institution is a complex body that needs to adapt and change when it is aimed at supporting community engagement processes. The University needs investments (funds but also dedicated personnel) to perform these partnerships as well as the political willingness to really believe in third-mission actions that are co-created with

territories and (complex) local communities.

**EO:** Going back a while to the main topic of this Special Issue, what role do you think art and culture have – as a project but also and especially as a creative method – in these processes of reciprocal learning between community-based actions and institutions?

**LL:** Culture can be pivotal in processes of institutional learning, especially when it works as a critical space to challenge assumptions or reveal unaddressed issues. This implies a certain degree of independence and outspokenness from the side of cultural agents. Oftentimes, the role of culture as a corollary of power – quite common in several regeneration projects – ends up with “reinforcing the message” of formal institutions or vested interests. In this sense, the relationship between culture and political power is inherently controversial, shifting between critique and normalization.

Art and culture become drivers of citizenship insofar they are able to engage social groups that would otherwise be difficult to intercept or hard to gather. They provide abilities of expressions that can contribute not only to the development of an individual person, but also to cohesiveness and the strengthening of social capital – a sense of “us”.

**Elena Ostanel**, Assistant Professor in urban planning at Università Iuav di Venezia, she has been Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow in partnership with the University of Toronto and TUDelft. At IUAV, she teaches courses in community planning and she is the vice-director of a Master Course on urban regeneration/social innovation. She is the author of numerous national and international articles on diversity and urban inclusion/exclusion, urban regeneration/social innovation and innovation in planning. Among her recent publications: (2020) *Community-based responses to unjust processes of neighbourhood change in Parkdale, Toronto* in *Critical Dialogues of Urban Governance, Development and Activism*. London and Toronto, UCL Press and (2023), *Innovation in strategic planning: social innovation and co-production under a common analytical framework*, in *Planning Theory* 0(0). [ostanel@iuav.it](mailto:ostanel@iuav.it)

**Laura Lieto** (1966) is a planner-architect, and a full professor of urban planning at “Federico II” University, Napoli (Italy). Laura is a planning theorist and an urban ethnographer, her main body of work is about urban informality and planning regulation. She now serves as deputy Mayor and urban planning counselor in the City of Napoli. [laura.lieto@unina.it](mailto:laura.lieto@unina.it)