10. Care, community and reuse of places

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10.1 A transition paradigm

It takes a whole village to educate a child. According to Manzini, the meaning of this African proverb can be expanded considering that it also takes a village – or a neighbourhood –to care for an elderly or particularly frail person. Ultimately, it takes a community to take care for each other. Therefore, the proverb refers to a strong connection between caring and the village, understood both as a relational and a physical place, where we are close to one another. Using a more recent term, closeness in the village that cares is defined as *proximity* (Manzini, 2021).

Although the village of last century cannot be recreated, there is a deep connection between the dimension of proximity, the presence of a community, and a physical place, which in different experiments is starting to be practised in present urban contexts. Our contemporaneity is profoundly influenced by abuse of nature; space obsolescence and abandonment (Dal Borgo *et al*., 2016); mass migration; questioning how we can live together, sharing

places, and taking care of each other. In addition to urban density, soil consumption, abandoned places and interrupted landscapes, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has proved megacities to be particularly inadequate in preventing contagion diffusion and providing healthy psychophysical conditions (Anzani, 2021). As a result, the discussion on how to understand and promote a more-than-human proximity has expanded and deepened, bringing to the forefront the fact that what we have hitherto called nature can become an extraordinarily powerful agent in human affairs, at all levels, from the global to everyday life. This should drive us to change our ways of being and thinking, to adopt a systemic point of view, recognizing that we are part of something bigger and deeply interconnected (Bateson, 1972), and that a new wave of social innovations motivated by democracy and social justice should also give voice to non-human entities (animals, forests, rivers…) and regenerate the web of life (Manzini, 2021).

Conversely, ahead of the climate crisis and the pandemic, which have increased the vulnerability of the weakest sectors of the population, the most vital lesson learned is the need for the application of the ethics of care as a transition paradigm to a healthier, more resilient, and more sustainable world. In this conceptual framework, the discussion on the meaning to be given to the condition of physical and relational proximity becomes fundamental for the construction of a culture of sustainability adequate to the dimension of the multiple crises in which we find ourselves (Manzini, 2021).
The existence of a link between sustainability, well-being, public space and care seems to be recognized in different spheres and by different actors: the World Health Organization (WHO) promotes a holistic and ecological concept of health; the ethics of care in its traditionally female voice (Tronto, 1993; Farè, 2013; Morini, 2021) prefigures a relationship between sustainability and the urban dimension; placemaking implies a psychological and social dimension of mental well-being.

The extraordinariness of the situation is imposing an indispensable and inescapable change to our priorities, through the use of a framework capable of increasing the intelligence of our surroundings, based on consciousness, culture and creativity, promoting

a development founded on the reduction of resources waste,
a sense of belonging, proximity, mutualism and inclusivity.

10.2 Care

The concept of care is rich with different, sometimes controversial,
meanings: besides indicating work done with skill and commitment,
but also with fatigue and concern, it has been used in the past to in-
dicate a set of domestic activities traditionally carried out by women.
Marinelli calls it *domestic intelligence* (2002).
But while the (only) role of women in society was to be a caretaker
and a nurturer, the idea of care itself was undervalued. In classical
studies from development psychology, female morality actually
appears to be more immature than that of men. In fact, those theories
put the focus on individuation and separation as essential steps
towards adulthood, which corresponds to autonomy, meant as not
depending on anyone or anything. In Hartmann's language we could
say that, for a certain classic psychology, the purpose of development
is to set thick boundaries between *me* and the world outside and,
inside my own mind, thick boundaries that differentiate good from
evil by law and rights. Opposite to these traditionally masculine
thick boundaries we find thin ones, the ones involving dependence,
closeness and intimacy, which historically, biologically and culturally
are related to women. As a consequence of this point of view, women's
traditional concern for relationship looks like a weakness rather than
a potential human strength. It is only in the past forty years that
the voice of women has been listened to and valued as a different
voice (Gilligan, 1982, 1993) – not as a childish version of men's,
but as a voice that can tell another truth. The ethics of care has
feminine and feminist roots, but its potential importance has a uni-
versal appeal. In fact, the ethics of care deals profoundly with acting
with responsibility towards self and others, and leans on the implicit
awareness and understanding of the systemic and relational nature
of human beings. It enables a shift from a morality of rights (Gilligan,
1982, 1993), based on equality and focussed on fairness, to an ethic
of responsibility that is committed to equity and to the recognition

of the differences in need. So, caring for relationship can finally become a source for moral strength.

Articulate reflections by Joan Tronto redefine the ethics of care, regardless of a strict distinction between genders, repositioning it and combining it with the spaces of democracy and the idea of a fully understood citizenship. Entering into the debate on the struggle against discrimination and the promotion of equal opportunities, Tronto not only focusses on the female gender, but addresses all so-called *vulnerable* subjects. She obviously considers women, but also those who find themselves living in societies that consider them strangers or foreigners, people we refer to as *migrants* (Naga, 2023) and are increasingly involved in caring work that is very often belittled, undervalued or even exploited, as it has been women's work for centuries. Vulnerability, that we have unexpectedly experienced during pandemic, is an aspect several subjects share: people with disabilities, individuals with specific needs, communities, territories and ecosystems. But ultimately vulnerability is an inescapable aspect of the whole human experience and denying it means denying a significant part of humanity, ours and other's. According to Arno Gruen (2007), true autonomy is not being independent and separate from others, but rather consists in feeling free to experience vulnerability, pain, loneliness, but also joy, hope, love – all the human feelings and needs, all equally dignified, and seeing them welcomed and embraced by others. This allows a bridge to be built between the internal and external worlds, that makes proximity, compassion, and then care possible; in essence an authentic relationship with another human being. The ethic of care is interwoven with this awareness of human frailty and vitality, of the inescapability of dependence and relationships, and in the end of the systemic nature of life on earth. Far from being a weakness, the concern for relationships can became the foundation for new ways of living together, more oriented to proximity and care.

The potential of the ethics of care resides in its capacity to deal with the relevance of relationships, and the connectedness of local and global, individual and community, cities and planet. Outside the logic of productivity or individual sovereignty, the formidable knowledge that women have handed down over the centuries can be

related with the infinitely sensitive notion of *dependence* and *vulnerability*, as an inescapable element of the human condition. It can become a competence accessible to all, men and women, useful to understand and convey the complexity of our time.

10.3 Community

In past centuries, communities were smaller than today, and their dwellers shared strong boundaries, related to common roots and often to blood, that conveyed identity, common purpose, mutual care and a deep feeling of belonging. But at the same time, those boundaries generated wariness and even closure to the outside, often ending with the exclusion of outsiders.
In Ernest Hartmann's language (2011) boundaries were thin within the small community and very thick towards the outside world.

Since the 19th century, with their organization based on rational socio-technical criteria, modern cities profoundly changed the relations between citizens and places and also among dwellers of the same spaces. Boundaries between spaces became stronger, conveyed by purposes (a place to sleep, a place to work, a place to shop and so on), while boundaries between citizens became weaker and weaker, suggesting the idea that people were losing the very sense of community they had known in ancient villages.
At the same time, modern cities developed as places made up of differences (Jacobs, 1961), between people, events and social forms. But the rapid political, social and economic changes over the last forty years have led to social fragmentation and even discrimination and it has become difficult to consider differences as a resource rather than a threat. In Hartmann's language, boundaries within people thickened, deeply separating *me* and *my family* from the rest of the neighbourhood.

Over the last twenty years, the rapid spread of available technology like the Internet and connected devices once again changed the rules of living together, allowing and encouraging connections with people, jobs, commodities without moving from home – thinning boundaries. This change brought with it new and exciting oppor-

tunities, but also widespread concerns about the risk of increasing loneliness and isolation from *real* (physical) relationships; social marginalization for those who aren't connected; damage to the local economy; and in the end the final death of communities as an important asset for life.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic forced Western societies into a huge social experiment in this sense, having to step up and improve the use of the new technologies to work, learn, shop and keep in touch with others, but also widening the social and economic gaps between those who had access to connections and could manage them and those who hadn't and couldn't, making the former more and more connected and suited for the new emerging community and the latter more and more lonely and isolated, even neglected. Moreover, the pandemic showed in the most dramatic way the serious inefficiency of the megacity in taking care of its citizens, making it literally a matter of life or death, of access to primary health services, but also of mental and social health, as we are now seeing.

So, it seems we have two different scenarios in front of us. On the one hand what Manzini (2021) names the *all at/from home* city, in which the dwellers don't need to move from home and from their very close relationships for many of the essential activities of life like working, studying, getting food or other things, like most of us (the lucky ones) did during the pandemic. The social, political and economic risks of a city like that, with the unavoidable outcome of social injustice, are right before our eyes. On the other hand, we can see appeals being raised for a *return to the past*, to the good old communities of the good old times. This scenario, besides being impracticable, is even more dangerous: those communities weren't good for everyone (primarily women), with their thick boundaries, very rigid social and familiar roles and regressive, more than often violent, social practices that are unacceptable nowadays.

Manzini (2021) suggests a third, new way with his idea of proximity. The author's proximity is a hybrid one that considers the physical and relational dimensions of community and at the same time includes the digital connections as a channel of information not to be cut away (Bateson, 1972). There is one thing we know for sure about communities and living systems at large: they cannot be engineered

top-down in a theoretical and rational way (Bateson, 1972; La Cecla, 2000). The dream (that on some occasions revealed itself as a nightmare) of designing
the ideal city for ideal people living in an ideal harmony missed
the target or even led to failures from Le Corbusier to the most recent attempts, even if they were well-intentioned. The real limit of these projects is the hubris of not considering the complexity and the very systemic nature of human systems.

What can be done instead is to create the circumstances, both relational and physical, in which relationships can emerge and grow, easing the spontaneous birth of a community from the bottom to the top.

But how can we draw a line and define what *proximity* and conse-quently community are? Manzini's idea of the 15-minute city is evocative, but of course we cannot use a compass to outline a community. At the same time, to define a boundary, a perimeter, is the first crucial step if one wants to observe, describe and intervene in a system. Of course, boundaries do exist in external reality and the physical ones are usually easier to recognize and detect than the relational ones, which are less visible, but have tangible impacts on systems. Reality is complex and made of sub-systems (nature, human systems, physical spaces, channels of information...) deeply interconnected with each other, but we can see and deal only with arcs of a bigger circuit, which can involve the whole of life on earth. The *systemic wisdom* (Bateson, 1972) is about the recognition of the occurrence of the bigger circuit, with all its vital connections with the sub-system we are observing. Not all boundaries are the same (Bateson, 1972; Morin, 1992) or have the same relevance compared to the matter one is observing (individual or community); it depends on what one wants to understand, and on the purpose one wants to achieve. It takes care, awareness and expertise to recognize the relevant boundaries for an existing group of dwellers, because drawing outlines can ease the development and the strengthening of a community but can also weaken the current relationships or even hinder the formation of a neighbourhood. Such an eventuality could happen when one fails to recognize the existing boundaries and all the relevant channels of information for a system, covering

the physical ones, related to places, and the relational ones, related both to the current web of institutional services and social actors and to the informal network of relationships present throughout. The authorities of big cities like Paris or Barcelona (Manzini, 2021) are using existing blocks to outline new forms of community, in a top-down decision process that is actively engaging social actors from the boroughs involved.

Besides physical and relational aspects, it is vital to also consider the immaterial, emotional aspects that bond dwellers to the places they live in, like all the feelings, memories, and stories about individual buildings or their districts (Anzani and Schinco, 2022).

Drawing outlines is an essential, necessary act for the wise and for the mad (Bateson, 1972; Piselli, 2020), but it is most of all an act that should entail a huge assumption of responsibility, supported, sustained and strengthened by a profound ethic of care and by a systemic and ecological epistemology.

10.4 Reuse of places

Today, some 56% of the world's inhabitants live in cities, with the urban population expected to more than double its current size by 2050. Though more than 80% of global GDP is generated in cities, which contribute to growth through increased productivity and innovation, the speed and scale of urbanization also brings many challenges, including pressure on land and natural resources. The expansion of urban land consumption outpaces population growth by as much as 50%, which is expected to add 1.2 million km² of new urban built-up area to the world by 2030. Building green, resilient and inclusive cities requires intensive policy coordination and investment choices by national and local governments (World Bank, 2023). Dealing with existing buildings has brought to the architectural and design discipline new, creative and fascinating challenges which have considered the adaptive reuse and urban regeneration approach as a valuable strategic alternative to our ever-increasing throw-away society. Within a framework of limited resources, the reuse strategy has answered the contemporary world's need

for sustainable development patterns, raising the awareness of the benefits of repurposing abandoned buildings and underutilized areas, their environment and landscape.

A great number of these buildings (former hospitals, military barracks, churches, railway depots, schools etc.) are situated in central parts of cities and can accommodate valuable contemporary functions (Figs. 1-4). Besides, they also represent important cultural values to be maintained for the collective identity and the communities' sense of belonging. Starting from the need to give value not only to a functional but also to an experiential use of spaces, significant inspiration can be gained from the memory layered in complex historical spaces, implementing innovation with individual and collective well-being, favouring physical and psychological comfort of a community.

While the idea of adapting existing architecture represented for a long time the guiding value of the reuse projects, today the principle is the idea of accepting the current state as a condition to set up a modern point of view. The state of abandonment in which the buildings find themselves, with their material alterations, distortions, colour shades or scars can be seen as an essential factor of their uniqueness, as a fundamental aspect of the places' atmosphere and character.

Abandoned or underutilized buildings represent an extraordinary resource, not only because they are places capable of carrying out new functions but also because they can assume a high symbolic value, as custodians of human memories and stories that are otherwise destined to disappear. Through an interdisciplinary approach, these abandoned spaces can be reinvented by attributing to them a representative character through a moderate use of resources; use of reversible interventions; enhancement of the traces of deterioration; the use of low-cost, lightweight materials; and solutions that can be implemented quickly. The act of reuse is not limited to modifying the functions, or to creating new forms, but also involves the resignification of the past. The challenge is returning discarded areas to new use possibilities, relying on temporary and reversible strategies, consistent with the places' nature and soul, aimed at their reintegration into the living social fabric and the enhancement of their symbolic significance. Designers have a great responsibility in identifying quality solutions for the project of spaces, service and

technology which could allow that welcoming and hybrid dimension of proximity to be built, which includes the physical, digital and relational community described above. Indeed, besides being tools for taking care of people and the planet, reuse and reinvention are a strategy of mind and life, not only an opportunity to exploit the potential of existing buildings but also that of existing relationships, and human and relational materials.

10.5 A new urban ecology

The chapter has explored care as a female knowledge, to be extracted from its traditionally domestic perimeter, reinvented and made accessible to all in relationships, places and communities.
The issue intercepts the complexity of contemporary city at different levels, where the needs of creating caring communities to improve individual well-being cannot be dealt with by disregarding a systemic approach. In this framework, the reuse of places turns out to be a form of care towards an individual and community dimension of dwelling, which can enhance urban proximity and safeguard the planet. Interior architecture and design can reverse the appetite for overproduction; foster the reuse of existing assets and enhance their stratified memory; acknowledge that urban and natural spaces are part of a whole ecosystem; and promote a new urban ecology.

Figure 1.
Former psychiatric hospital in Racconigi. Photo by A. Anzani, 2023.

Figure 2.
Concept for the reuse design of the former psychiatric hospital in Racconigi, by E. Andriani, C. Antonutti, B. Bravi, G. De Salvo, G. Lamera, F. Paolino, F. Pappalardo, 2023.
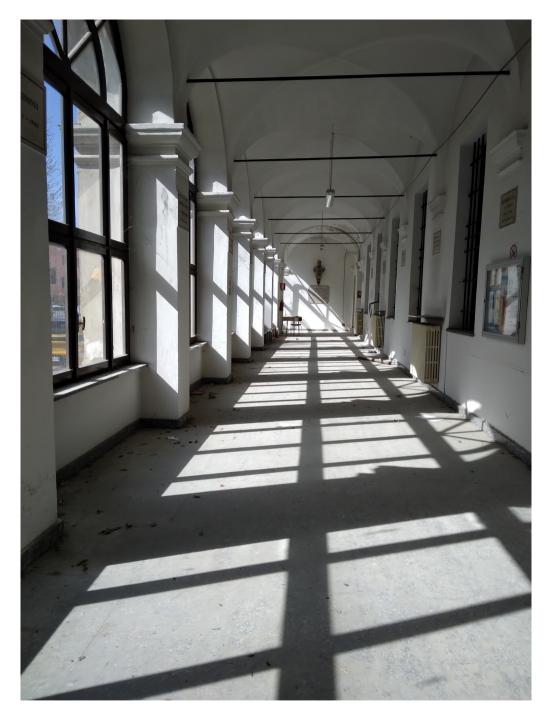
Figure 3.
Former civic hospital in Racconigi. Photo by A. Anzani, 2023.

Figure 4.
Concept for the reuse design of the former civic hospital in Racconigi, by M. H. Berg
Kanika, M. Calì, D. German Zubiaurre, J. Godard, A. S. Lopes Amorim, L. Minciotti, A.
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