PITFALLS OF COLD SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING

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Abstract. "Beyond all Limits: International Conference on Sustainability in Architecture, Planning, and Design" is the title of a conference resulting from the cooperation between three universities, namely Çankaya University of Ankara, the University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", and the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow (which replaced the University of Plymouth in 2021). The second edition, held in May 2022 at Officina Vanvitelli, located at the San Leucio Belvedere in San Leucio-Caserta, was organised by the Vanvitelli University, which assumed responsibility for the event. The conference aimed at exploring sustainability in ways that would reflect and contribute to the latest international approaches. The event covered the fields of architecture, planning, and design, and was framed within the context of the NEB (New European Bauhaus), launched by the European Commission in 2021 to promote the three pillars of Sustainability, Aesthetics, and Inclusion. The NEB initiative is an interdisciplinary and creative endeavour that aligns with the objectives of the European Green Deal, emphasising human-centred design and promoting a novel lifestyle paradigm where sustainability and style converge, thereby catalysing the green transition across various economic sectors, including construction, furniture, fashion and other domains of daily life.

Keywords: social sustainability; social innovation; social actor; cold sustainability planning.

Introduction

While sustainability has undoubtedly become a fundamental principle of human existence, it is equally true that, thirty-eight years after the publication of the Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987), this concept risks losing its meaning due its increasingly superficial appropriation by marketing and media rhetoric, with mentions of "alliances for sustainability", "sustainable cities", "green cars", and so on. Like many other positive principles of our time, sustainability risks losing its ethical foundations, once exposed to the demands of the voracious neoliberal economy.

Is our planet becoming less sustainable, despite the efforts made and advocated by scholars? To what extent are ordinary individuals, who are not part of the scientific community, truly committed to living sustainably and even altering their lifestyle in the name of this principle? This is the scenario that Alex Langer, the Italian politician, environmental journalist, pacifist and essayist, described in 1994, when he declared: «The environmental transition will happen only when it becomes socially desirable» (?).

The core of the issue lies in shifting the understanding of sustainability from a purely "technical" and abstract notion to one that views it as a foundational principle of human relations and a new vision for the future. As environmental thinker Vandana Shiva with Kartikey Shiva write in *Oneness vs. the 1%: Shattering Illusions, Seeding Freedom* (2018): «We are one earth family, one humanity. We are connected through our diversity, intelligence, creativity and compassion». Indeed, by emphasising the "sentiment" of responsibility, the Brundtland Report addresses the issue in ethical and moral terms. Section 3, titled "Sustainable Development" from Chapter 1, "The Global Challenge" includes the well known statement that summarises the entire report: «Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs» (WCED, 1987). These words envision growth as the result of the harmonious balance between social, economic, and environmental factors, promoting an equitable, inclusive and sustainable society in the long term.

To remain consistent with the foundational philosophy of the Report, we need to recognise the value of social sustainability: «[...] which is notably absent from public debates [...], as most discussions focus on the economic and environmental paradigms [...]» (Moralli, 2022). But how can we conceive of sustainability without human rights, gender equality, social harmony, and the right to dignified work for all? These aspects are what make social sustainability a cornerstone of sustainable development, if not the most strategic of the three pillars.

This Special Issue of TECHNE offers a more direct analysis of the various facets of social sustainability, calling attention to the role of communities, territories, and local identities within broader processes of transformation in contemporary cities.

Social sustainability: my/our responsibility

When it comes to environmental sustainability, citizens can make a significant impact by changing their lifestyle without waiting for institutions to take the lead. As Giampaolo Fabris suggests in his book *La società post-crescita. Consumi e stili di vita* (2010), individuals can engage in virtuous practices, such as recycling correctly. The impact of this behaviour, while seemingly trivial, could potentially have a significant social effect, particularly in terms of providing a compelling testimony. However, it would be naive to ignore the disproportionate environmental damage caused by the unsustainable policies of lobbies, multinational corporations, criminal organisations, and warring nations that outweigh the actions of virtuous citizens. It is an unequal struggle!

In contrast, the contribution of individuals to social sustainability may appear minimal. This is evident when we look at the 17 Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the UN Agenda 2030 (General Assembly of the United Nations, 2015). These are the goals that the United Nations Assembly committed to in September 2015, aiming to end poverty and ensure global access to education, healthcare, and dignified, regularly paid work. The use of terms like "ending", "ensuring", and "promoting" in the document places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of nation-states, leaving citizens in a state of passive waiting.

However, there have been multiple instances in which grassroots actions, including some quite well-known ones, have led

to tangible changes, even resulting in new laws. One notable example is the case of Riace.

Riace, a small town in Calabria, Southern Italy, famous for its ancient *Warriors* housed at the Magna Grecia National Museum of Reggio Calabria, is regarded as a positive example of immigrant reception policies. However, that model is now nearly dissolved following accusations and legal challenges involving the town's former mayor, Mimmo Lucano. In 2009, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Wim Wenders remarked:

The real utopia is not that the Berlin Wall came down – it is that which has been happening in some towns in Calabria, especially in Riace [...] I saw a town that had the capacity to solve, through welcoming refugees, not the actual problem of refugees, but its own problem of continuing to exist, resisting death caused by emigration and depopulation (Perfetti and Ronconi, 2021).

This statement by the German director encapsulates the Riace experiment, which began in 1997, when eight hundred Kurdish migrants arrived on the coast near Riace. At that time, Lucano, who was a schoolteacher, decided to open the doors of his small town to these newcomers in an effort to repopulate the historical centre. His efforts were inspired by international refugee reception practices. The migrants arriving in Riace were provided shelter and essential services, including dignified housing, healthcare, legal assistance, groceries for a week, personal and domestic hygiene products, and clothing. But there is more to the story. Over time, Riace transformed into an example of virtuous reception policies, with a newly repopulated historical centre housing migrants in abandoned homes and repurposed shops, which prompted the return of former residents. Maria Luisa Ronconi highlights one of the key strengths of the Riace Model:

Equal treatment of the local workforce and a business-like approach were adopted in Riace to manage local facilities [...] and organise craft workshops. These were not run by migrants and/or residents alone but by what became an integrated, multiethnic community (Perfetti and Ronconi, 2021).

In Riace, integration was not conceived of and achieved as a one-way process, where migrants were expected to assimilate into the host society. Instead, it manifested as *mixophilia* – the positive mixing of locals and migrants – the opposite of *mixophobia*, which instead leads to the creation of «communities of similar people» gathered within the guarded spaces of gated communities, such as those found in the United States (Bauman, 2005).

Unlike the hyper-selective legal procedures practiced in the West, which draw sharp distinctions between legal and illegal immigrants, fuelled by a fear of foreigners (who, if not as terror-ists, are described as thieves coming to steal from the host society and its "rightful" citizens), the essence of the Riace Model seems to lie in a deeply rooted propensity for warmly welcoming foreigners – a concept that transcends pity and is anchored in very ancient, almost 'mythical', times.

In the case of Riace, we should then speak of "hospitality" – the universal principle adopted by ancient cultures toward foreigners. This is distinct from the unidirectional and compassionate act of "reception". Jacques Derrida, reflecting on the concept of hospitality rooted in ancient cultures, notes that words like the Greek *xénos* and the Latin *hospes* made no distinction between the "host" and the "guest". He claims:

Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic among others. In so far as it has to do with the ethos, that is, residence [...] the familiar place of dwelling, in as much as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others [...], ethics is hospitality; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality (2018).

For this reason, speaking of an "ethics of hospitality" would be tautological.

A poignant example of the sacred value of hospitality for ancient cultures is found in the *Old Testament* (Genesis, 19), when Lot offers his daughters to save his guests from the Sodomites. However, as philosopher Umberto Curi (2022) points out, the paradigmatic poem of hospitality is *The Odyssey*. Curi highlights several exemplary episodes, including the one in which Mentor and Telemachus, after leaving Ithaca in search of Ulysses, land on the island of Pylos. «[...] they reach the royal palace just as a feast is about to begin [...] and they are welcomed and invited to partake in the food, without ever being questioned about their origins». It is only after being welcomed unconditionally that the foreigners are asked to reveal their identity and intentions, as «[...] for at least a thousand years – from the time of Homer to the early Christian era – *xenia* was one of the fundamental institutions of ancient Greek civilization» (Curi, 2022).

This discussion of unconditional hospitality, which becomes a practice of taking care of the "foreigner", emphasises the potential of a creative openness to encountering the other, something opposed to the *mixophobic* hysteria that grips contemporary society. Furthermore, Lao Tzu's ancient teaching, invoked 2,500 years later by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, posits the notion that individuals do not merely «[...] bear needs, but also abilities» (Manzini, 2018). What happened over roughly twenty years across the so-called Calabrian ridge of solidarity and reception – encompassing the small towns of Riace, Badolato, and Caulonia Stignano – demonstrated an unusually open approach to the foreigner that was beneficial to all host communities. It led to the repopulation of historical centres by migrants

and had «[...] socio-economic and cultural effects on the social and economic fabric of marginal and disappearing communities» (Perfetti and Ronconi, 2021). It is also important to note that the Calabrian experience inspired new laws, including Law number 189 of 2022, which established the SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) «[...] that now involves 137 municipalities, providing hospitality to up to 20,000 people» (Perfetti and Ronconi, 2021).

What, then, could the Riace Model mean for us? What is its cultural, political, economic and social legacy?

Social innovation   In his book *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958), British sociologist and politician Michael Young introduced «social innovation» as a paradigm to combat social inequality. Though much has changed in the last two decades, the Riace Model still stands as a positive example of social innovation. Another historical example is the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which led to monumental legal changes, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that ruled against racial discrimination in public spaces and workplaces, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which eliminated racial discrimination in voting. Another example that should be mentioned is the Bangladeshi microcredit project for small enterprises and low income individuals developed in the 1970s by Muhammad Yunis, the founder of Grameen Bank.

It is, therefore, worth examining the theme of social innovation and its connection to social sustainability, and introducing the figure of the social actor. Melissa Moralli writes: «[...] in a framework of sustainability, the creative and reflective capacity of social actors shows that innovation can be a form of social sustainability [...]» (2022). So, who are these social actors? They are individuals, informal groups, associations, private and social enterprises, and public administrations, all of whom work together to pursue common goals (Moralli, 2022).

However, we must be cautious, as we can speak of social innovation in two ways, precisely when innovative initiatives have a positive impact that exceeds previous efforts, and if innovation creates not only positive social effects, but also environmental and economic ones. Otherwise, it would not aid sustainable development (Chahinian, 2022). This means that social innovation needs to be implemented and subjected to verification at a subsequent stage, and cannot merely remain an abstract concept.

Moving to the very different context of architectural design education, it is worth mentioning the well known work of Riccardo Dalisi. Dalisi was a unique "social actor" who, in the 1970s, turned the streets and courtyards of Naples' suburban neighbourhoods into outdoor classrooms. He created temporary "hybrid communities" of underclass children and students, using "animation" as a participatory design tool in the Rione Traiano and Ponticelli districts. If we were to assess the impact of his work in the lumpenproletarian district by focusing on its political effects over time, we could certainly argue that what Dalisi did in Ponticelli was, at least in its initial phase, an act of social innovation, which countered the devastating plans of those who, years earlier, would have wanted to demolish the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, Dalisi was unable to prevent the interventions that followed the earthquake of 1980, which proved to be both an architectural disappointment and a social failure. However, measuring social innovation solely by its effect on territories does not do justice to new aspects that, in a way, break from the past. Dalisi's novel approach to participatory design and education left a lasting mark on design culture that was championed by Giancarlo De Carlo in his journal "Spazio & Società", as well as by Alessandro Mendini with the 'Radicals' when he was Editor of "Casabella", and Andrea Branzi, the author of *La Casa Calda* (1984).

Equally notable is Dalisi's work in Rua Catalana, the street lined with copper, iron, and tin artisan workshops in the heart of Naples. Dalisi was able to revive the area by working with skilled craftsmen, many of whom were generally engaged in repetitive tasks before his arrival. The façades of Rua Catalana still display traces of this fruitful collaboration, which involved public institutions. The initiative not only acknowledged the value of the artisans' work, but also contributed to their economic wellbeing.

In *Politiche del quotidiano*, Ezio Manzini writes about "transformative" social innovation, which «[...] transforms what is already in place, inspiring changes toward sustainability» (2018). Manzini highlights seemingly irrelevant examples of transformative social innovation, such as «[...] leaving the car at home and walk or bike, or starting a carpooling initiative [...] that create a discontinuity that changes the system on a local scale [...]» (2018). These actions should not be underestimated, as over time they accumulate, generating «systemic changes on a greater scale» that ultimately affect institutions and politics. Manzini's words suggest that «transformative social innovation» encompasses two key aspects. First, the individual social actor-designer who takes charge of the process:

[...] does not only participate in the debate on public matters, but actively practices and manages what he discusses, working for himself, for the people he works with, and for society as a whole, enacting forms of participation in which the decision-making phase is directly connected to its implementation (Manzini, 2018).

Additionally, collaborative projects often yield results that would be impossible to achieve alone.

Conclusions: The limits of "cold planning"

"Cold planning" can be understood as the process of conceiving, discussing, and implementing actions aimed at social sustainability and/or social innovation, whilst excluding from the investigation all factors that cannot be quantified or measured from the investigation. These factors, which belong to the sphere of irrationality – like emotions, difficulties, or friction with contexts – are nevertheless often crucial aspects of the decision-making process. In the descriptions of social innovation projects, it seems that everything runs smoothly, without jolts or shocks, and that their implementation follows a constant linear progression. Therefore, if you want to get an idea of what social innovation means, with all the burden of human passions and the friction with an unfavourable context that "social actors" must face to support their goals, you should (re)watch one of Ken Loach's films, *The Old Oak*, from 2023. The friendship born between a young Syrian refugee girl and a pub manager – despite the failure of their social innovation project – breaches the community in a small town in the North-East of England, and is embodied in a shared 'value' through a project that is even wider and more unifying than first imagined. A movement of social inwardness that the word resilience cannot fully capture.

Thus, the effort required of specialists is to move beyond the confines of "cold" planning. Even when executed with the best of intentions, such planning becomes rigid, focused on concepts, carefully avoiding the slippery nature of irrationality, an inherent aspect of human existence. The commitment required of specialists is to overcome the limitations of a "cold" design that, even with the best intentions, closes itself off from concepts that carefully avoid the slippery entanglement in the sphere of the irrational, an unavoidable variable of human life. A cultural commitment to model a different approach is, therefore, required. This approach must be applicable not only in the phase of discussion and the implementation of a social innovation project, when the designers are social actors, but also in training tasks, when they are educators. We must acknowledge that social innovation and social sustainability cannot be subservient to the hegemony of technique, as their intrinsic nature is intricately intertwined with the liquid plane of interaction between individuals and communities. The genesis of a social innovation project can be traced back to a profound sense of responsibility, a concept that is encapsulated in Adriano Olivetti's work as an enlightened entrepreneur who encompassed and harmonised the aesthetic, political and economic dimensions.

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