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WALKSCAPES

Urban Regeneration through Education

The Dossier

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Index:

1. Walkscapes and the Dossier
2. The Survey on Urban Regeneration
3. Walkscapes as a methodology
4. Parma seen from the River - Policy Recommendations

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Walkscapes and the *Dossier*

“Walkscapes - Urban Regeneration through Education” is a project under the Erasmus + Small Scale Partnership Cooperation program. At its core, it focused on developing non-formal education practices through the exchange of experiences between two non-profit organizations: "Laboratorio Urbano di Prossimità - APS" (LUP) in Italy and Vsl "eMundus" in Lithuania.

The project lasted two years and aimed to experiment with educational activities in the field of urban regeneration through urban exploration, inspired by the experience of the Roman collective Stalker and the work of its founder Francesco Careri, as outlined in his book *Walkscapes - Walking as an Aesthetic Practice*.

Between 2022 and 2024, the project took the form of various urban exploration workshops held in Parma and Kaunas, as well as practice exchange meetings between the two implementing associations. Among the most significant outcomes of the project, in addition to the on-site activities, were educational and dissemination materials, including a collective academic publication featuring contributions on Walkscapes and the experience of LUP in Parma.

This Dossier is the final output of the project and encapsulates a synthesis of its most important aspects:

- The process of reaching out to our community of participants and the emphasis put on mutual learning;
- The commitment to developing a methodology that combines a prescriptive vision of urban issues with a non-formal educational approach;
- The thematic focus and work carried out to gather ideas, visions, and proposals for the location chosen for the exploration activity.

On this last point, it is essential to highlight that the Parma branch of the project, which will be the focus of this publication, immediately emphasized the need for an in-depth thematic focus at the heart of the activity organization. This was to ensure that the project would hold value for the city, aiming to reach conclusions that would contribute to a collective reflection at the city level, rather than risking to result in a self-referential effort.

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In this regard, LUP staff has undertaken a reflection on the most pressing themes that Parma offers from an urban planning perspective. We aimed to identify matters that could be explored and rediscovered through an exploration activity inspired by the flâneuristic principle of drifting, while also representing an ambivalent, contested space that is both defined and indefinable. The choice fell on the river, the *Torrente Parma*.

For a comprehensive analysis concerning literature, the analysis conducted by LUP on the topic, as well as the thematic work carried out and the results of the Workshop, the point of reference is the Handbook of the project “Walkscapes - Urban Regeneration through Education”, published by Monte Università Parma Editore. In particular the article written by the association’s secretary, architect Gabriele Nicoli.

In this Dossier the focus will be mainly on the methodological framework of the project and on its most pragmatic conclusions. In the following pages, we will discuss:

- The results of the survey on the knowledge and predispositions of the participants regarding urban regeneration in the broader sense, collected prior to the implementation of the project.
- A summary of the methodology used to carry out urban exploration activities.
- Our Policy Recommendations, derived from the synthesis of the work carried out over these two years and the extensive participation, especially of the groups of youth targeted by the project, that characterized the various activities of the project.

Two years of study, activities, and participation focused on the *Torrente Parma* enable us to propose some ideas for at least its narrative repositioning and, hopefully, to bring our river to the center of a discussion that involves citizens, civil society, citizen representatives, and administrators in a more open, transparent, and proactive way.

The Survey on Urban Regeneration

The first phase of the project implementation involved extensive information gathering. This was done informally through dialogues with other entities based in Parma who focus their work on environmental protection, urban regeneration, as well as various citizens directly affected by the management of the Torrente area, and policy makers.

Additionally, LUP collected information formally producing a survey aimed at investigating the predispositions of the workshop participants regarding urban regeneration.

The survey aimed to achieve three objectives:

1. Provide an overview of participants' perceptions regarding their knowledge of urban regeneration;
2. Gauge the perceived level of citizen involvement in decision-making and participation in local urban regeneration actions;
3. Collect suggestions on how the administration and other local institutions, such as schools and universities, should act to increase citizen involvement and awareness of urban regeneration activities.

Here is a brief summary of the most relevant results:

1. What is Urban Regeneration?

The first open-ended question of the questionnaire was: "What do you think are the objectives that urban regeneration should achieve?"

Most responses were quite consistent in indicating that the conscious use of public space to meet the general needs of the citizenry is the primary goal. Several answers referred to strengthening the sense of community identity through the creation of accessible spaces dedicated to social interaction.

One response particularly encapsulates the perception of a certain stratification of objectives. We quote:

- 1. Regenerate degraded or undervalued areas or neighborhoods;*
- 2. Raise awareness of the culture inherent in certain places;*
- 3. Provide opportunities for social redemption for those at risk of exclusion.*

2. Give creativity a chance!

The vast majority of participants expressed concerns regarding the efforts made by the municipal administration to make the decision-making process regarding urban planning and management of public spaces participatory.

Despite being mandated by bureaucratic regulations, the organization of opportunities for the direct engagement of citizens in the discussion of municipal urban plans is seen as token gestures. These engagements often give the impression that the administration merely reiterates decisions already made, giving a veneer of democratic process to strictly bureaucratic and technical decisions. This perception may stem from various reasons but ultimately erects barriers to active citizen participation.

Some solutions that were proposed to address this challenge include organizing public contests for ideas and projects, involving groups of citizens from diverse backgrounds through direct invitations to organize focus groups, and more straightforwardly promoting public surveys by the municipality.

The greatest resource for a city lies in the energy and ideas of its citizens—let's harness them!

3. Give opportunities to the youth.

While it may sound like an electoral campaign cliché, the survey results highlight one of the major challenges in our city: the active involvement of the population under the age of 30. Specifically, the most sensitive areas for intervention include:

- The serious lack of urban regeneration and sustainability topics integrated into the school curriculum.
- Insufficient public spaces dedicated to young people that are easily accessible to them.
- Respondents note that the voices of young people do not seem adequately considered in decisions concerning changes to public spaces in the city.

In response to these findings, alongside the need for more widespread information from local institutions on these issues, institutions must be more vocal and specific about their commitment to urban sustainability. One respondent suggested involving local associations as intermediaries between schools and programs aimed at educating and listening to young people about the future of the city.

4. The issue lies in priorities.

A final noteworthy finding is the lack of agreement among respondents regarding the priorities that urban regeneration should address. When presented with various thematic areas to focus on for potential urban regeneration interventions — Social Interaction, Sports & Wellness, Green Spaces, Art and Creativity — respondents were almost evenly divided across the proposed domains.

This result suggests a lack of common consensus in the perception of the city's needs among the respondents. While everyone acknowledges the growing need for urban regeneration initiatives in the city, there is no common denominator regarding the envisioned uses of "regenerated" public spaces.

Walkscapes as a Methodology

One of the main objectives of the project was to codify an intervention method that could serve both as an activity within an educational program and as an urban regeneration action in itself. What we have learned is that this type of intervention is not only possible but also recommended to accelerate the development of analytical thinking on one hand and prescriptive action on the other among participants.

However, a noticeable limitation of this approach is the need for a rather extended period of time, longer than what is typically allocated for educational units, to ensure that this activity bears fruit. It is crucial to understand not only that each exploration activity needs to extend beyond the participants' comfort zones but also that this approach risks failure if it does not allow for subsequent visits to the spaces at the center of the analysis.

In our discussions with Professor Francesco Careri, the originator of the concept of Walkscapes, we were repeatedly advised on the necessity of fully experiencing the river space, spending days and nights there to attempt to absorb the essence of a place that is challenging to encapsulate, as should be the focus of research done through Walkscapes.

Walkscape Torrente Parma - The 2022 Workshop

Far from being able to implement the Professor's advice within the framework of this project, the first workshop organized to experiment with Walkscapes took place in June 2022 and lasted five days. During this time, we visited various areas along the river and aimed to provide insights into different themes: historical/urbanistic, architectural/political, ecological/environmental, and artistic.

The thematic approach, developed collectively, aimed not only to generate research questions but also to encourage exploration rather than seeking definitive answers. We gained insight into these questions through feedback from participants based on the materials provided at the beginning of the workshop: maps, note-taking tools, and work postcards. Some participants' final work manifested as architectural projects or landscape photography projects.

Therefore, the methodological approach of the first workshop focused on enriching each participant's cultural knowledge. Through urban exploration activities and theoretical and practical work, participants absorbed various inputs that they then had the opportunity to incorporate into personal projects.

Maretto Dreamin' - The 2023 Workshop

The second workshop, on the other hand, was conceived and realized starting from the imagination of the participants of the first workshop who co-organized activities with LUP. It took the hybrid form of an artistic installation carried out in parallel with an activity of urban exploration. In this iteration, the flâneur spirit of Walkscape emerged more prominently thanks to the initiation of the search for a non-existent place.

The search for "Maretto," a legendary beach on the banks of the Parma River remembered as a summer leisure spot by young people from Parma in the 1960s and 1970s, was conducted both physically by a group engaged in urban exploration and metaphorically through the creation of a photographic set that captured the aesthetic of 1960s Romagna vacation tourism, juxtaposed within the less picturesque context of the polluted riverbed around Ponte Nord.

Through the creation of this contrast between the environmental situation of that place and the recreated aesthetic with actors and photographers, the workshop aimed to denounce the mandatory abandonment of the relationship with the river by the latest generations of Parma citizens due to ecological degradation.

Parma seen from the River - Policy Recommendations

1. Democratic and participatory processes

The attention that the project *Walkscapes: Urban Regeneration through Education* has brought to the management of the Parma River demonstrates that, faced with a complex urban planning issue, a young community of participants provided with theoretical and practical tools has managed to create an experience with significant transformative impact.

The reflections, projects, and ideas that emerged during the two workshops are a valuable asset that illustrates the need to replicate such opportunities in the city of Parma and beyond. Addressing complex issues directly with citizens, particularly representing age groups with less space in decision-making processes, offers numerous inherent merits including the creation of new networks, activation of social dynamics aimed at improving contextual circumstances, and circulation of new ideas.

Experiencing the river so intensely during the workshop days not only changed the perspective of the participants and all those who engaged with the project, but importantly created a sense of ownership between people and this space. Direct participation in reflecting on the use and renewal of public spaces facilitates taking responsibility for those spaces, initially in an ideal sense and then practically. These processes need to be conceived, structured, and implemented to ensure that urban regeneration efforts are truly successful. Without active citizen inclusion, the efforts of any administration will always result inadequate.

2. Informality and Institutionalization

One of the most pressing themes addressed during the workshops was undoubtedly the need to imagine the potential role of regulation in accessing, using, and managing the spaces along the Parma River, particularly in the section that runs through the city center. During our explorations, it became evident that on the one hand, there is widespread encroachment where large portions of the riverbed are occupied without legal authority by private individuals for personal enjoyment, while on the other hand, there is a complete absence of official avenues for public enjoyment of these spaces. Some parts of the river are

only accessible by overcoming obstacles such as fences and gates whose presence does not seem justified.

Throughout the project, the importance of informality in the use and enjoyment of public spaces was frequently advocated as a crucial freedom to prevent public space use from being perceived as a concession rather than a fundamental right granted by the public domain. The institutionalization of public space use inevitably brings with it a series of regulations and prescriptions that by definition limit its usage. Furthermore, the theme of ecological conservation of a space contrasts with potential demands for anthropization and the provision of functional structures and guided institutional pathways.

During the workshop discussions, no consensus was reached on these issues, and it would be misleading to overly generalize the role and function of the Parma River independent of specific contexts. However, a more focused reflection on this dichotomy is essential to find solutions for better river management.

3. *Proactive Safeguard*

During our explorations, it became clear that there are increasingly numerous commendable initiatives by informal groups of citizens, especially young people, and sometimes even formal associations and networks of associations dedicated to the environmental protection of the riverbed. These initiatives focus on activities such as cleaning up and collecting waste. While this phenomenon is entirely positive, it also highlights the shortcomings of the authorities responsible for the environmental protection of the river within the city.

As mentioned, formalizing the river spaces can have positive aspects, such as easier management and protection of the riverbed areas, which naturally cannot escape human impact and are therefore most used and abused by people. These areas are primarily concentrated in the historic center of the city, and their widespread use makes the discussion about facilitating or restricting their use somewhat redundant in this regard. This place is becoming increasingly popular and thus needs protection from abuse.

In this regard, the municipality and agencies responsible for managing the riverbed, particularly AIPO, cannot claim to be uninvolved. However, as suggested earlier, taking

responsibility should not solely rest on public administration but involve all citizens. This begins with creating a sense of ownership among people toward this space.

4. Paths and integrated system with the city

In essence, what we are conveying through this paper is the message that the river must begin to be considered as an integrated system within the city. It should be seen as a reality rather than just a place, one that is involved in participatory processes of reflection and creativity. This is crucial for it to then become the focus of comprehensive management and protection shared among various entities and the community.

Within this integrated system, there should be areas that can be utilized for both recreational purposes and areas where absolute protection and cessation of human impact are paramount considerations. Developing cycling and pedestrian paths, along with equipped and accessible areas, not only benefits the local community but also tourism. This approach could stimulate renewed interest in redefining the role of the river in the city in the short term. This could be particularly true for river areas outside the city center, where the vast natural resources of the river can be harnessed for non-congested use and the enhancement of green spaces in peripheral areas of the city.

A new narrative is necessary to recount the history of this city's relationship with its river, and Walkscapes has offered this narrative from various perspectives. By placing young people at the forefront of this process and delivering a fresh and vibrant aesthetic to the Parma River, Walkscapes has contributed significantly to reshaping perceptions and potentials surrounding this vital urban resource.