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Situated knowledges in action. The Nolo *Situated Vocabulary*

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Abstract

Sometimes the context in which we design urges us to question and rethink the work we do from a slightly different perspective. When working in Participatory Design (PD) processes, we do not necessarily question the hermeneutic paradigm we use nor focus on the idea of knowledge we engage with. This is certainly the case of this project, a neighbourhood *Situated Vocabulary* where the context literally urged us to rethink our approach to PD with the aim of mitigating social polarisations by embracing the perspective of marginalized (human and more-than-human) actors. To do so, we are compelled to address the epistemological issue with an idea of "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988) able to embrace relationality and go beyond the dichotomies subject-object, man-nature. The following experimental paper is a reflection on this ongoing process: exploring how to engage with a situated idea of knowledge in a PD design project on a neighbourhood scale.

Keywords: Participatory Design, Design for Social Innovation, Situated Knowledge, Radical Interdependence

1 Ontologizing the PD process: the Nolo case

1.1 Participatory Design to uncover and engage *situated knowledges*

Participatory Design (PD) has significantly widened the scope of Design in developing new forms of social engagement in the public sphere. The approach has effectively succeeded in triggering inclusive projects and dialogues by entering in those contexts - such as neighbourhoods - rich in pluralities (Manzini, 2015) where different social players have to co-design effective solutions for the whole community but at the same time maintain - and let emerge - the value of individual points of view. This whole process aims at generating a discourse - thus a cultural artefact -

SERVDES 2023

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Livework

which is very specific to a given context as it is developed by that specific community. To design there - though aiming at an urban bottom-up renewal - means in first instance to touch upon (shared or contested) meanings for the community, and possibly help the citizens to identify them, question them and re-assess them from multiple perspectives. It is a process of dis-articulation and re-articulation (Mouffe, 2013) of different points of view to identify the "common interests" (Arendt, 1958; Tassinari & Staszowski, 2020) of the community and empower citizens through action by means of the discourses put in place with the community (Huybrechts et al., 2018). However, these points of view are expressions of assorted communities made up of diverse bodies, ontologies, and world-making projects. When dealing with these rich communities, we - as designers - need to step outside of Cartesian dichotomies of bodies and mind, subject and object, nature and artificial (Coccia, 2021; Latour, 2018) engaging with many diverse (pluriversal) epistemologies.

In this particular case, we looked into Donna Haraway's work on *situated knowledge* (Haraway, 1988) as there she provides an epistemological framework to counter dominations and powers at play, to engage with diverse world-making projects, or "worldings" (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018) but, most of all, to allow the vulnerability and the open-endedness. In short, we *ontologised* our PD process (Huybrechts et al., 2022b, 2022a), considering the interdependencies deeply connecting humans and their "worldings" to one another and to those of other agents such as plants, animals, mushrooms, bacteria and so forth. As Haraway teaches us, we should not be afraid of vulnerability but rather engage with it and dare to explore its unexpected potentials (Haraway, 1988). Within the project we engaged with a specific situated form of knowledge also to counter the temptation of "positioning" ourselves as designers in the PD process, and to embrace our own vulnerability as designers. To re-think our PD projects from this epistemological framework, might help us to de-construct our idea that our projects necessarily need to succeed, and that this success can be possibly quantified, that our knowledge necessarily needs to be investigated in a scientific mindset, and quantified, scaled and reproduced. This "partiality" (Haraway, 1988) is supporting us in de-constructing our "positioning" as designers, engaging with our "partiality" and "vulnerability" - countering thus our idea of "objectivity" (ibidem) the process - and from this vulnerability and partiality to enabling other "partial", "vulnerable" points of view to be heard and recognised. *Situated knowledge* is in our opinion an epistemic paradigm which might help us to better recognise relationality (Escobar, 2018) and the frailty and open-endedness it entangles, and dares to stand from within this uncomfortable open, undefined space of the inbetween (Arendt, 1958; Tassinari & Staszowski, 2020). This is particularly compelling if we think PD is about communities, not individuals and their individual standpoints.

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We often debate that PD practices are often less participatory than they might seem, that they often fail to go beyond the usual suspects (Reyes-García et al., 2012). That is why we had to enable the participation of diverse publics engaging with different bodies, ontologies and "worldings" (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018). In our case study, we explored how to concretely address those different bodies, ontologies and wordings in the peculiar, unique situatedness of the context in which we were called to act. To be really (ontologically) inclusive and respectful of all differences of points of view, we need here to dare to be partial, engaging with the "vantage points of the subjugated" (Haraway, 1988), the "silent and silenced" (Huybrechts et al., 2022a) and "establishing the ability to see from the peripheries and the depths" (Haraway, 1988). In contexts such as the one here presented - where many human and more-thanhuman agents are under social and economic pressure and therefore tend to be marginalised - a situated form of knowledge might help to both acknowledge and empower those voices and their entanglements as well to enable power dynamics to be disarticulated and questioned. And yet, this operation is not unproblematic. As also suggested by Haraway (1988), "how to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language".

In the next sections, we will explore how we took Haraway's invitation to "see from below" by exploring through PD the potential of our "skills with languages", maintaining the "heteroglossia" (Haraway, 1988) of the different voices of a situated context - without forcing them into a "common language" (ibidem) - to generate together a situated, agonistic (Mouffe, 2013), (ontologically) inclusive discourse, able to reach beyond the current "creative communities" (Meroni, 2007) already at work.

1.2 The context and the platform: Nolo and The *Situated Vocabulary*

The project presented in the paper is framed within an ongoing experimentation of the Polimi DESIS Lab (the research lab of the Politecnico di Milano University the authors belong to) within the city of Milan and developed in the urban living lab of Off Campus Nolo, hosted in the local municipal market of Viale Monza, 54. Off Campus Nolo is part of a wider initiative from the Politecnico di Milano to make its presence in the city more tangible, providing the possibility for researchers and scholars to be more responsible, attentive to social challenges and close to the territory and its community.

In the case of Nolo, a cultural discourse was already in place, also thanks to online platforms such as the Facebook group "Nolo Social District" - comprising more than

12.000 members - that has poured a series of social cohesion and innovation initiatives both online and offline, providing the informal dialogues in the neighbourhood street breakfasts where citizens meet, discuss, and ultimately collaborate to create new initiatives (Fassi & Manzini, 2021). However, this form of

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social engagement and productivity is not always able to reach all the different actors - or better *agents* (Latour, 2017) - who are part of the neighbourhood and too often some (human) voices - mainly for linguistic and socio-cultural reasons - are still not listened to.

One of the research projects launched with the opening of Off Campus Nolo (and still ongoing) is the Nolo *Situated Vocabulary*, a neighbourhood vocabulary that - since its first steps - helped the community of Nolo to map the area with its spatial and social features by embracing its wide network of "situated stakeholders" (such as citizens, shopkeepers, neighbourhood associations as well as local administrators and the Municipality) (Fassi & Vergani, 2022). With "situated" - a term borrowed from Haraway (1988) - we refer to the plethora of public and private proactive actors (or agents), each with a unique and specific perspective. The founding idea of the project is that the Vocabulary starts as a physical prompt and then becomes an "agonistic space" (Mouffe, 2007) - a political space in which to foster discourses and actions in contested but respectful way - , and a "collaborative platform" (Huybrechts et al., 2022) in which to dis-articulate and re-articulate points of view, illuminating unexpected similarities and revealing possible divergences, to develop a cultural discourse on the neighbourhood developed by the same neighbourhood. The Vocabulary is mainly composed by different voices from the Nolo community and specific attention is given to those marginalised fringes (humans as well as morethan-humans) such as the diverse communities of immigrants populating the neighbourhood (and the diverse languages they use) as well as elderly, kids, teenagers, and citizens with physical and cognitive impairment. By bringing together all these voices, we intend to identify the "radical interdependence" (Escobar, 2018, 2019) deeply connecting them: in other words, how all neighbourhood agents interdepend from one another. When those interdependencies are uncovered, than some neighbourhood polarisations might also be re-framed (Huybrechts et al., 2018), new commons might be identified (Custers et al., 2020; Seravalli et al., 2015), and new, more transversal kinds of collaborations might arise.

2 Objectives

As the context of Nolo is rather complex and diverse, and our main aim there is to address diverse (even ontologically speaking) publics, we necessarily need there to be cautious about how to include those different publics in these conversations, how to represent their voices when they would be reluctant to participate (or could not, as in the case of more-than-human agents), but also how to represent the entanglements of their "common interests" (Arendt, 1958) - or "*common matters of care*", to re-frame Arendt in Puig de La Bellacasa's perspective (2017) -, what is

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really "in-between" (Arendt, 1958) the diverse agents. Based on the current literature exploring the importance of re-framing design practices from an "ontological" (Willis, 2006) perspective and better consider human/more-than-human entanglements (Akama & Yee, 2019; Forlano, 2016, 2017; White, 2019), we started to look into how to bring more-than-human voices into neighbourhood conversations, but also the voice of unrepresented, marginalized communities, helping all actors to identify their subtle entanglements, articulate (and eventually, dis-articulate/re-articulate) (Mouffe, 2013) their own points of view, and identifying both criticality as well as possible common interests which might urge them to collective, transformative actions. To really address inclusion in the design process, we needed to "ontologise" our PD process by envisioning "collaborative platforms" (Huybrechts et al., 2022a) - the *Vocabulary* - from which to really engage with the complexity of those specific entanglements present in the neighbourhood.

The *Vocabulary* aims at mapping those "radical interdependencies" (Escobar, 2018), to question where there is "need for care" (de la Bellacasa, 2017), and to re-assess and weave back those interdependencies which might have been offended and brutalised by human, often anthropocentric behaviours (Latour, 2018). Looking into the nature of those interdependencies, engaging with relationality, and asking to go beyond dichotomous thinking, we have been compelled to look for an epistemological paradigm from which to design our *Vocabulary* enabling to respect the open-endedness, dynamics, and ineffability of those relationships. This means that both our collaborative *platform* (the *Vocabulary*), the co-design tools developed to collect the voices as well as the ontological mapping, needed to reflect this vulnerability and partiality. Moreover, these objectives concretely translate in a process of envisioning common matters of concern and new courses of transformative actions in the shape of projects (spatial solutions as well services), activities, and events to be developed in the neighbourhood.

3 Designing the Situated Vocabulary

3.1 Playing with language

To make our PD process more ontological, we decided to play with language and its ability to connect, bringing actors into dialogue and articulating neighbourhood keywords. Each neighbourhood has another vocabulary, which has to do with the different languages inhabiting the place, the different "ghosts" (Tsing et al., 2017) populating it, the diverse memories and stories, hopes and visions that move citizens in a specific context. When social innovation takes place on a neighbourhood level, not only the latter tend to become more resilient, sustainable, collaborative and vivid (Manzini, 2015) but something else also happens there: there is a culture in the

SERVDES
2023

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DAD | PUC-Rio Pontifícia Universidade Católica Do Rio De Janeiro
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street that changes, a social intelligence that moves, shifts, and might lead to more transformations. In Nolo, this was already rather evident. In our PD work, we started from this collective intelligence we encountered when we asked some active citizens - in particular, the ones working for Radio Nolo (the neighbourhood web radio) - to help us identify some of the words more used in the neighbourhood to describe the ongoing bottom-up urban transformation/regeneration, but also some of the more debated ones tending to polarize citizens. Following a round of diverse co-design sessions [fig. 1] spread in a couple of months – where citizens were called to grasp the main topics (as keywords) experienced in the neighbourhood - we arrived to identify 9 words - *Public space, Degradation, Common good, Sense of belonging, Memory, Change, Fun, Commitment and Nolo* - for our *Situated Vocabulary*.

Figure 1. The first co-design session with citizens to identify the keywords (Photo by the authors)

Using the semantics of a vocabulary, we started exploring the 9 words and collecting different interpretations according to diverse points of view. Indeed, as previously said, the intention here is not to generate a neighbourhood "common language" (Haraway, 1988) but rather keep its "heteroglossia" (Ibidem), without forcing different point of view towards a convergence but enabling the fruition of the differences. People collaborating might discover to be moved by very diverse reasons, as well as people apparently distant might identify unexpected convergences. Common sense might be questioned, and criticalities might come to the surface. Inspired by Haraway's epistemological framework, we then started looking into ways to generate a neighbourhood vocabulary not closing meanings, but rather explicitly opening them

SERVDES 2023

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DAD | PUC-Rio Pontifícia Universidade Católica Do Rio De Janeiro
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and forming with its language an agonistic space for encounters of (ontologically) diverse actors. If we look closely at the making process [fig. 2], every couple of months a word chosen by the citizens is addressed as a red thread to provoke new thinking about what could happen in the neighbourhood related to that specific notion. During this period, Off Campus Nolo hosts co-design sessions in its (physical and digital) space with passers-by and specific focus groups, and showcases the diverse ideas emerging from these encounters, the conversations, and the social media activities. The diverse voices that flow into the vocabulary are collected on the one hand through workshops, co-design sessions and specific neighbourhood events, on the other through individual interviews (online and offline) with inhabitants, activists, but also experts from several disciplines. As it is difficult to have very specific voices coming from a single neighbourhood, sometimes we turned to external experts such as linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, writers, artists, as well as environmental activists and practitioners, botanists, zoologists, geologists, and microbiologists who bring peculiar points of view such as those of the more-thanhumans. Plants and animals joined the process thanks to scientists playing the role of "representatives" (Latour, 2018), as they provided data and insights from the perspective of the more-than-humans. A specific workshop for the word *Common Good* (as well as a currently ongoing project in a small park of the neighbourhood prompted by the word *Degradation*) focused on vegetal beings and aimed at understanding the human/more-than-human entanglements (Vergani et al., 2022).

Figure 2. The making process of the Situated Vocabulary (Diagram by the authors)

In this way, the market hosting Off Campus Nolo becomes a physical "agorà" (Huybrechts et al., 2018) in which reflections on the words can be shared, conversations can take place, and new courses of actions can be envisioned. From this perspective, the vocabulary has many versions as it grows through time and can be spread in the neighbourhood in different forms.

3.2 The *Vocabulary* and its formats

As we framed our project as a situated form of knowledge, we decided to keep the *Vocabulary* format open. At the beginning, the *Vocabulary* was a physical artefact -

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mainly a textual *platform* (a booklet) - that traced all the different voices gathered from the neighbourhood (but not only) according to the word chosen [fig. 3].
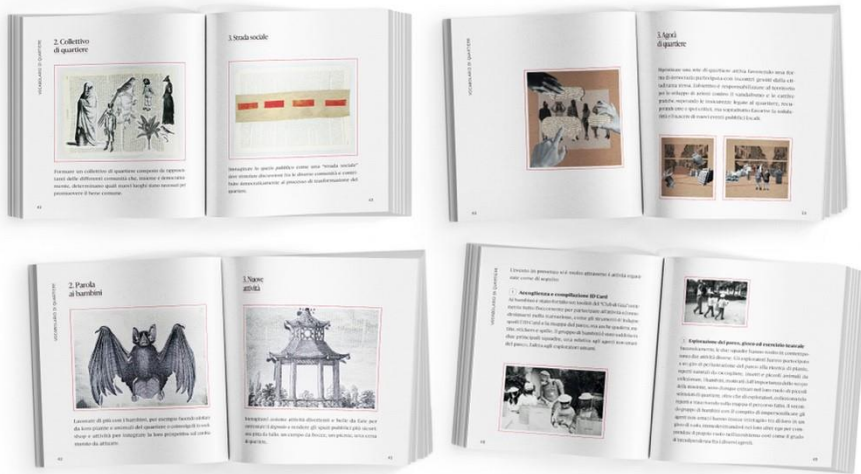

Figure 3. The first four vocabularies with a focus on workshops and scenarios (Photo by the authors)

As work with the community progressed, it was constantly enhanced using both physical props (such as cards, posters, collages and others) and digital tools (those that already existed through neighbourhood social media) supporting tailor-made participatory co-design activities (workshops) that helped us even more in going into detail on some issues relating to specific groups of the Nolo community [fig. 4]. Data coming from interviews and workshops were then clustered in several scenarios that helped us in envisioning future *transformative actions*. These *transformative actions* are intended as spatial solutions (such as a new public space in an unused external portion of the market or a community process of care for a degraded small park) as well services (such as SOSpesa, an initiative to provide fresh food to help 20 families in need each week), recreational events and activities to be developed with the "situated stakeholders". Another way for us to keep the *Vocabulary* format open was to imagine it as a radio podcast ("In Poche Parole" - literally, "In few words"). The

idea was given to us by the collaboration with Radio Nolo, whose working station is located in the spaces of Off Campus Nolo. In the podcast, the *Vocabulary* is enacted, allowing a live confrontation - where both words and bodies are involved - between the diverse points of view, articulating a reflection and engaging the citizens to continue the conversation on the social media platforms. This use of the language in its oral way helped us reach those marginalised voices not embraced at that time in a broader social change. To better address other neighbourhood "worldings", we

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interviewed several anthropologists entangling the point of view of different world making projects and tried to frame them in the *Vocabulary*. In this operation of translation, we followed Haraway's feministic take on the latter, problematizing the fact that - as previously mentioned - we as designers often do not "position" ourselves critically (Haraway, 1988). Translation to us is an act of bringing into the design space the visions of many, engaging with a "politics of translation"

(Huybrechts et al., 2022b; Spivak, 2021) able to de-construct our role as translators, and keep the translation space open, *"interpretive critical, and partial"* (Huybrechts et al., 2022b). With the podcast we tried to engage in such *"conversations"* (Huybrechts et al., 2022b) entangling this feminist understanding of translation, open to fallibility and expressly vulnerable and partial in its situatedness. It is in this epistemic space that we translated unrepresented and marginalised voices and wordings in an imperfect and vulnerable way.

Figure 4. Co-design activity for the word "Public Space" with passers-by at the market (Photo by the authors)

4 Results

Designing tailor-made participatory activities has opened us to an even broader concept of "situated stakeholders" by integrating different cultural realities of the neighbourhood, a wide range of shopkeepers and local associations, but also children and parents of other ethnic backgrounds which are often difficult to reach due to language barriers. The *Vocabulary* in its diverse forms is serving us as a base

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to map these *radical interdependencies* in the neighbourhood (Huybrechts et al., 2022b) - countering mapping's tendency to avoid open-endedness (Parker, 2006) - and from them to envision small scenarios of change to enable citizens to action. This operation of envisioning done so far within the framework of the first 4 words of the *Vocabulary* (*Public Space*, *Degradation*, *Common Good* and *Sense of Belonging*) and their workshops [fig. 5] - shared both on social media and at the ephemeral exhibitions in the market living lab - helped us to identify specific polarising "spatial nodes" (Fassi & Vergani, 2022) in the neighbourhood - public spaces with different levels of criticality - that have to be redesigned.

WORKSHOPS			
WORDS	👥 FOCUS GROUP	✎ TOOLS	📍 PLACE
1 PUBLIC SPACE	+30 passers-by (regulars of the Market, citizens, students, etc.)	Nolo maps, postcards, case studies, red flags	Municipal Market
2 DEGRADATION	12 immigrants and people from other cultural backgrounds	Nolo maps, postcards, Virtual platform (Miro board, Zoom and others)	Online (on Zoom platform)
3 COMMON GOOD	20 children from the neighbourhood	Park map, binoculars, messages in a bottle, disguises and masks, diplomas	"Trotter" Park
4 SENSE OF BELONGING	Elderly people and teenagers from the neighbourhood	Nolo map, time line, postcards, action-role cards	"Lido Bar"

Figure 5. The four workshops already launched for the first four words (Diagram by the authors)

This is the case for instance of those spaces that suffered from the "overbuilding" process that took place in the last 50 years, that has deprived the neighbourhood of trees but also of a green corridor for insects and small animals. This process is now questioned, and many tactical urbanism initiatives (Fassi & Manzini, 2021) are currently happening where our colleagues from Polimi DESIS Lab together with the "situated stakeholders" (Fassi & Vergani, 2022) are currently working to prototype depaving of public space and introduction of new common (green) space.

What we have been realising in this first two years, is that to work within the epistemic paradigm of situatedness to "ontologise" (Huybrechts et al., 2022a) our PD process is currently helping us to better engage with the local community and address its complexity, better comprising matters of exclusion and countering easy polarisations, between members of the community but also between social and environmental issues. To sum up, we are experiencing that it is considerably helping

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us to involve (ontologically) diverse publics. We are aware that issues of power and of perspectives are still into play and that needs to be further problematised, particularly when it comes to the point of translating/bringing in some of those voices in the PD process. Nevertheless, the fact of engaging with this epistemic paradigm is helping us to look at ourselves as "translators" from a slightly critical perspective and acknowledge the frailty and partiality of our work. This is slightly helping us to reassess our role as designers in the PD process, and better engage with its fallibility.

5 Conclusions

As the project is still ongoing, it is particularly difficult to evaluate it. And yet, the fact of having embraced a situated paradigm of knowledge, suggests us that even when we will have more elements for evaluating it in the next years, we will still perhaps have to resist the temptation of evaluating it "scientifically", as it moves from an epistemic paradigm resisting scientific evaluations. We need to simply engage with its frailty and potential open-endedness now, in the same way as we will have to engage with it in the future.

Furthermore, the case study is currently validating our research hypothesis that to address language in a situated context might be a good move for enabling the different actors to generate a sense of community in the respect of its diverse "worldings". If it is true was Spivak says - that "(...) making sense of ourselves is what produces identity" (2021) - then with this experimentation we are experiencing that to perform a situated vocabulary might help the difficult task of a neighbourhood identify-creation: an identity not artificially created (as it is unfortunately often the case), yet to be thought from within a "situated" thinking engaging with the irreducibility of differences, the ineffability and fundamental heteroglossia of language, the polymorphism of reality and the multiple "worldings" which compose our contemporary perception of the "world of many worlds" (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018) in which we live and to which we collaboratively give form to.

What we are currently experiencing is that we needed to stay in the situation, understand and engage with the context, learn from it, without having the ambition to extrapolate from it some knowledge we could just reproduce in another context or be scaled up on a macro level (such as the level of the city). A situated knowledge resists being scaled up or being reproduced in other contexts. To consider PD experimentations as a form of situated knowledge might help us to recognize even more that PD processes necessarily need to be "other" and engage with the complexity of other contexts, resisting the tendency to develop tools or platforms to

SERVDES 2023

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DAD | PUC-Rio Pontifícia Universidade Católica Do Rio De Janeiro
Livework

be reproduced in other contexts or scaled up. We need to respect the uniqueness of each context we approach. Also, it can help us to counter the risk of using scientific, rigid parameters to evaluate our PD projects. We need to engage with other thinkings - also beyond this epistemological paradigm - and explore other "worldings" that might help us to re-think PD and our role as designers.

To sum up - based on the current experience with this case study - we envision a potential for engaging with a situated knowledge framework when working to make PD processes more ontological. This is yet for us just the beginning of this journey, to be continued in other contexts, with other agents, entangling with other wordings and other politics of translation.

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