The technician, the activist, the researcher and the teacher.
Towards a transvaluation operating system.

VERENA LENNA
PhD candidate in Urbanism
Scuola di Dottorato, IUAV Venice
OSA-RUA, KU Leuven
verenalenna@hotmail.com, Verena.Lenna@asro.kuleuven.be

Abstract
In the current regime of precarity a variety of urban practices are being experimented, triggered by the inefficiencies of the welfare state, at the same time providing the stage for political expression and the elaboration of new values and forms of living. Urbanists and architects are increasingly involved in this kind of practices which question their role in relation to politically and technically aware, proactive communities. Very often they simultaneously work within academia as researchers or as teachers. I argue the intersection between practice and the academic realm is very fruitful not only in terms of empowerment of the urban experiments in course, but also as an essential premise for the processes of knowledge elaboration and ultimately for the institutional critique. Aim of the paper is to envision new research frameworks enabling the dialectical continuity of the world-making - world-thinking processes.

Keywords: transvaluation, urbanism, research, engagement, institutional critique

Introduction
The paper will be articulated in three parts. In the first part I will shortly outline the set of conditions characterizing the current processes of urbanization, relevant to the reflection here articulated as they imply a variety of urgencies and processes which in their turn question the role of urbanism as a discipline, its tools and methodologies. Frameworks of research and/or action, operating in between academia and practice are thus introduced as occasions for the reciprocal empowerment of the discipline on the one hand and of the ecological experiments unfolding in the contemporary city on the other hand. This becomes particularly important when these experiments address issues of socio spatial justice, thus requiring an urgent update of the discipline for an improved adherence with reality and an amplification of the actions. This proposal has been triggered and conceived because of the specific triangulation of my position¹.

¹ This paper will be written in the first person as a choice coherent with the form of individual engagement at the origin of the different operating conditions which will be described. In general activism and any form of advocacy or engaged initiative -for a juster city as well for a more responsive discipline- require by definition commitment and adherence to a different, alternative set of values, which as an ethical choice is necessarily individual, in a never-ending process of critique and transformation of the hegemonic power configurations. Accordingly, writing about these forms of personal activation and the reflections they engendered finds in this stylistic option a coherent choice, respectful of their ethical motivation.
characterized by an engaged attitude leading to coherently question both the role of the discipline and of my contribution for the empowerment of the initiatives of the civil society. These two fronts of engagement should actually be considered as complementary parts of the same movement of social change. After describing the specific point of view determined by my position and in which way this engendered the reflections articulated by this paper, in the concluding paragraph some working hypothesis for transvaluating frameworks of research will be proposed, as starting point for a larger discussion to be developed in the context of the seminar. As hybrid spaces of action and knowledge production, they could be conceived as operational systems working in between the practice and theory, matter and imagination; their purpose would be to elaborate and propagate change by coherently reproducing at the superstructural level the paradigm shifts emerging in the factual world.

**Academic revolutions**

It is from an engaged point of view - which will be more accurately defined - and it is in relation to urbanism as a discipline and to the socio-spatial dynamics of urban change that the reflections of this paper have been built. They are thus deeply influenced by the urgency of the constraints and the contractures the contemporary process of urbanization - combined with globalization - is producing. In a moment of deep socio-cultural transformation - predominantly referred to as "crisis" - academia should be urged to (re)define its role and modus operandi regardless of the disciplinary realm, with the purpose of providing a critical framework for the understanding and the participation to the transvaluation processes in course as unexpected, uncolonized alternatives. Similar considerations already emerged in the past, suggesting a comparative reflection that in the space of this paper can only be shortly outlined, with the aim of lucidly framing the present situation and of increasing the awareness about the opportunity it offers.

At the beginning of the 70s, after a period of intense economic growth and of the infrastructural urban development which supported it, the energy crisis exacerbated the rising critique to a productivity driven society and to the many forms of functionalism it implied. Welfare state and especially its spatial devices were accused to induce homogenization of needs and living conditions, unable to respond to the unique necessities and desires of individuals and communities. 1968 represented a crucial moment for the civil rights movements and universities played an important role in the elaboration of the contents and the forms of the protests engaging the civil society. Nevertheless, in 1969, in occasion of a lecture, the Italian architect and urbanist Giancarlo De Carlo complained about the missed revolution of academia, unable to deeply appropriate the values at the base of the social changes in course. Instead of simply transforming the academic contents and methodologies they should have discovered "a different way of doing architecture for the edification of a different world (perhaps best defined negatively: not classist, not racist, not violent, not repressive, not alienating, not specializing, not totalizing)".

---

2 De Carlo, G. 1970. Architecture's public. In J.P. Blundell, D. Petrescu, J. Till, eds, Architecture and participation, London: Routledge. In the moments of crisis space - fragmented, reified, exploited - denounces and rejects the fragility and contradiction of those socio-spatial organizations which, purely based on an economic reason, ignore the act of inhabiting as a more complex, cultural expression and anthropological need. At the beginning of the 70s despite the apparent redistribution of resources and opportunities, the degree of functionalisation of the productive and the reproductive systems became crystal clear and especially unbearable at the level of spatial devices supposed to organize welfare. The need for (social) change was thus expressed first of all in the form of new systems of values, alternative or subversive, engendering protest and forms of counterculture. But although the realm of material organization and needs is more accessible to express resistance and insurgency - in the 70s for example it was in the form of more ecological lifestyles, objects, materials-, inevitably they should reverberate at the level of cultural-political structures and forms of knowledge elaboration that would continue the transformation at a superstructural level. This was the missed revolution denounced by De Carlo. And this is why transvaluation processes necessarily need to be
In those days many architects and urbanists engaged in community based urban experiments, contributing to develop an alternative to the "less is more" philosophy and the resulting cult for standardization. But apparently the values underlying those experiments struggled to engender a deeper transformation of disciplines such as architecture and urbanism. "The field of architecture remained amorphous and impalpable, lacking structure. Not only was it incapable of regenerating itself: it even remained insensitive to the stimuli of its own contradictions"\(^3\).

If in the 70s the inefficiency of welfare corresponded to the levelling of needs and to the functionalisation of the reproductive to the productive city, today the retreat of welfare state is the result of more than two decades of connivance of the state with the reasons and the dynamics of the financial turn of capitalism, which transformed real estate and cities as a whole in one of the main financial assets. This is at the origin of a new urban question, mainly characterised by the deteriorated political capacity of the city of making society\(^4\).

Given these circumstances, the reaction of civil society goes towards the substantive re-definition of neglected needs and rights, which find in the space of the city and in its built equipment the material for insurgent transformations. A great opportunity is provided to rethink forms of living, systems of wellbeing, fuelling what could be in fact acknowledged as a transvaluation process: at the origin of many current urban experiments communities and inhabitants are exploring the material implications of values and belief systems which in many cases manifest a paradigm shift and suggest new horizons of meaning.

As in the 70s so today many urbanists and architects are engaged within proactive communities and self-organized initiatives. This could be seen as the result of ethical reasons: to support grassroots initiatives as a way to advocate for the just city. But it could also be the evidence of the increasing relevance of practices and spontaneous initiatives crucially meaningful in terms of transformation and use of the space, perhaps pointing at an evolution of the profession; but meaningful also for what they represent in terms of re-invention of the welfare (state), citizenship affirmation and interpretation of new values. These aspects explain the growing interest of academia, which is approaching these initiatives at different levels of radicality, unfolding a variety of forms of engagement and of critical apparatuses. The proliferation of researches, workshops and discourses addressing contemporary forms of insurgency is a clear manifestation of this interest and confirms the factual and/or symbolic relevance of transformative processes in course, even when - or especially when - marginal.

As said, the tensions and values expressed by societal changes and initiatives should be mirrored and further elaborated by the structures of knowledge production and elaboration, in an unbroken dialectical movement towards an increasing awareness that ideally should find in disciplinary apparatuses and academia a supportive environment\(^5\). This is why an interesting situation occurs when architects and urbanists engaged in community based initiatives are at the same time involved in the academic realm: the conditions are thus provided to fuel the mutual shaping of world-making and world-thinking processes, thus empowering still marginal transvaluating processes, seeking for more radical results.

The years in between the end of the 60s and the 70s interweave a number of issues: the criticism of the processes of production of space and their economic functionalism; the claim of the role of the public and the invention of participation but also of advocacy planning. But in the

\(^3\) ibidem, pg.4

\(^4\) Donzelot, J. La nouvelle question urbaine. In Esprit, Novembre 1999

\(^5\) as mentioned in footnote 1.
academic realm, architecture and urbanism\textsuperscript{6} schools were mainly unprepared to embed the values implied in similar changes at a structural level, for example by renewing educational and professional methodologies instead of simply camouflaging with new contents an established role in the productive-reproductive machinery. No form of institutional critique was achieved, perhaps not even really envisioned. Today this challenge is again - and perhaps even more urgently - on the agenda. What could be the role of academia, as a main department of knowledge centred economies, its independence being increasingly compressed - more than in the past - by the economic reason and efficiency driven regulations? Its positioning seems the most appropriate and strategic to fuel the critique of the social processes in course - perhaps as one of its original missions - thus continuing the transvaluation process started by society.

Urbanism and other related socio-spatial disciplines in particular are being called once again to position themselves and to learn from the multiplication of movements and initiatives which reclaim urban space to enact biopolitical forms of resistance: beyond the simple need of dwellings, towards a redefinition of the productive and the reproductive systems and their founding values. If this moment represents another opportunity to reinvent academia and its role in relation to the process of social transformation, for urbanism and architecture as disciplines concerned with the making of the space and society this is also the occasion to reclaim their political role.

Engaging transvaluation
The reflections articulated in this paper have been triggered by the operational conditions I had the chance to experience from the beginning of my PhD in 2013: a fruitful convergence of different roles in the intersection zone of the marginal, but almost genetic transformations happening in the city of Brussels\textsuperscript{7} on the one hand; the operative framework of academia on the other hand. This serendipitous situation positioned my point of view and gave me the possibility to question the forms of dialogue existing between the two realms. If the purpose to improve the conditions of living and to increase socio-spatial justice can be identified at the origin of urbanism as a profession and as a discipline, then the exchange between the academic discourse and the material processes of urban transformation appears to be a physiological implication.

On the one hand this would lead to the empowerment and further experimentation of still marginal or weak initiatives; on the other hand it would lead to continuously question and update consolidated tools and approaches of urbanism as an inherently political discipline\textsuperscript{8}, towards an institutional engagement\textsuperscript{9}. Ideally, the separation between the factual and the theoretical domains more than disappear should be modulated, continuously recombing a posture of critical distance with moments of strong engagement thus learning from the experimental situations enacted by the society.

If this is not a new concern and can be in fact found at the core of De Carlo’s invective, as

\textsuperscript{6} In his lecture De Carlo stressed why architecture’s faculties were in the vanguard of the protest at the end of the 60s: “because the faculties of architecture more than any other faculty, had long been dominated by an academic body interested only in preventing new ideas from penetrating into the school (in architecture new ideas are at least 50 years old)”.\textsuperscript{7}

The word mutation is used to refer to those transformations which -despite their marginality- can be considered as radical because activated first and foremost at the level of the values and belief systems of the civil society. This is the case of the CLTB (Community Land Trust Brussels), a form of cooperative housing, main case study of my research which I presented in these terms in Lenna, V. 2014. Ecologic mutations in the precarious city. The Community Land Trust in Brussels as a form of a resilient attitude. In: proceedings of the conference Composite cities, Istanbul, November 12 -14, 2014.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{8} as Italian urbanist Benevolo suggested, in particular Le origini dell’urbanistica moderna, published in 1974.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{9} with this expression Chantal Mouffe opens to the possibility -and to the need- to inject change at an institutional level.
expressed in the mentioned article but actually present in his whole career as a teacher, the current moment encourages to reconsider the efficacy of this exchange. In particular when socio-spatial justice is at stake: this is actually the urgency which originated the reflections and imaginative framework presented in this paper. If the relationship between practice and teaching has already been shown as nourishing and essential\textsuperscript{10}, this assumes a political tone when dealing with values shifts in our society and the counterhegemonic fracture they could represent.

Connecting the four roles that I mentioned and that I will shortly describe, a common, engaged attitude dictates the purpose and pushes to imagine some possible tools and frameworks of research which will be introduced in the last paragraph. The expression engaged attitude refers to a personal predisposition engendering different forms and degrees of activism, outside and within academia, in support of experiments of urban transformation and of the disciplinary updates these should produce. Pervasive by nature, engagement strives for the coherence, the continuity and the radicality of the processes of change: which actually means to strive for the unfinished completeness of the transvaluation processes, from the world-making to the world-thinking domain.

As a researcher (first role), I am interested in those urban initiatives that in this moment are reformulating the paradigms of wellbeing and the forms of welfare, possibly suggesting how to reinvent the concept of welfare state\textsuperscript{11}. New forms of cohabitations and the redefinition of the notion of public space are the result of interweaving factors which certainly have in the current economical downturn and - more structurally - in the critique to the neoliberal regime a common triggering element. These (transvaluating) processes are happening in part as a reaction to the current circumstances, in part due to the exhaustion of the previous belief systems: individualistic attitudes are being replaced by less extreme variations, nuanced by shared forms of living often organised for sheer pleasure more than for need.

It is in relation to my research, but also as the result of a personal - as mentioned, engaged-attitude and understanding about the nature of urbanism that I have been involved in two different scenes of urban transformation in Brussels: with a technical role (second role) in the activities of the Community Land Trust Brussels\textsuperscript{12}, a no profit organization whose mission is to provide low cost housing by means of a cooperative, non speculative formula; as an activist (third role) and co-founder of the urban collective Commons Josaphat\textsuperscript{13}, whose purpose is to reflect and to develop scenarios and actions for a city based on the concept of Commons. The pretext and main theatre of operations is the vacant site of Josaphat, a ZIR (zone d’intérêt regional) of 24 ha located in a strategic urban position for future speculative manoeuvres. While the Community Land Trust also represents a main case study for my PhD research, the situation of Commons Josaphat dealing with a big vacant site in the centre of Brussels, nourishes imagination and triggers experimentation about new forms and processes of making the city.

Being involved as member of the teaching staff (fourth role) in several urban design studios, necessarily these experiences triggered my curiosity about which methodological apparatuses and new didactical approaches could import in the academic context the urban transformations in course, possibly in order to empower them thanks to the imaginative infrastructures the learning environment could and should provide. Clearly this curiosity has to be interpreted as a continuation of the same activist attitude that triggered my involvement in the mentioned Community Land Trust and Commons Josaphat situations. Similarly, it also generated a number of questions concerning the role and the contribution of research as a form of engagement,


\textsuperscript{11} The working title of my PhD research is Who cares? Spaces making the welfare: reclaiming the body, setting the conflicts, building democracy.

\textsuperscript{12} https://communitylandtrust.wordpress.com/

\textsuperscript{13} https://commonsjosaphat.be/blog/ (the blog is hosted by an independent server)
beyond indignation. If teaching should bear the responsibility of transferring the changes in course within the academic discourse, what about research? How could research respond to a transforming society? How could it intensify transvaluation, hybridizing different knowledge forms and domains according to emerging societal needs? Which methodologies and which forms of outputs could be imagined to serve these purposes?

Scholars have previously pointed out the advantages of a dyadic coexistence of practice and teaching. By adding research as a related framework—especially when this continues to critically/proactively deal with the same contents addressed in the other two domains—a sort of speculative meta-frame is defined, which provides the conditions to develop awareness about both practice and teaching. Besides, by activating the reciprocal transfer of contents, values and tools this meta-frame could empower the former while updating the latter. In this perspective I suggest the design of specific frameworks combining action and research should represent a main stepping stone for the processes of institutional critique. By definition its ultimate purpose being the critique of the institutionalized *modi operandi* and of the segregation of the disciplinary system, part of the effort should go towards the invention of critical devices and research/action situations able to continuously fuel and renew forms of knowledge and their related operative apparatuses. Ideally these should become part of the transvaluation processes in course, contributing both in terms of actions and of critical speculation. These operational metaframes are the object of the imaginative exercise introduced in the last paragraph.

**TransVal OS: a six point argument for the imagination of a transvaluation operating system**

In the experimental perspective set by this seminar a rare condition is given to use imagination in order to suggest alternative frameworks conceived to support and to fuel the transvaluation processes throughout their unfolding, which implies the continuous dialectical articulation of world-making and world-thinking operations. Given our peculiar cultural and economical conjuncture, still dominated by quantitative and efficiency oriented paradigms, but agitated by the insurgent movements of civil society; given the freedom of initiative authorised by neoliberal credos and made possible by the institutional dismantlement, these alternative frameworks should dare to question the very definition of academia. Which role(s) for academia? Which are its operative boundaries? How could they be stretched thus becoming part of the margin of action of civil society? How could they mediate the heterotopic nature of the educational realm and the need to foster the social transformations in course?

On the basis of my specific positioning - as above described - and motivated by the mentioned urgencies - I will take advantage of the imaginative, speculative space created by the Seminar to envision how a transvaluating operational system (TransVal OS) could work and which would be its characteristics as a framework conceived to support transvaluation processes. In this definition the verb transvaluating describes the role these operational systems should have: to function as transforming apparatuses for the transfer and continuous critique of the values and experiments emerging in the factual world to the speculative realm of academia and vice versa, contributing to their aware, continuous elaboration, at the same time blurring the boundaries of the two domains.

The hypothesis here proposed have been specifically formulated in relation to urbanism as a discipline and to the urban transformations in course in the contemporary city, as previously mentioned. Hence the tools and approaches being suggested necessarily refer to this peculiar operational realm and its challenges; they have been conceived in consideration of the moment of intense urban experimentation in course with the intention to import the implied transvaluation

---

values within the academic realm as a form of institutional critique. As working hypothesis they are presented in the context of this Seminar with the purpose to be enriched by the discussion, towards a more precise formulation.

0 | TransVal Operating System: a definition
Working in between research and action, academia and the civil society, purpose of these operating systems is to create the material and organizational conditions required to empower site specific transvaluation processes in course, which means to support their continuous development from the world-making to the world-thinking realms and vice versa. From the formulation of the purposes to the empowerment of the unexpected synergies; from the identification of the required actors to the articulation of the methodologies and the platforms for their cooperation; from the invention of the tools to the critical assessment of the transformation in course; these are some among the functions of these apparatuses. Some basic principles and methodological suggestion for their installation in given site specific conditions will be further defined in the following points.

1 | Infrastructuring transvaluation
TransVal OS essentially correspond to the design of an infrastructural apparatus conceived to operate in between the factual and the speculative. This means to organise competencies, resources, communities and environmental potentialities as platforms by means of which different actions, strategies, methodologies could be conceived, thus interpreting the specificities of the context of intervention on the one hand; responding to the processes of knowledge elaboration on the other hand. Priorities, specific goals and the related operations will be defined by the convergence of the different needs and interests of the actors involved, concerning both the implementation of real (urban) projects/interventions and the disciplinary openings they should lead to.

2 | Transdisciplinary approach
Necessarily TransVal OS will have to develop a transdisciplinary approach, fuelled by the synergies and the deep interactions of an heterogeneous community of local actors, organizations, researchers, activists, designers, citizens, etc.

3 | Site specificity, long term operational horizon
TransVal OS are site specifically defined: environmental conditions and working methodologies should be identified by the concerned communities. In order to support real transformations in course, they are supposed to work in the long term. Time availability will be an essential requirement in order to foster the transvaluation processes in course: from the emergence and articulation of their socio-cultural specificities to their embedding and reproduction in (socially and culturally) coherent frames of action and knowledge elaboration.

4 | Toolbox
Traditionally urbanism - as a discipline and as a practice - relies on two main conceptual operations here suggested as appropriate systems to act in between the factual and the speculative, the pragmatic and the imaginative: description and project. Their boundaries often abundantly overlap: to describe is to project and vice versa\textsuperscript{15} Addressing the transformations in course description and project could be used with different goals: to amplify the marginal; to systematize apparently fragmented situations, whenever possible acknowledging the existence of

unifying discourses; to communicate in order to empower and build necessary networks; to envision as a strategy to reinforce the feasibility of a desired transformation. Accordingly, many different forms of description and project could be introduced and hybridized, to be considered as new kinds of knowledge elaboration: from mapping to texts, from visual art artefacts to seminars, etcetera. In the perspective of supporting transvaluation processes, descriptive and projective tools could be used for critical or for pragmatic purposes; if in the first case they would work at a speculative level, within frameworks built in order to develop awareness and a critical attitude towards the world-making processes in course; in the second case they could be developed within more communicative/participative situations, with the aim of supporting processes of collective imagination or awareness.

5] Institutional critique
The elaboration of the tools above mentioned has to respond first of all to the contextual conditions of the transformations in course, with the aim of critically supporting them both on the side of the civil society and the side of the related academic elaborations. While in the first case they should support the synergic performances of actors and the achievement of their goals, in the second case the result should be the redefinition of traditional research outputs, disciplinary contents, curricula and methodologies. What if new Master curricula would be conceived around the organization of a platform for the encounter of actors and stakeholders interested in the implementation of a given project? What if a research could be used to support the elaboration of new policies?

Coherently, a knowledge based economy should be concerned to define new evaluation -if still required- criteria apt to measure the capacity of TransVal OS tools and configurations to support change and thus produce a social impact. These criteria should also be able to seize the degree of responsiveness of academic systems in relation to their operational context: in other words their capability to operate an institutional critique, as the ultimate result - and as a required phase - of transvaluation processes.

References