Walking and talking about the memories of a transformed urban space

The main goal of this research is to study the walking interviews, also called go along walks or walk along interviews (Garcia et, 2012) as a method for studying urban memory in an urban context that has suffered an important transformation. During the development of this methodology, researchers or interviewers walk alongside interviewees in order to observe, experience and make sense of the relationship between the participants and the context. Under this condition, the collected data is a result of the direct interaction between the two involved parties, and is often analysed in a spirit of collaborative participation between participants and researchers (Brown and Durrheim 2009; Garcia et, 2012).

The use of walking interviews and its particular characteristic of taking an interview out of the “safe,” stationary environment, is not a new approach to the study of social sciences. In fact, it has been used in numerous disciplines including urban studies, anthropology, sociology, and geography (Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009; Hall, 2009; Springer, Black, Martz, Deckys, & Soelberg, 2010) and has been proposed as a particular effective methodology to the study of environmental perception, spatial practices, biographies, social architecture, and social realms (Kusenbach, 2003). The propagation of this methodology is very related to its spatial connotation and its capacity of placing events, stories and experiences in their spatial context. This action of contextualizing and locating information can help participants to articulate their thoughts; the narratives can add detail to the researcher’s understanding and insight; and locations can be used to provoke or prompt discussion and evoke memories.

Even though a lot of effort has been put into understanding how the method works, which are its pros and cons and how to construct it properly; there is a substantial gap on how to produce quantitative data, connecting what people say with where the say it and managing to create an useful output from the walking interviews.

In order to give an initial answer to these problems, the present work tries to use the walking interview method and incorporate the use of complementary instruments that help to transform the qualitative into quantitative data. With the collaboration of the Urban Center Metropolitano and the ZipLab collective, this method will be tested in a particular area of the city of Turin that took part of an important urban transformation. The research will take part in the area of Spina 3 in the northeast part of Turin, Italy. This area was transform starting in the year 2000 from an industrial site with over 20000 employees of Fiat and Michelin, into a residential area, which includes new public spaces such as “Parco Dora”, technological spaces as Envipark and commercial spaces as Parco Dora Shopping Centre. By some, this transformation has been described as one of the most effective urban transformations, by others, it has been criticized by the lack of connection with its real inhabitants (Boero, 2011).

In both cases, due to its post-industrial transformation, the area represents an optimal context to test this participatory method and understand how much of its original identity is still present or has been forgotten in the memory of its inhabitants. Therefore, the main activity of this research will be
organizing an open call go along walk in the Spina 3 area where participants can take part of a pre fixed but not rigid walk. The interview will be an unstructured one and will depend very much on the participants and their own relation and memories of the place. Taking as a starting point a selected number of iconic places of the area, the route between them will be decided by the participants. During the walk, GPS and manual instruments will be use to track the path, photography and drawings will be use to identify the most relevant, conflictive, forgotten or remembered places for the participants and audio recording will be use to transcript spontaneous comments or information exchange between participants and researchers. Finally, the collected information will be synthesized in a final output that consists of a map constructed collectively and based on the areas most identifiable or remembered by the participants. In this way it is proposed to produce a map that represents graphically the relationship between the citizens and the urban memory and memory gaps that they possess of the area. This action could represent how citizens of an area construct the memory of an urban space that no longer exists or has been heavily transformed, and how some pieces of this urban space have been victim of oblivion.

References


