Mapping the Right to the City: City Perception as a Shaping Force

Giulia Carones
giulia.carones@gmail.com

What is the heart of a city? And its soul?... How do you know a city? How do you get to know your city?

Method: one should either give up talking about the city or force oneself to talk about it in the plainest, most obvious, most familiar terms. Getting rid of pre-conceived ideas. Quitting thinking in ready-made terms, forgetting what urban planners and sociologists said. We shall never be able to explain or justify the city. The city is here, it is our space and it is our only one.

George Perec, Specie di Spazi 1989

Mapping as voicing alternative perspectives on the city

Conducting ethnographic research in Milan on how political activists perceive the city through the lenses of their explicit advocacy for the urban commons has prompted me to devise a participatory methodology to explore the nexus between political engagement, the Lefebvrian framework of the right to the city, and the urban commons. More specifically, I was interested in how the purposeful long-term squatting practices of activists within the urban fabric could shape participants’ city perception and the city itself. This is in the context of an increasingly regulated and neoliberal globalising urban environment, characterised by privatisation, gentrification and uneven spatial development. These issues led me to consider the extent to which contemporary citizens can effectively reclaim their right to the city as the right to make the city, to engage in a creative endeavour giving rise to cities as (in Lefebvre’s terms) an oeuvre.

Completed between February and May 2018, my fieldwork research consisted of an ethnography of a Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito (CSOA) (literally, ‘Self-managed, Occupied Social Centre’), the Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitano (LUMe) in Milan. LUMe brings together activists, university students and recent graduates together with young artists and musicians from a variety of backgrounds. They share a political commitment against fascism, racism, sexism and, more contentiously internally, against capitalism. LUMe has been active in Milan since April 2015 and has since occupied three locations in the city. Its current site is shown by the red dot on the map in Figure 1. The movement’s explicit references to notions of re-appropriation and de-alienation of urban space and to the right to
the city renders LUMe especially compelling for the issues outlined above, conveying a research-aware, politically-charged commitment to shape the city.\footnote{3}

My own involvement as an activist with LUMe whilst I was conducting research has shaped the participatory action tool research which participants and I have devised and implemented. Given my dual commitment to participatory research and activist anthropology, the results of the present work must be understood within the framework of engaged research, building on shared values and political stances which are between the researcher and participants.\footnote{4} Cognitive mapping was chosen as a tool because of its potential to fuel meaningful exchanges, constituting a gateway to political conversation and reflection on abstract concepts. Deploying cognitive mapping as a methodological tool, the aim was twofold: to capture and describe city perception from the often sidelined standpoint of political activists, and to explore notions of the urban commons as a practice within the city and a way to assert a comprehensive right to the city. As such, the cognitive mapping tool lies at the intersection of practices of counter-mapping – which gives voice to alternative, grassroots perspectives on the city and advances their visual representation – and caretographies as suggested by Hind, which emphasise that representation entails a form of responsibility and the practice of power which can understood in terms of a relationship of care for a place.\footnote{5} This latter consideration also bridged the practice of squatting and the act of representing the city, precisely via the attitude of care towards the city, of taking care of a place by taking responsibility for it.

Creating a tool for participatory exploratory research

In order to achieve these two aims and to build a replicable, consistent methodological framework, I have relied mostly on Lynch’s seminal work on city images and imageability, specifically targeting individuals’ perception of the urban environment and experience.\footnote{6} I have also drawn on the localisation and actualisation of Lynch’s work carried out by Pezzoni in her use of cognitive maps to investigate the perception of the city of migrants passing through Milan. I have made adaptations necessary to create a tool which will work in an
activist context with participants who live in Milan. Table 1 illustrates how I have adapted Lynch’s categories for this work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lynchean category (Lynch 1960)</th>
<th>Research-adapted category</th>
<th>Methodological Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landmarks / Reference points people cannot enter</td>
<td>Landmarks / Quali sono i tuoi punti di riferimento a Milano? What are your reference points in Milan?</td>
<td>The Lynchean restriction of non-access to Landmarks was foregone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paths / Travel channels</td>
<td>Mobility / Quali sono i tuoi spostamenti abituali e come ti muovi all'interno della città? What are your habitual paths and how do you usually move around the city?</td>
<td>Mobility was open to feeling-based judgments on preferred modes of transport according to destinations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Districts / Medium-large, two-dimensional areas</td>
<td>Urban Commons / Cosa sono per te i beni comuni urbani e li collocheresti a Milano? Se sì, dove? What are the urban commons for you and would you say they are present in Milan? If yes, where?</td>
<td>The category Urban Commons represents the element of novelty within the framework. It was purposefully left to participants to construct personal meaning for the category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes / Focus of large areas</td>
<td>Confrontation / Cosa è per te il conflitto all'interno della città e dove lo collocheresti? What is confrontation/struggle for you within a city environment and where would you place it?</td>
<td>The participatory approach to research has proven especially insightful for the category Confrontation, as the latter has been the most questioned, criticised and shaped by participants, as well as being debated amongst participants themselves following the cognitive mapping interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edges / Real or perceived boundaries</td>
<td>Boundaries / Dove finisce la città? Pensi che la tua percezione corrisponda ai confini geografici? Where does the city end? Do you think your perception differs from the city's geographical boundaries?</td>
<td>The second question was used to prompt further discussion.</td>
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Table 1. Methodological framework for cognitive mapping.

The table shows the questions in Italian, focussed on perceptions of the city, which were used in the 19 semi-structured interviews (15 with LUMe members and four with Milan residents not involved in urban social movements) together with their English translations. They maintain a dialectic relationship with the Lynchean genealogy.
Capturing perceptions of the city – emerging trends

Interviews featuring cognitive mapping were conducted between 10 February and 15 May 2018, and the data shown in the figures below refers exclusively to these semi-structured interviews. Amongst the varied range of findings suggested by the data, two key observations have emerged from the cognitive mapping with LUMe members which relate to perceptions of the city. The first is about the emergence of a creative, operational gaze on the city and the making of new landmarks and places of belonging. The second reveals a normatively positive phenomenology of confrontation, confirming Pruţit’s remarks on the centripetal role which it plays in political urban social movements which practice occupation and which perceive confrontation as a positive, creative, generative rupture within the city.

Making and integrating new landmarks

The making of new landmarks, usually in the form of CSOA and their steadfast adoption and integration in individuals’ perceptual landscape of the city, is corroborated by analysis of the data collected during the cognitive mapping interviews. More specifically, it is noteworthy that all the LUMe participants involved in the cognitive mapping interviews reveal that making new landmarks within the city is perceived as a creative gesture, and that 14 out of 15 participants confirm that new landmarks are straightforwardly integrated into individual city perceptions. Thus the triangulation of data collected via cognitive mapping interviews, participant observation, LUMe’s research output and extant literature suggests that participation in social movements is associated with a creative gaze on the city aimed at disrupting its established order, allowing for spontaneous encounters and for an alternative way to live in time and space. One of the strategies for creating such an alternative is by the making and assimilation of new landmarks.

To explore the visual relevance of both trends in the perception of the city, I now consider two of the maps from LUMe participants, both produced by women under 25 years old.

Figure 2. Participant’s cognitive map of Milan.
The map in Figure 2 is representative of the tendency to assimilate new and recent landmarks within the city. It shows how squatting practices may be framed as a creative endeavour within the urban fabric which delivers genuine change in the perception of abandoned spaces. In the participants’ account, former sites of occupation are not abandoned places and have not ceased to be reference points for an emotional navigation of the city. On the contrary, LUMe’s former sites of occupation are present on the map, and participants attach to them the creative potential which their activism aims to unlock. Drawn in red, in the imaginary bottom right quadrant and signposted with a hand-drawn cross, is LUMe’s foundational, first occupation site. The map also features sites of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ). Despite the ephemeral, transient nature of these experiences, which are self-contained or subject to eviction, they have produced long-lasting change in participants’ perception of the city perception as they are progressively integrated as landmarks and reference points despite their formal disappearance. At the other end of the spectrum, the second cognitive map supports the observed trend of looking at the city with a creative, operational gaze, in a proactive search for new landmarks which is coupled with the desire to make the city. Understood in this way, activists’ creative urban gaze stretches both into the past and into the future, spanning time with the possibility of crafting the city.

Figure 3. Participant’s cognitive map of Milan.

In the imaginary bottom right quadrant, the participant has referenced a villetta abbandonata, an abandoned house, as a landmark, written in green and circled. The rationale behind this choice of representation was to express the potential which the participant saw in the unused and decaying place. She told me she wished to turn the abandoned house into something useful for the neighbourhood, something alive, and continued saying that on her daily commute to work she could not help looking at it and wondering what LUMe could make out of it.
The phenomenology of confrontation

The second theme to emerge from the cognitive mapping interviews concerns the phenomenology of confrontation. When asked to define confrontation and to place it in Milan, if they thought it was present, participants’ responses fell into one of the three phenomenological categories identified by the diagram represented in Figure 4. More specifically, responses could be traced back to:

a) A descriptive judgment – regarding the presence or absence of confrontation and its relative occurrences.

b) A normative negative judgment identifying confrontation as undesirable.

c) A normative positive judgment, deeming confrontation as a necessary, generative moment of rupture which is desirable, to be hoped for and sought after in the city.

Figure 4 groups participants’ responses, including features and definitions of confrontation within Milan and cities more generally, and refers them to one of the phenomenological categories.

Figure 4. Phenomenology of confrontation

Two of the longest-standing LUMe members who participated in the cognitive mapping suggested that the three responses which fell into the normative negative phenomenological
description of confrontation were attributable to having joined LUMe only very recently (around one year or less than before the interviews were conducted). In their opinion, and, as far as the data was concerned, this was corroborated by research. More sustained participation to militant activism proved transformational for how LUMe members viewed confrontation, changing the mainstream, confrontation-avoiding stance which was consistently characterised by non-militant views. Indeed, the very narrow sample of non-militant participants involved in the cognitive mapping interviews compromises the reliability of the data for the latter category. However, as far as activist participants are concerned, the positive view of confrontation is consistent with Prujit’s tenet that the such a view is central to political occupation configurations. In particular, one participant’s response offered an insightful mediation between the descriptive and the normative positive judgment on confrontation, bridging the gap amongst LUMe participants, by suggesting that confrontation had two possible connotations, a passive one and an active one. In the passive sense, confrontation occurred in the tangible differences in wealth amongst citizens, whilst the active sense of confrontation entailed the occupation and liberation of urban places to make them accessible, free and inclusive.

Exploring notions of the urban commons as a practice – emerging trends

The diagram in Figure 5 collects the main notions of the commons gathered from LUMe members by means of the interviews and the cognitive mapping task. It is worth bearing in mind that although not perfectly homogenous across LUMe membership and attendance, these notions are not mutually exclusive and reinforce the federal, inclusive nature of the movement, allowing for coexistence of different schools of thought, often influenced by individuals’ educational backgrounds.

Figure 5. Polysemy of the commons
These findings suggest that the preliminary and all-encompassing conception of the urban commons as a mode of production which comprises governance, positive outcomes for the relative local context, open access, conceptual innovation and there being an alternative to the status quo, informs and influences LUMe participants’ perception of the city. It does this in relation to research of new reference points and how confrontation manifests itself in the city.

As well as illuminating alternatives to the neoliberal paradigm through occupation, these results, coupled with the counter-mapping potential of the cognitive mapping interviews, hint at the possibility of a novel way to look at the city, at the intersection of precarity and neoliberalism, and strategies to engage with the latter.

Where to Now? Cognitive mapping and participatory methods beyond exploratory research

The research described here is a part of a wider ethnographic project carried out through three months of fieldwork in Milan, shaped by participation in and by Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitano (LUMe), a growing activist movement born in 2015 which comprises university students and recent graduates, young artists and musicians. The work discussed here has tried to convey how cognitive mapping and participatory research may be conducive to more comprehensive and inclusive visions of the city we inhabit, representing and voicing otherwise unheard claims, and co-creating a tool for political discussion. The study has been achieved through 15 semi-structured interviews based on a cognitive mapping exercise which explored activists’ perception of the city and their notion of the urban commons as shaped by their political participation in an urban social movement. The relevance of the research lies in the acknowledgment that globalising cities are increasingly characterised by encroaching neoliberal urbanism and that fora for citizens’ participation are standardised and top-down. By contrast, my research has focussed on claims of self-legitimacy by looking at how squatting conveys and expresses claims to the right to the city in terms of the right to make the city.

When discussing the value of this research and of the cognitive mapping tool with participants, most of the feedback I received was positive about the fact that it had prompted new ways of reflecting on how people perceive the city they inhabit, how LUMe positions itself within the city and how it supports the ongoing process of political subjectivation and self-awareness. However, some participants also expressed considerable scepticism about the extent to which the research described here would positively impact LUMe itself, beyond self-knowledge and exploration of differing notions of confrontation in the city and the urban commons. For the engagement I have described to be truly meaningful, longer, closer participatory research is needed. Further study could envision how to transform exploratory grassroots research into a genuinely political tool for negotiation towards more inclusive cities. Visualising voices and claims which are often sidelined through cognitive mapping has the potential to become a tool for such negotiation.
Endnotes


8 During interviews, ‘confrontation’ has been referred to as ‘conflitto’, because it is a polyvalent term, assuming different values within leftist, antagonist social movements. However, the questions aimed at exploring first, instinctual definition and localisation of confrontation within the city, precisely to investigate possible divergencies within its phenomenology, namely, the way it is perceived. The rationale for the choice to explore perceptions of confrontation lies in Prujit’s observation that for urban political occupation configurations, confrontation constitutes a non-renounceable component of activism. Interestingly, there was a tendency amongst LUMe’s most recent acquisitions and participants external to LUMe to identify confrontation as a negative phenomenon. Prujit, H. 2013. ‘The Logic of Urban Squatting.’ International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 37(1), pp. 19-45.
