

Anthropological Approaches to Urban Space

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1. Introduction¹

Planning stems from multi-actor, interactive, and negotiating processes (Crosta 1998, Forester 1982), which occur through discursive practices and are strongly conditioned by power distribution. In these processes, the planner is invested with a dual role, at once technical and political, and has to mediate between the interests and demands of different groups and stakeholders. The cross-pollination between urban planning, design practices, and anthropological approaches makes it possible to address the distortions produced by uneven distributions of power and information, drawing on the cultur-

al and symbolic dimensions of space-making. Anthropological urbanism serves the cause of spatial justice and ethically responsible planning (Cranz 2016, Stender, Bech-Danielsen, Landsverk 2022).

This issue of *CONTESTI* takes stock of the current debate, promotes theoretical reflection on the interdisciplinary exchange between urban planning and urban anthropology, and highlights re-

This special issue of CONTESTI investigates how anthropological approaches can reshape urban planning by centering lived experience, spatial justice, and ethnographic engagement. Through diverse case studies—from protest camps and cultural initiatives to rural transformations and carceral spaces—the volume highlights how everyday practices challenge dominant planning paradigms. Emphasizing the value of situated, relational knowledge, the contributions argue for planning as an ethically

and politically embedded practice. Together, they demonstrate how anthropological urbanism enables more inclusive, responsive, and just urban transformations.

cent design and planning experiences shaped by these approaches. The contributors examine how anthropological methods sharpen awareness of spatial injustice and create space for relational and culturally grounded interventions. Together, the articles explore how spatial practices and ethnographic approaches reshape our understanding of urban and territorial transformations. Across diverse contexts – from migrant protest camps to cultural initiatives, from multi-ethnic urban interiors to rural digital economies and the rethinking of carceral spaces – the articles demonstrate how everyday and often invisible practices produce alternative spatial orders. Rather than accepting top-down frameworks, the papers foreground lived experiences and the need to critically rework the categories through which space is planned, governed, and imagined. Together, they argue for the centrality of ethnographically grounded perspectives in advancing spatial justice and more responsive modes of spatial organization. These contributions articulate concrete strategies for crossing disciplinary boundaries, confronting asymmetries of knowledge and power, and reconfiguring urbanism as an ethically and politi-

cally situated practice.

2. Urban Life through Anthropological Lenses

Anthropological approaches engage the city not as a finished object but as a living fabric of relations, continually remade. They resist reducing urban space to a technical problem or managerial challenge, apprehending it instead as a dynamic field shaped through negotiation and improvisation. As explored in this issue, anthropological urbanism invites us not merely to describe the city but to accompany its unfolding, recognizing that knowing the urban is inseparable from inhabiting it. Ethnographic methods move through the folds of lived space, exposing fractures that formal plans overlook but that surface within the textures of everyday experience. They reveal spatial contradictions and power relations as they materialize on the ground (De Boeck and Balaji 2016, Caldeira 2017). Anthropological approaches to urban space help provincialize hegemonic planning paradigms and foreground plural urban knowledges. Research often begins where maps mislead, policies fragment, and archives fall silent – where official narratives fail to apprehend the entangled textures of urban life (Gandy 2014, Roy 2011). As David Mosse (2006) reminds us, ethnographic work is not simply about making hidden structures visible, but about navigating the inevitable distortions that arise in representing complex social worlds. In these uncertain spaces, urban ethnography becomes a practice of listening, attuned to the contin-

gent and shifting life of the city. It is not merely a technique of inquiry but an ethics of attention to the lives of others, an ethics that resists abstraction, statistical reduction, and political indifference (Fassin 2013).

We follow a mural, trace uncharted routes, and walk alongside residents to learn how cities are inhabited and remade (Simone 2010). Through long-term engagement and co-presence, anthropological urbanism brings into view what official accounts elide: the solidarities that sustain everyday life and the infrastructures that quietly persist beneath formal systems. It neither romanticizes struggle nor reduces urban life to spectacle. Instead, it focuses on how everyday spaces become political through acts of exclusion and appropriation (Holston 2009, Lefebvre 1974). The field is not only a site of study but a space where urbanism itself is reimaged from within.

Studying the urban anthropologically demands a shift in scale and epistemology. Rather than privileging master plans, ethnographic methods attend to how people reconfigure and claim space. Informal vending, the adaptive reuse of vacant lots, and ephemeral constructions are vital to urban life. Public spaces, even when designed for fixed purposes, are continually reimaged through quiet appropriations, bringing deeper struggles over spatial justice into view (Mitchell 2003, Low 2000) and revealing whose claims to the city are recognized and whose are erased (Bayat 2010). Planning is not negated

in this view but reframed, allowing policies to emerge from the textures of lived space rather than from abstract models.

Anthropological approaches also foreground the material and affective dimensions of urban experience. Knowing the urban is not merely cognitive; it is profoundly embodied. Encountering urban space unfolds through the body, in textures that cling to the skin and rhythms that press into awareness (Willis 2011). Movement itself inscribes meaning: walking becomes a form of writing across the urban fabric, affirming, testing, and sometimes transgressing its spatial scripts (de Certeau 1984). Infrastructures and rhythms, as Jaffe and de Koning (2021) emphasize, constitute the very conditions under which cities are inhabited and contested. Built environments are not inert backdrops: they mediate access, organize movement, and shape social relations. Water pipes, cables, sidewalks, and walls are more than technical supports; they materialize exclusions and silently govern the flows of urban life (Larkin 2013).

Today, urban governance increasingly operates through modes of abstraction that anthropological methods help to contest. GIS platforms, smart city programs, and algorithmic governance reduce complex urban life to calculable surfaces, organizing populations and territories at a distance. The tensions and contradictions that animate lived cities vanish from these diagrams. As Doreen Massey (2005) argues, modernity flattens space into a uniform

surface, stripping it of temporal depth and relational thickness. Katherine McKittrick (2021), drawing on Sylvia Wynter's work, shows how such abstractions extend colonial logics, coding bodies and futures into systems of control while masking the violence embedded within them. Leah Lievrouw (2011) further reveals how data-driven governance obscures the socio-political assumptions inscribed within technological infrastructures, naturalizing exclusion under the guise of neutrality. Anthropological engagements seek not merely to critique these structures but to trace the inequalities sedimented in cartographies, infrastructures, and data flows – and to resist the language of “optimization” and “efficiency” that so often conceals exclusion.

Anthropological urbanism calls for a rethinking of how knowledge about cities is produced. As Paul Rabinow (2008) reminds us, the task of anthropology is not only to describe emerging realities but to rethink the very conditions under which “the human” – *anthropos* – is conceptualized. The figure of the human has become plural, heterogeneous, and unsettled, complicating the categories through which knowledge is organized. Anthropological problems arise when inherited frameworks like “culture” or “urbanism” no longer adequately capture forms of emerging life. Anthropology, Rabinow argues, must not only study its objects but also rework its own tools and assumptions, inventing new modes of engagement for a changing world. Urbanism, approached anthropologically, is not a

fixed domain of practices but a moving terrain of relations that demands continuous rethinking of the frameworks through which urban life becomes visible and intelligible.

Traditional planning often rests on expert abstractions, detached from the embodied realities of urban life. Anthropological methods, by contrast, insist on relationality and presence. Donna Haraway (1988) reminds us that all knowledge is situated; ethnographic inquiry is shaped by the positionality of the researcher and the conditions of encounter. Knowledge, as Kratz (2010) notes, shifts with evolving interactions and partial perceptions. Through this lens, cities no longer appear as coherent totalities to be designed and governed, but as assemblages of bodies, infrastructures, rules, and imaginations (Farias and Bender 2010). Urban life emerges from convergences and frictions, where human and non-human agencies entangle in ongoing negotiations. In this view, planners and designers are not sovereign authors but participants embedded within the contingent life of cities.

When practiced within urbanism, fieldwork demands more than observation or documentation. It calls for reciprocal engagement and a willingness to be transformed by what is encountered. Participatory observation, collaborative mapping, and situated co-design do not extract knowledge; they inhabit urban worlds alongside their makers. Knowledge is never produced neutrally but is shaped through the dis-

cursive and power relations embedded in its making (Briggs 2002). Fieldnotes are not passive records; they are acts of interpretation (Clifford 1990). Ethnography demands an ethics of care and accountability: speaking with, not for, others (Abu-Lughod 1990). As Alcoff (1991) and Anderson and Jack (1991) remind us, listening attentively means attending not only to what is said but also to what remains unsaid.

While urban anthropology has long immersed itself in the textures of city life, *anthropological urbanism* goes further. It applies ethnographic methods not only to interpret urban life but to actively inform and reshape planning and design practices. The task is no longer to describe the city from a distance but to intervene within it, through attentive engagement, embodied observation, and responsiveness to local ways of inhabiting space. Anthropological urbanism equips planners and designers with a sensibility to lived experience and everyday practice, recognizing them as critical to cultivating more responsive and just urban forms.

3. Observing People, Places, and Practices

A common ground for all the participants in this special issue is related to the belief that a good planner/expert in urban studies should own at least one pair of comfortable shoes for walking, observing the city, and *learning from* (not about) residents and users of a place. At the same time, acquiring knowledge of the city is also a bodily experience in the space. Knowledge

comes from pleasant (and sometimes also unpleasant) experiences of places.

Apart from classic readings in Ethnography that represent a key point of reference for this special issue (Cefaï, 2010; 2013; Ocejo, 2013; Dunne et al., 2014; Madden, 2017), a starting point in anthropological approaches to urban space and *its specificities when practiced by planners and designers* is *Ethnography for Designers* by Galen Cranz (2016). From the first pages of her book, Cranz underlines that architecture is not only structure, form, or function. Cultural and social aspects are also relevant and should play a core role for a designer. Through her teaching experiences at the Harvard School of Design, Cranz outlines a path to train future designers to 'listen to the users'. In her book, she takes stock of previous writings (Pavlidis and Cranz, 2012) to underline how ethnographic methodologies may support architectural practice and design. According to Pavlidis and Cranz (2012), the ultimate goal of teaching architecture should be related to improving the design, and learning from the users of the spaces is a way to improve their design. Cranz's notes are useful for planners as well.

If ethnography is the description (*graph*) of people (*ethnos*), for planners, part of the work could also be related to describing behaviours *in the space*, as well as the material expressions of culture – where 'culture' has a broad meaning and includes the city and its built environment. In this direction, Nova's (2014) work calls for a fo-

cus also on the materiality of the built environment, that is seen as an expression of a situated culture: field research includes surveys of the buildings, mapping places and the quality of the built environment, direct participant observation, and interviews with different actors involved in dwelling as a part of a material culture. Cranz's work focuses on some specificities of ethnography when practiced by designers, underlining the main aspects of developing an ethnographical approach with a specific focus on spatial dynamics. Referring to studies on human territoriality, she investigates the role played by the space in power relationships, as well as in facilitating encounters, and separating uses and people. In her work, a clear distinction is established between *direct participant observation* (the key methodology of research for an ethnographer) and participation in design. If participation implies in a more or less rhetorical way a devolution in choices on possible futures for a place from the designer to (a usually a limited number of) residents and users, direct participant observation implies a form of learning based on a whole-of-a-body experience where all the designer's senses are in use to understand a situation in the space. Observation is visual but also happens through touch – Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin* (1996) – smells, and sounds. Many aspects that could be explored through direct sensorial experiences can contribute to rendering a place more or less comfortable, welcoming, and used. A design-

er may observe practices in the space and learn from the users. But, it is argued here with Cranz, this form of learning is not collected to devolve choices to the users. Observing users and uses of the space should not substitute design choices that come from expert knowledge that users do not possess.

The less convincing aspect of Cranz's work is that it outlines a sort of toolkit on how to realise an ethnographic path – significantly coded in each step – in a compressed amount of time. From the point of view adopted in this special issue, coding ethnography step by step in a linear way betrays some specific aspects of this way of developing a knowledge process. 'Being ethnographic' is also being open to serendipity and surprise, discovering relevant issues through paths that lead to unexpected situations and practices (Cefaï, 2013).

People, places, and practices (Stender, Bech-Danielsen and Landsverick Hagen 2021; Briata, Postiglione, 2023) seem to be three core and intertwined keywords in anthropological approaches to urban space. 'People', as in studying 'the urban', a core role should be given to human beings – on the one hand, by observing and trying to understand how people live and use places in their everyday life, on the other hand, by designing places for people to live in. 'Places', as far from any determinism, the spatial and material dimension support/shape people's behaviors and is shaped/ enacted by people, sometimes also through un-expected uses.

'Practices,' as an ethnographical approach for any discipline committed to developing comprehension or transforming a place, should be intrinsically interested in understanding how an articulated system composed of places/objects/people works in a specific location.

All the participants in this special issue share a discomfort with any form of design that does not consider the everyday uses of the space (de Certeau, 1984). They give value to an exploration of 'what is already there' in terms of places, how people use the space, and how people express and cope with their needs through spatial practices.

4. Anthropological Approaches to Urban Space in the Planning Process

Urban decision-making is both political and technical and relies heavily on discursive practices. Planning choices are argued, justified, and contested within political institutions, and the way places are described and represented plays a crucial role in shaping the decisions made about them. In her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jane Jacobs underscores this relationship between representation and policy from the very beginning, using the case of Boston's North End—a well-known Italian-American neighborhood—labeled as a slum.

Although these depictions were factually baseless, they had tangible consequences: they halted neighborhood improvement efforts by public

authorities, pending sweeping redevelopment plans. At the same time, financial institutions refused to issue mortgages due to the perceived risks associated with the area. In essence, merely representing the North End as a slum created, from an institutional perspective, the conditions for it to become one—a classic example of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yet, in Jacobs' view, the North End demonstrated extraordinary resilience. The local economy, driven by small businesses at nearly every corner, ensured a steady presence of people in public spaces, fostering safety and vibrancy. Social solidarity among residents—rooted in shared geographic and cultural backgrounds—enabled them to maintain their homes even in the absence of financial support from banks. There was, in short, a stark disconnection between the negative portrayals perpetuated by media and uncritically accepted by policymakers, and the actual lived experience of the neighborhood, which continued to thrive quietly despite looming threats of demolition.

Perhaps it was Jacobs' powerful critique and the widespread impact of her 1961 book that ultimately helped spare the North End from the fate of "slum clearance." Just a few years earlier, a similar Italian-American neighborhood—the South End—was not so fortunate. When Herbert Gans published *The Urban Villagers* in 1962, documenting the everyday life, customs, and spatial practices of its residents, the neighborhood had already been erased. Its inhabitants—mem-

bers of tight-knit, spatially organized communities—had been dispersed to distant suburbs, their social networks irreversibly fractured.

The case of Boston's North End, which served as the foundation for Jacobs' observational methodology and fieldwork, remains illustrative to this day. Across the globe, urban "power games" are frequently driven by distorted and detached representations of places—particularly those inhabited by marginalized communities with little political voice. Here, ethnographic work plays a vital role: by accurately capturing the lived realities and spatial practices of everyday life, it brings what Henri Lefebvre (1974) calls *lived space* into planning discourse. In doing so, it challenges policy frameworks rooted in hegemonic and arbitrary representations, opening the door to more just and grounded forms of urban development.

At the heart of this methodological shift lies the broader aspiration toward spatial justice—the fair and equitable distribution of spaces, resources, and opportunities within the urban fabric. Inequalities are actively produced and reinforced through spatial arrangements (housing, transport networks, borders, etc.), and the struggle for justice must therefore also be a struggle to transform space (e.g., Soja 2010). Ethnographic approaches, by prioritizing the voices, experiences, and needs of marginalized communities, act as powerful instruments for revealing spatial inequalities and countering systemic exclusions. They enable planning prac-

tices to recognize and repair the social injustices embedded in spatial organization, ensuring that urban and territorial transformations do not reproduce or deepen existing hierarchies but instead foster inclusion, dignity, and empowerment for all residents. In this sense, ethnography becomes not only a tool of knowledge but also a tool of emancipation.

5. Articles overview

To guide the reader through the multiplicity of approaches explored in this issue, the articles are organized to reflect a gradual shift: from questions of representation and urban knowledge production, to practices of spatial negotiation and contestation, and finally to radical reimagining of spatial organization.

In "Co-presence and learning. From interiors to the city and from the city to interiors by looking at practices", Paola Briata and Gennaro Postiglione – experts respectively in urban planning for multicultural contexts and in interiors, domestic culture, and dwelling – reflect on their seven years of cooperation based on a common interest in ethnographical positioning. Their 'interdisciplinary contamination' is grounded in a dialogue between two disciplines focused on cities and dwelling spaces at different scales. People, places, practices have been the three main keywords that have guided their joint work. Their contribution revolves around these words by developing an explicit dialogue with a key text by Pierluigi Crosta (2010) focused on practices

of everyday life and the challenges of co-presence in the space of diverse populations in contemporary cities.

In “Pilot books: navigating plural urban experiences”, Martina Bovo reflects on the kind of interdisciplinary knowledge to be deployed to see and represent migration landing processes, among others involving cities today. Cities are facing rapid socio-demographic changes that often introduce new ways of using and signifying urban spaces; often, the logic and dynamics of these changes cannot be grasped through existing categories and rather call for new ones to be outlined. A need to define and redefine the categories through which space is described and, eventually, governed emerges. The paper discusses the importance of mobilizing some specific forms of knowledge in the study of urban spaces where the production of descriptions and representations of urban uses, populations, and spaces plays a core role, arguing for the transformative potential of these descriptions.

In “Cultural Initiatives and Urban Transformation in Vienna”, Zornitza Draganova develops an urban-anthropological account of independent cultural initiatives – projects and spaces initiated by artists, cultural workers, and community actors operating outside formal state or market institutions. These initiatives include informal art galleries, collective studios, performance hubs, and activist cultural spaces, often located in repurposed buildings or overlooked

city areas. Based on fieldwork across multiple sites, the article explores how these actors activate urban space through cultural production while responding to economic precariousness and shifting regulatory frameworks. Their work generates temporary forms of inclusion and participation, often in conflict with larger processes of gentrification and commodification. While these initiatives rarely result in stable outcomes or fixed interventions, they open up plural and contested terrains of urban meaning. The text “Rivoluzioni Rurali”, authored by Sofia Leoni, explores how the digitalization of rural China – through the rise of e-commerce villages like Junpucun – has profoundly transformed rural life, infrastructure, and socio-spatial organization. These transformations are not purely technical or top-down developments but emerge through informal, lived, and community-driven practices. At the core of the article is the idea that rural areas, traditionally marginalized in Chinese economic planning, are reinventing themselves by creatively integrating e-commerce technologies into everyday life. This is not merely an adoption of digital tools but a reconfiguration of space, work, and community, largely invisible to conventional, macro-scale planning approaches. The practices observed in Junpucun – where homes, streets, and informal logistics hubs blend daily life with economic activity – show how bottom-up adaptations reshape rurality into hybrid spaces of production and living.

In “Las Raices: Protest and Spatial Negotiation”, Camilla Rondot and Antonio di Campi examine the protest camp of Las Raices in Tenerife, located across from a state-run migrant reception center. The camp emerged as both a space of resistance and a site of everyday survival. Drawing on feminist theory and the concept of domestic infrastructure, the authors interpret the camp’s kitchens, tents, and shared utilities as spatial tools that sustained collective life while enabling political dissent. These temporary yet essential structures challenged institutional regimes of control through their very material presence and organization. The article invites a rethinking of the camp’s spatial logic – ephemeral yet organized – not as an exception but as a terrain of political imagination and negotiation. For planners, Las Raices offers a compelling example of how informal spatial practices express alternative forms of belonging and unsettle the assumptions embedded in top-down planning.

In the paper “Il Carcere come Città nella Città”, authored by Ilenia Spadaro, Francesca Pirlone, Fabrizio Bruno, Massimo Ruaro, Paola Penco, and Noemi Pomicino, the prison is rethought as a micro-urban environment, proposing it as a city within the city and advocating for its planning and regeneration through a trans-disciplinary, participatory, and spatially-aware methodology. The case study of the Genoa Pontedecimo prison serves to test and demonstrate this approach. At its core, the paper em-

phasizes the need to address space as a social and political issue, echoing anthropological insights that people produce meaning through the spaces they inhabit. Moving beyond a purely technical or security-oriented view of prison design, it introduces ethnographic-inspired tools – such as participatory questionnaires, spatial matrices (*Spazi x Utenti*), and SWOT spatial analysis – to involve all stakeholders (inmates, staff, educators, volunteers) in diagnosing spatial problems and imagining solutions.

Note

¹ While the entire contribution stems from collective discussions and collaborative work among the authors, the individual sections may be attributed as follows: §1 Introduction and §5 Articles Overview, are the joint work of all three authors; §2 Urban Life Through Anthropological Lenses is authored by Giuseppina Forte; §3 Observing People, Places and Practices by Paola Giuseppina Briata; and §4 Anthropological Approaches to Urban Space in the Planning Process by Giulio Giovannoni.

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