USING PHOTOGRAPHY IN INTERNATIONAL CASE-STUDY RESEARCH IN STIGMATIZED CONTEXTS.
AN EXPERIMENT USING PHOTO-ELICITATION AND 'TRAVELING PICTURES' WITH CHILDREN IN A PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEX OF EASTERN NAPLES.

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of photography in an international research project on publicness and public space in European housing complexes. It proposes an investigation of how photography was applied in a pilot project entailing photo-elicitation in Eastern Naples (Italy), from my perspective as a postdoctoral researcher in architecture and planning collaborating to the project. The pictures of five European housing complexes (called 'traveling pictures') were used in the experiment. For the purpose of the study, I herein propose the analysis of an activity conducted with sixteen students at a middle school and their teachers through the lens of participatory research guided by the principles of feminist scholars and critical pedagogy. The aim of the paper is twofold: firstly, it means to provide an account of how the image-based experiment was developed with young residents of a public housing complex marked by stigma; and secondly, it discusses how the photo-elicitation experiment affected power dynamics and participants' roles both during the activities and within the international research project.

KEYWORDS

Photo-elicitation, Public Housing, Photographs, Participatory Research, Critical Pedagogy, Children

BIO

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Photography as a research tool in public housing research projects

We are witnessing an increase in the production and use of photographs portraying objects, humans and places by a whole different range of people, crossing genders and ages. At the same time, the pervasiveness of pictures and the heterogeneity of their producers in the context of housing and the people's private sphere has also had an impact on the production of academic studies involving residents in photographs. As participatory visual methods are gaining more and more popularity, a number of studies can now offer insights into some emerging methodological and ethical challenges (Switzer 2018; Warr et al 2016; Liebenberg 2009). As a matter of fact, the widespread interest of scholars in photography and visual methods in social and anthropological research (Pretto 2015; Pink 2013; Mitchell 2011; Rose 2016; Pink, Kürti and Alfonso 2004; Warr et al 2016) and the use of specific research methods such as photo-elicitation (Soaita and McKee 2021; Burningham 2020; Rose 2016; Harper 2002; Pretto 2015) have recently pointed out to the fact that photographs have become tools for new experimental research. In the past, photo-elicitation was marginally present in research areas such as anthropology, psychology, education and organizational studies (Harper 2002). More recently, academic journals in visual methods research have published accounts of experiments with photographs conducted by Early Career Researchers at the scale of the neighbourhood (see for instance Schoepfer 2014), to deepen critical understanding of the potentialities and limits of photographs in experimental visual research with residents.

Given this premise, the present article aims at exploring the relationship between ethnography and photography in public space, by discussing how photo-elicitation may support the involvement of young residents of public housing in international academic projects. The study was conducted from the perspective of the author who is an early career researcher in planning and architecture. This is a particularly relevant field of inquiry for at least two reasons. First, it uncovers the potential of images for reaching and interacting with groups that usually are hard to involve in participatory studies (Darbyshire, Macdougall and Schiller 2005; Rose 2016); this is even more true, for example, when it comes to international research projects where the language employed is usually different from that of the residents involved in the experiments. Second, it offers a useful methodology to explore sensitive environments such as housing complexes where stigmatization occurs. At the same time, it is also worth addressing a number of potentially problematic circumstances where researchers may be initially perceived as intruders by residents and marginalized youth, or where young and less young age residents may have concerns about the risks of their involvement and doubt the positive impact of such academic studies.

This article critically interrogates the use of photo-elicitation and photography in an interdisciplinary research project on children living in public housing in Eastern Naples. The study is part of a wider postdoctoral project conducted by the author, aiming at involving residents of different ages to study their role in the production of public space. It discusses how photo-elicitation can be used as a methodology in similar research, taking as an example two participatory sessions in a public housing complex. The sessions are part of a pilot project conducted by the author[1] and initiated in 2019, when sixteen students, between 10 and 12 years old (6 female and 10 male), along with their teachers (3 female) were selected for participating in activities meant to observe the role of residents, schoolteachers, NGOs members and volunteers in public space. The pilot project was not an isolated initiative. On the contrary, it pertained to a wider research project on 4.000 long-time Italian residents located in a public housing complex in Easter Naples. In the summer of 2019, I joined a three-year European project designed as a multi-case study on public space, to be conducted with the use of visual representation by a team of planners, anthropologists, architects, and landscape architects. The Italian case was selected as it would contribute to non-comparative research that encompassed five European public or social housing estates as case studies. Through the different cases, the researchers have had a chance to investigate the dynamics emerging in public space and how they affect residents. In this context, publicness is defined as a phenomenon occurring through and within specific socio-spatial sites (Tornaghi and Knierbein 2014). In this paper, I would like to discuss how visual representation may increase the involvement of children in one of the selected sites for the exploration of the Italian case, i.e. a school.

In the twentieth century, much Italian research on architecture and planning concentrated on housing neighbourhoods and housing complexes, with photography being a central element. More

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[1] I herein acknowledge my privileged position as a white, educated researcher.

specifically, public housing has been extensively photographed and represented in these disciplines. Photography is still very used in housing and neighbourhood investigation, where architects and planners may get in touch with residents (from photographing them to co-researching with non-academics). Social sciences developed a critical and reflective approach towards photography in the last few decades, especially regarding centring and decentering the authority of the researcher as the author of visual representations (Harper 2002). However, this is an aspect that is still not fully addressed by researchers in architecture and planning. As Harper clarifies, photo-elicitation as a visual method is based on the production and use of photography that contributes to the postmodern debate in ethnography, in that the researcher considers the polysemic quality of images and questions the authority of the subjects that researchers involve (Harper 2002: 15). Visual representations and visual (ethnographic) methods may help to understand the changing role of researchers within these disciplines, given their potential in architecture and planning studies (see for example Sandercock and Attili 2010a; 2010b; Siemiatycki 2012) .

The overall aim of this study, and of the wider research project on public housing it is embedded in, is to contribute to a transdisciplinary conversation by reflecting on the usage of visual representations. Researchers interacting with people and residents and educators using visual representations may have some interest in the present analysis[2].

The article is divided into five sections. Sections 1 and 2 provide an outline of the reasons why a participatory pilot project involving children was conducted for the present study on visual representations in a housing complex that underwent stigmatization, and why the local educational institution was involved as part of the author's postdoctoral project. Section 3 focuses on the photo-elicitation methodology as it was developed in Eastern Naples for the purpose of the project. In section 4, an analysis of its applications using participatory research rooted in feminist research and critical pedagogy as an analytical framework is provided so as to discuss how the sessions in photo-elicitation, among other participatory activities, contributed to reconfigure power relations between the participants. So much so that it also contributed to stimulating the involvement of youth in the other case studies of the international project after the pilot project ended. The final section provides an overview of the study limits. It also explains why photo-elicitation using pictures from international housing complexes can be an effective methodology, provided that it is part of a wider project for the active involvement of residents.

1) Photography and stigma in the research project

The international research project on public space in social and public housing started in 2019. It involved four national groups of researchers engaged in the study and production of visual representations of publicness[3]. That same year, my postdoctoral project began as a participatory process. The project entailed the investigation of the use of visual representations in case-study in European housing complexes and how they could be experimentally used in public housing research including the Italian case marked by stigmatization[4].

The local institutions, media and some residents described the entire neighbourhood where the housing complex is located as a 'problematic context'. This 'public perception' was considered. In a

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[2] I would like to share a personal experience that I had as co-supervisor of Italian students in architecture and planning participating in the international research project as interns, and working on the use of visual representations of Italian public space for the project exhibitions. A student was photographed by some of the residents and the pictures were published on social media. Another student was invited by NGO members to present her visual production in a public event. Their agency as research-students and the very act of producing images significantly changed compared to their predefined roles. In this sense, visual representations in neighbourhood studies should be seen as a process more than a product, also in disciplines where there are still strong assumptions, such as the role of the researcher as mere observer.

[3] The international research is conducted by the University of Copenhagen, NMBU - Norway, ETH Zürich, and DiARC - University of Naples "Federico II".

[4] For the concept of stigmatization of neighbourhoods see Wacquant (2016) and Wacquant, Salter and Pereira (2014). I refer specifically to the stigma as a performative idea attached to a specific place: "(…) territorial stigma has become nationalized and democratized, so to speak: in every country, a small set of urban boroughs have come to be universally renowned and reviled across class and space as redoubts of self-inflicted and self-perpetuating destitution and depravity. Their names circulate in the discourses of journalism, politics, and scholarship, as well as in ordinary conversation as synonyms for social hell." (Wacquant, Salter and Pereira 2014: 1273).

report published in 2012 by the Municipality of Naples, the area is represented as follows: "In a social fabric so degraded, so fragmented, with almost non-existent urban spaces and without meeting places it is easy to imagine how organized crime became part of the territory with a radical presence"[5] (Comune di Napoli 2012: 17). Stigmatization was also detected in media and social media products as well as in conversations with the people directly or indirectly involved in the research project. More specifically, the housing complex under investigation was often associated in media products with words such as 'desperation', 'poverty' and 'crime'.

The research – considered the specific aspects of the Italian housing complex[6] – was designed in light of to the following premises: (1) an existing link between stigma and visual representations in the Italian housing complex under investigation; visual methodologies could become a strategy aimed at including marginalized people (Warr et al 2016), or they could reproduce the same processes of stigmatization of both people and places; (2) the risk that visual representations of the local, stigmatized public housing complex may have a negative impact onto the study, because of the fact that the Italian housing complex differs from other research cases pertaining to the same project[7].

Officially, the neighbourhood was described as having a high concentration of low-income people and with a pervasive presence of organized crime. The housing complex in the neighbourhood has more than 1.000 apartments and was built for the massive relocation of people in the years following the well-known Irpinia earthquake (Central-Southern Italy) that took place in November 1980. It was indeed one of the most devastating events hitting the south of Italy in the last century. The realization of the complex fell under the reconstruction process along with 3.988 public housing units to be built in a rural area (Vitellio 2011).

In the public discourse, the specific site under investigation is considered one of the most problematic due to criminal organizations operating therein, over time coupled with a generalized disinvestment in the management and maintenance of post-earthquake constructions. So much so that a 40-year-old resident explained, while approaching one of the sites in the housing complex where an abandoned building is located, that "*this is why we are Zero, nothing*"[8], thus recalling the history of the housing complex's name, which ultimately contributes to its definition as a marginalized and stigmatized place[9].

The narrative of stigma was a frequent and pervasive element emerging during the interviews with residents and operators of NGOs and institutional services. The use of visual representations for the analysis of people's everyday experiences in public space and the research through photographs was a specific challenge of the project, in order to address dominant ideas over imposed by external agents and reproduced in the local context. Methodological experiments can help overcome standardized narratives that could emerge when seeking for comments or answers from people through photographs (Schoepfer 2014), for instance when using neighbourhood images in the interaction with residents. Moreover, as it was this study's aim to make narratives emerge through visual methods, the process of selecting participants for the study became an intrinsic part of the methodological design which was shaped in line with the characteristics of the context.

The case study was seen as a possible manifestation of urban marginality (Wacquant 2008; 2014) where visual representations can lead to a decrease in the sense of place. In this and similar contexts, researchers should take into account the 'erosion of a sense of place' (Wacquant 2008: 7) occurring in space, through material phenomena and discursive practices at the same time. There is a risk of the reproduction and justification of the same dynamics that emerge from those manifestations. In conducting the investigation, I was well aware that socio-spatial narratives and visual evidence (as seen

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[5] All the quotations from Italian reports and transcripts of conversations are translated from Italian into English by the author of this article.

[6] The research was not comparative, but the researchers acknowledged the influence derived from conducting the five cases together. Four of the case studies, excluding the Italian case, had similar characteristics: good or excellent level of maintenance of buildings and open spaces; heterogeneous population by social class and ethnicity; limited and episodic crime phenomena. The Italian case differed in the poor state of maintenance of the residential buildings and open areas; the presence of a homogeneous population (whites, Italians, high poverty levels); widespread and frequent crime phenomena; high sense of insecurity among residents; turnover of inhabitants linked to a perceived sense of insecurity.

[7] See note 4.

[8] From a personal conversation with a resident (November 8, 2021).

[9] The building complex is defined as marginalized and stigmatized in reference to objective spatial characteristics and public discourses on the site (see note 4). Within the debate on the stigmatization of the housing complex, it should also be considered that the complex is bordered on all sides even by metropolitan roads, increasing the sense of spatial isolation.

and photographed by researchers) may influence not only the participants in the study, but also the researcher herself while trying to overcome those narratives. This triggered the urge to critically reflect upon the reproduction of stigma in visual representations, which consequently required to deal with questions about how to do visual research in the specific context of marginality (Mitchell 2011; Warr et al. 2016) such as public housing complexes.

During a private conversation about one of our first photographic explorations in the housing complex, one resident said:

> I remember one of you photographing me when I was hanging out the laundry and that made me feel like an animal in the zoo, so I started to shout at you, and I was very upset! (woman, 60-year-old.)[10].

It is worth pointing out that the housing complex under investigation was photographed after events connected to local criminal activities. The above statement testifies to some of the risks that come with the usage of photographs in public housing as well as the impacts that photography may have on the residents, as some perceived being photographed while immersed in their daily routine as an intrusive practice. Based on this statement, it therefore became necessary to take a different route and use my privileged position as a researcher traveling through the sites of the international project to turn the place images into valuable research means. Operating in a housing complex required being attentive to people's space and intimacy (Orellana 1999). For this reason, setting up a mutual sense of trust and discussing the international project with residents was crucial to the study, as was their inclusion in the project itself.

In Eastern Naples, the team agreed to design activities following participatory approaches and action research (Reason and Bradbury 2006; Torre and Fine 2008). On the other hand, research in the field of feminism and feminist action research (Maguire 1987, 2000, 2001; Reid and Frisby 2008; Frisby, Maguire and Reid 2009; De Lima Costa and Alvarez 2014; Hundle, Szeman and Hoare 2019; Lather 1988, 1991) helped to deconstruct the categories of residents, operators, and researchers as different homogeneous groups. The two – participatory research and feminist action research – helped to cross a boundary between insiders and outsiders and to build relations with people that deepened our understanding of the case, critically reflecting on the difference between the researchers and non-researchers, the residents and the people working in the housing complex. Among the people involved over time, there have been local school teachers, local associations based or working in the complex, higher education students and residents of all ages. Numerous participatory activities were conducted during the first two years of the project. Some activities are still in place. Other scholars called for collective spaces of transnational feminist research (Hundle, Szeman and Hoare 2019); contact zones for investigation and transformation (Torre and Fine 2008; Askin and Pain 2011); spaces to connect personal experiences with larger social processes (Cahill 2007); time-space social arena (Kesby 2005) where collaboration between researchers and non-researchers developed. The attempt to build spaces of interaction with residents in Easter Naples within the international research project can be seen as being part of the creation of spaces to enhance critical listening processes with a transformative attitude (Forester 2006; Sclavi 2003), based on which photographs can potentially stimulate a deeper understanding of the overall context of action in planners and architects.

2) Engagement in researching with photograph: a perspective on children

A 31-month agreement with a local school was signed in October 2019, with the aim to start a pilot project for mutual learning between the Italian research team and the local educational institution in Eastern Naples. After informing the families and getting their consent, a two-month interaction of one/two hour/s per class per week started. Following the teachers' suggestions, the activities were organized during school hours to encourage students to come to school, considering the significant level of dropouts recorded by the school. As a scholar trained in architecture and planning, and as a previous child educator, I offered my expertise in producing maps and models in exchange for the participation of the school in the pilot project. The pilot activities were meant to understand how to create an inclusive and supportive research space that could increase the school's involvement. They were also necessary to

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[10] From a personal conversation with a resident (June 19, 2021).

assess whether the school teachers felt comfortable in continuing their collaboration to the research project.

The participatory activities involved visual representations carried out by students. In one of the activities, selected pictures of the European neighbourhoods were used to initiate a class debate. The local educational institution served as a gatekeeper with the families to introduce the project and obtain informed consent (Fargas-Malet et al 2010). The experiment was designed and enacted using photo-elicitation (Soaita and McKee 2021; Burningham 2020; Rose 2016; Harper 2002; Pretto 2015), using photographs to stimulate the discussion with children. First, the international project's five cases were introduced to the participants to explore their opinions and perceptions of their own public spaces and other public spaces they were not familiar with. The participants were then invited one by one to select images from a set of proposed pictures portraying other housing complexes.[11] In the second part of the activity, the participants were asked to motivate their choice. The research design was guided by an interest in power dynamics between researchers, young residents, and female educators, in light of the framework offered by feminist participatory action research (Maguire 1987; 2001), feminist pedagogy (Luke 1996; Lather 1988; 1991) and critical pedagogy (Freire 1971; Dolci 1988; 2020) for their contribution to the construction of research projects in educational contexts.

In planning studies, scholars started to discuss children as one of the most vulnerable groups more than thirty years ago. This new way of seeing children as vulnerable emerged in the wake of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UN General Assembly, when many scholars overtly stated that urban development plans, policy and practice were based on an abstract idea of childhood. The researchers emphasized that children's needs were misconceived or unaddressed, regardless of their backgrounds and different conditions (Bartlett 1999), and that they were often seen as a problem (Davis and Jones 1997). Western planners saw children as immature and irrational subjects (Edwards 1996), while the experience of childhood was dangerously universalized (Valentine 2004). Although the participation of people was introduced in international planning disciplines, still, investigating children's perspectives was seen as unnecessary. Indeed, adult participation replaced children's involvement, whose exclusion was tacitly accepted (Edwards 1996). Starting from 1989, planning scholars have shown occasional interest in promoting the well-being of children. Some years later, though, the need for an exquisitely child-focused perspective, based on children's involvement, emerged as a critical necessity to reshape generic policies and planning prescriptions that could harm children (Bartlett 1999). Although there was still some scepticism about the introduction of participatory practices in local planning and decision making, the involvement of children was seen as an important step. In fact, it gradually led to the recognition of their voices as well as of their ability to be experts of their own environments, so much so that children were granted the right to participate in community development and planning (Bartlett 2002).

During the 1990s, in Italy, experiments were conducted with children to institutionalize their participation in activities aimed at fostering civic education and direct democratic participation. For example, children councils and youth forums were created and are still functioning in some Italian regions (for an account see Corsi 2002). The debate was led by pedagogists and was limited to a segment of the Italian scientific planning community[12]. International studies recalled the importance of the inclusion of children as social actors (Holloway and Valentine 2000). Many methodological experiments have recently flourished on visual representations in planning with children, e.g. on the use of participatory maps (Freeman and Vass 2010), digital platforms for mapping (Hanssen 2019), tools for the co-design of physical space (Özdemir 2019). Nowadays, children's involvement seems to be still partially, if not addressed at all in planning research showing a critical pedagogical approach (Freire 1971; Dolci 1988; 2020) aimed at recognizing a legitimate role to children. Research in planning and architecture can also engage children at various levels, ranging from their 'full' participation to 'tokenism' (Hart 1997), which can result, as much literature on participation states, even in their overall

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[11] I personally took some photos during my research trip, while others were retrieved from social media and/or official websites. All the photographs represented the housing complexes selected as case studies for the international project.

[12] It is emblematic that, at the beginning of the new millennium, the housing complex in Eastern Naples was selected as a destination for one of the Children's City experiments, with the aim to combine training and practice for child support. In Naples the project should have addressed the multiple problems affecting children and could have promoted alliances between institutions. Unfortunately, the plan was never finalised and the half-built building was abandoned within the housing complex, even though several attempts to complete it over the last fifteen years have been undertaken.

exclusion from the urban environment (Mansfield, Batagol and Raven 2021). Advancing methods, and focusing on approaches or paradigms (Knowles-Yánez 2005), are both fundamental parts of the research involving children as participants.

A self-reflexive analysis on visual participatory activities and participatory approaches in planning studies can help to distinguish between structural impediments to participation (i.e. difficulties in reaching specific individuals or groups) and frictions that may emerge when participatory approaches occur in existing power dynamics (i.e. inclusion and exclusion of participants inside and outside participatory processes).

Despite the frequent references to young people, the risks they are exposed to and the problems affecting children, their direct participation in the public debate seemed not encouraged. Local authorities profiled the neighbourhood as featuring the highest presence of children and young inhabitants (Comune di Napoli 2012: 9). Children and youth are pervasively present in mediatic and institutional discourses on the neighbourhood as well as in discourses of local NGOs and institutional operators, through statements such as

> Young people are the future of this place, and we should help them"[13].

On the other hand, an 'improved understanding' (Liebenberg 2009) of youth experiences may overturn the role of young people as passive objects of discourse in mediatic and public debates. The case we will discuss in the next section is an attempt to overcome the exclusion of children residing in the social housing complex that was selected as a case study. The analysis of the structural causes related to the school context, of the barriers and of the opportunities that emerge during the research process will provide insights into some of the challenges I have encountered.

3) Exploring "with children": seeing things differently

This section focuses on the photo-elicitation activities undertaken with a group of children selected for the purpose of the study. Eighteen pictures from the five case studies pertaining to the international research project were chosen: 5 photographs from Naples; 6 from Denmark; 4 from Switzerland about case one and two; 3 from Norway. The collection of photos was named 'traveling pictures'. The name was chosen because each photo came with a personal account of my experience visiting the sites or, alternatively, with a description published online by the residents, in case of places I had not had a chance to visit yet. The selection process and the activity itself was conducted in December 2019 and supervised by a senior researcher from the project team that had previous experience with photo-elicitation.

Two sessions were organized with the assistance of schoolteachers. The two sessions (A and B) were conducted separately with two different groups of students. Each group consisted of the same number of students, who were all the same age. Session A comprised 8 students and 1 teacher; session B, 8 students and 2 teachers. The duration of each session was the same. First, the photos were placed on a desk in the classroom (Figure 1). The photos represented interiors and open spaces, with street furniture and greenery, elements of space delimitation (curbs, fences, gates, etc.), and/or people doing some activities in different settings. We asked both students and teachers to select three photos. Then, we discussed each picture in a pre-established numerical order, mentioning the person who had selected each picture. We were interested in how images representing public housing complexes could help to produce narratives of the Italian housing complex. The activity raised enthusiasm among all the participants. Even the instructors were very participative and curious, as opposed to previous activities[14], when the participants lost their interest very fast and the instructors seemed overwhelmed (i.e. by interacting with their students while the researchers were there).

The photo-elicitation experiment lasted approximately two hours per group. This method was effective in keeping the attention alive and increasing the participants' involvement. The insights that emerged constitute one of the most notable results. Some opinions and ideas about the sites pictured in

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[13] Extract taken from a public speech given by a teacher during the commemoration of a young victim in the local church (June 8, 2021).

[14] Some additional test activities were also conducted for the pilot study, for a total of ten meetings of two hours each. The activities consisted in collaborative mapping, collages and models, through which children could practice some visual representation techniques. See the next paragraph for an assessment of the different methods we used.

Figure 2 and 3 were outlined, that suggested alternative perspectives and perceptions of those sites. Other insights pertained to the places in Figure 4, that I later visited having in mind the children's perspective. Insights regarding the Italian housing complex where the children lived were also relevant in that alternative viewpoints with regard to the complex emerged that were different from our understanding of the public space. Overall, these insights expanded our set of hypotheses formulated in previous steps. The results helped to develop a deeper understanding of how the children made sense of the spaces and to gain a new look on the sites that were discussed. Aspects emerged that had been previously overlooked or not considered at all, given possible preconceptions due to my gender, age and social condition that put some distance between the researcher and the site under investigation (Liebenberg 2009). Photography allowed the creation of a link connecting different realities (Pink 2013): that of the participants' and the reality of the other sites. The participation of children revealed a nuanced perspective (Kesby 2005), thus enriching my own point of view[15].

FIGURE 1-2: (left) The pictures on the teacher's desk during one of the sessions; (right) Outside one of the apartments in the Danish complex. ©Marilena Prisco - 2019.

Session A and B were conducted using the same protocol. Surprisingly, in session A no participant chose Figure 2 (coded as n. 10), although, in our opinion, it showed elements that we had previously identified in the children's neighbourhood. When the children were asked why nobody selected the photo, one student said: "Desolation. Unhappiness. It looks like a storage room to me". Some context was therefore provided and it was explained to the participants that in the place showed in the picture it was common that people of that housing complex left their personal belongings, like bicycles and shoes, out of their apartment door. When the children were asked whether any of them had the same habit, one of the students replied as follows: "If you do it here, your things will be stolen!" The conversation went on for a while. In the following session, again no student selected Figure 2. When the same question was posed (i.e. why nobody selected it), one participant asked to have a closer look. The photo went from hand to hand through the classroom. Again, we provided some context to understand the picture. This time, though, the picture enabled a longer and crowded conversation during which many of the participants voiced their opinions at once. One student said that the photo could resemble the entrance hall of one of their apartment buildings, while another said that storage rooms in his building were located on the roof or on the ground floor.

Another interesting fact regards Figures 3 and 4 (coded as n.16 and n.18). Figure 3 was the second most chosen, while, in both sessions, nobody selected Figure 4. When discussing Figure 3, a comparison was suggested. A student in session A said, regarding Figure 3, that "there is a table and some empty chairs where nobody is sitting… so we can go there together and spend some time without being bothered". Another referred to Figure 4 as a 'train station', another as 'a boring place'. They all agreed that Figure 3 represented a space where they could play and spend some time. This was the first time I realized that none of the courtyards in their neighbourhood is furnished with chairs or benches to sit.

More than a year later, when visiting the site portrayed in Figure 4, my perception of that space, influenced by what emerged during the photo-elicitation activity, was shared with the international

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[15] For example, debates emerged on the role of food in public space, on the maintenance of public gardens, on furnishings in open areas.

research group and it animated a conversation with the other researchers.

FIGURE 3-4: (left) A courtyard in the Danish site - ©Marilena Prisco - 2019; (right) The entrance of the community centre in one of the two Swiss sites - source: www.tscharni.ch.

The use of representations (especially photos) proved to be of great potential to this study when combined with a self-reflexive attitude towards the conversations generated through the photo-elicitation activities. The photos triggered useful conversations and encouraged all researchers to share their own stories or hearsay conveyed by media reports and social media about the places and the situations portrayed. And so did the children and their teachers, when sharing their personal perspectives. Nonetheless, it was essential to avoid the oversimplification of children's engagement, and to question my power position in the research project and the housing complex based on the reflexive practice proposed by participatory and feminist research.

Other scholars maintain that a self-reflexive attitude is not sufficient to justify participatory studies with children to empower them in research processes. They also highlight that there are risks connected to their participation in structured activities. For example, standards and rules set by adults in sessions may reduce their freedom (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). The next section draws on the political dimension of participation as a situated practice (Cornwall 2002), addressed by placing participatory visual representations and photo-elicitation within the context in which the longer research project was designed and conducted (the context of the public housing complex and the context of the international research project) and the effects that the pilot project had in the process.

4) Understanding the experience through the lens of power

The participatory experiments were helpful to understand why architecture and planning scholars should interact with the participants in a research project using a self-reflexive approach. This is crucial especially in the context of public housing, in order to deal with possible stigmatization in the interaction with residents and for rethinking power dynamics determined by the research process. The processual nature of participation – not 'taken for granted' but critically analysed for how it developed (or not developed) during the pilot project – unveils structural, contextual and relational barriers which may cause the exclusion of children. Such an exclusion may occur in case attention is not given to power and to the micro-politics of participation as a situated practice (Cornwall 2002). This is particularly relevant in research involving residents of public housing and especially when it comes to children. By addressing power dynamics in participatory contexts, scholars in participatory studies provide insights into how such dynamics can temporarily be dismantled. Participatory and feminist participatory research encompass many studies that adopted participatory methods with children (see for instance Hunleth 2011; Morgan et al 2002; Clark and Percy-Smith 2006; Fargas-Malet et al 2010; Burningham et al 2020). The perspective provided by participatory literature helps to move the attention from participatory products in the form of visual representations (i.e. maps, platforms, drawings made with children), to consider how power relations are restructured in research processes, within the participatory space where visual representations are produced or taken from elsewhere (i.e. the 'traveling pictures').

Given our interest in power alterations and visual representations in public housing research, the pilot project was designed as part of a three-year process activated within an international project. Since the photo-elicitation activities were meant to be part of the wider pilot study resulting in a future project with the local school, some additional test activities were also conducted, for a total of ten meetings of two hours each for each of the two groups. The activities consisted in collaborative mapping, collages and models, through which children could practice some visual representation techniques. Of all the applied methods, photo-elicitation proved to be the most effective in fostering confidence, granting inclusion between the children, and having performative effects (Schoepfer 2014) which triggered conversations and debates. It worked very well also because it prompted the participation of the schoolteachers. Conversely, during other activities, children and schoolteachers had showed less interest or seemed to be less confident in the techniques of visual representation that we were testing together. Unfortunately, the image-based activities only lasted only two hours per session and the entire pilot study lasted two months. As Pat Maguire emphasizes (1987) it takes time to build relationships and to practice the ability to listen as paying attention to the participants during processes which might be uncertain and surprising – being attentive to 'the other side of voice' (Maguire 1987: XVI) –. The use of photographs has been shown to increase participant interest and accelerate relationship building in such a limited time pilot project.

In participatory studies, lots of critical attention has been devoted to issues of power and practices of empowerment. More specifically, research in feminist participatory studies addressed the production of knowledge by vulnerable people (Greenwood 2000). The Italian case study favoured critical reflection on the use of photography in all the other four case studies, also among the scholars that had different epistemological perspectives. Participatory Studies that rely on action research have extensively worked on research processes that may connect the feminist challenge to power structures with the interventionist approach of action research studies (Greenwood 2000; Reid and Frisby 2008). Rooted in action research and in its attempt to reconfigure power embedded in everyday relations, societal structures, and institutional practices (Reason and Bradbury 2006; Frisby, Maguire and Reid 2009; Reid and Frisby 2008), participatory studies have devoted special attention to observe the dynamics emerging during participatory activities and if or how these dynamics are conducive of understandings of hidden dynamics. They share the same interest that critical pedagogists have in the 'oppressed' (Freire 1971; Dolci 1988; 2020), in the causes of their oppression, and in the processes and structures of oppression and exploitation they intend to transform. Visual representation in the history of public housing and, more specifically, in this public housing neighbourhood (as discussed previously in this paper), has not addressed the inclusion of children as participants, in most cases. The possibility that children can raise their voice is usually limited. Even more so because of their objectification in research pictures. Through photography, silencing, stigmatization or celebration may also permeate institutional research, even in participatory studies. The approach in this study entailed careful consideration of the risk of silencing children's voices in the design of a participatory research process (Checkoway 2011). Children are not the oppressed, voiceless people as they exercise their agency at different levels, also in public housing. The oversimplification of power dynamics (Cahill 2007) can ultimately undermine the evaluation of their real potential, as their ability to contribute to overcoming the dynamics between children and adults can be consequently overshadowed.

It is worth noticing that during the photo-elicitation activity, students that had not taken part in other activities within the same group developed increased confidence in sharing their own opinions. By means of creating a protected space, the superimposition of restrictive rules and surveillance was avoided, which is a problematic aspect of participatory activities conducted in non-protected areas (Orellana 1999).

The two sessions provided further examples of how confidence can be gained during photo-elicitation activities. The first is the case of a girl aged 12, who had partially joined the activities proposed in the previous weeks and was presented to us as a student having some difficulties in her relationship with the rest of the class. Initially, she put her head on the desk and strongly manifested her unwillingness to participate. Later on, she reluctantly agreed to participate in the first part of the session, consisting in the selection of pictures. She therefore selected pictures 4, 12 and 14. While the group members were commenting on the pictures in numerical order, her attitude towards the activity changed. Contrary to the rest of the group, she did not comment on picture 4. She was also unsure about what to say regarding picture 12 and she answered the questions "why do you like this picture? What do you like about it?" saying "… there are light, plants, colours and clothes hanging". But, by the time we turned to picture

14, she had become confident enough to firmly state that she liked that picture because of "its bright colours and because there are groups of people, bikes, games". At that point, the entire group had become more confident and much focused on the activity. The second case is that of another 12-year-old girl joining the second session, who showed similar difficulties in the interaction during previous activities. She selected pictures 1, 4 and 7. When asked about her opinion in regard to picture 1, she simply replied with yes or no answers, after being encouraged by her teachers. In commenting picture 4, she looked for the support and approval of her teacher, while saying: "how can you say, Prof… I don't know what they are doing". However, later on, she actively participated in group comments by providing details of the places she knew, expressing her personal opinions, etc. (i.e. "here there is a pizzeria!"; "this is very ugly!").

To understand how the activity may facilitate or not the rearticulation of roles and power, session A and B were compared. A relevant difference in the two sessions consists in the role that the teachers played throughout the activities (all female and residents). In session A, the teacher was a long-term employee who had been working in the housing complex for more than 25 years. She therefore knew the context very well. In session B, the two teachers were contract teachers employed on temporary engagements with the school. They had recently started working there and, for this reason, had only a limited knowledge of the context. In session A, the experienced teacher participated in the selection process with the students. In the comment's session, she shared her opinions too, showing a different perspective compared to the students. When we presented the place where the pictures had been taken – part of the pictures taken by me during the research visit in Copenhagen – the teacher spontaneously joined the conversation by providing additional information about the housing complex and its residents. She also commented on the disappointing quality of the space in the Italian housing complex compared to what she could see in the pictures, and expressed her own desires for the students. Speaking of Copenhagen, she asked "Why don't you bring us with you next time?" and added "it is a pity that the international researchers will come here, we would have liked better to go there!"[16]. She saw the international research space as an opportunity for her to put her knowledge of the residents to good use, and for her students to leave the housing complex. In session B, the two teachers joined the experiment as well by adding information during the activity. They mainly asked for more details about the contexts in which the pictures had been taken or shared their genuine opinions: "What is the name of this housing complex?"; "I didn't know that this is something you may find around here!"; "this reminds me one of the neighbourhoods in Naples"; "no, I don't agree… that neighbourhood is less green than you think". In session B, the teachers acted as participants rather than instructors. This was very important in order to reconfigure power relations during the session and to involve the participants in a meaningful way, thus disrupting daily dynamics in the school setting. The pictures successfully structured the dialogue during the photo-elicitation activities. The pictures we used helped to change group dynamics, although temporarily and partially; they enhanced the conversation on how space is conceived in housing complexes, and on pre-established roles that were temporarily suspended. We could notice, though, that the genuine interaction between the students and their instructors decreased when the teacher showed her knowledge of the context. Using photographs of international settings taken from the other case studies was important not only because it triggered the participants' curiosity for 'faraway and different' contexts (a narrative which was often mobilized by me and by the participants to the school activities) but also because it allowed them to experience the production of other narratives, as the experiment was based on acknowledging them as co-researchers in an international research project on public housing.

Unfortunately, the pilot activities did not result in a participatory action research project that brought to a prolonged inclusion of the children, because the school building was shut down in March 2021, due to the pandemic emergency. The photo-elicitation activity and the other activities of the pilot project were an important step in the ongoing research. However, they also proved that there are risks and downsides in linking a visual participatory project to the specific site where the activities take place, relations of trust are established and rules are set up. Because of the pandemic outbreak, the site of the school remained closed for most of that school year and the following. We managed to re-design some activities for a second pilot project based on interactions with the students, their families and the operators as virtual activities. Despite our efforts, though, the participatory activities were only sporadic

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[16] The pilot project preceded the research visit of the international team in Naples, a few weeks after the completion of the here discussed activities.

and brief (few sessions between April 2020 and May 2021). Due to the virtual activities, we were unable to create a personal bond with the teachers that could support the involvement of the students in a long-term project with children. The first pilot project (with physical activities) and the second pilot project (with virtual activities) did not contribute to identifying long-term objectives in the interest of the researchers, the teachers and the children.

Overall, the potential of photo-elicitation as a research method in international housing research encompassing cross-case studies should be further explored. However, its ability to activate trans-local empowerment is confirmed. For instance, the research activities conducted with the children gave rise to two additional collaborative activities involving youth, in which cooperative relations took different forms. As a matter of fact, the research team connected the school in Eastern Naples with a school located in one of the Swiss neighbourhoods involved in the international project. Interaction was facilitated between the two schools, consisting in the students exchanging presentation letters. Another opportunity for trans-local collaboration was offered by the Swiss research team. A Swiss-based NGO working with one of the Swiss local schools was asked to collaborate on the production of a storytelling style video about the public space in the neighbourhood. Both pre-established links between the Swiss researchers and some residents, schoolteachers and NGOs – the pre-existing relations of trust between researchers and non-researchers – and the example of the Neapolitan pilot project seemed to guide the decision to design such activities within the project. The video was presented and discussed with the researchers and the young participants from Switzerland during one of the international research meetings. Although the activities conducted in Eastern Naples by the Italian team succeeded in inspiring other researchers to include children in their research projects, they remained isolated cases also due to the lack of funding (Burningham et al 2019), time, skills and safety (due to spread of the pandemic) in all research groups.

5) Conclusion

This paper is the result of a self-reflexive practice on the use of photographs in a stigmatized public housing context in Eastern Naples, from my perspective as a postdoctoral researcher in architecture and planning collaborating to the project. The case-study of Naples was selected for an international research project conducted by a team of planners, anthropologists, architects, and landscape architects. In the specific case the production of research pictures and their publication may have affected stigmatization processes at the detriment of residents and children as well. Specific challenges for researchers emerged in terms of accessing the housing complexes for the purpose of conducting the research, developing trust with residents and being inclusive towards different groups that tend to be excluded in research conducted by architects and planners. For this reason, the use of visual representation – especially of photography – was tested in participatory activities with children and schoolteachers within a pilot project in the local school.

The pilot project involved a group of young students, where negative narratives combined with a high level of material decay of the housing complex. Based on our experiment, photographs in elicitation activities and 'traveling pictures' – photographs of the other housing complexes of the international project – can contribute to the creation of participatory spaces in international research on public housing complexes that are also meaningful and significant for architects and planners. The project provided inspiration to test new forms of collaboration between researchers and participants. Photo-elicitation allowed children and teachers to share their personal opinions in a more open and collaborative way compared to previous activities conducted using different methods, and pictures of the international case-study proved to have a potential that could be tested by architects and planners. Cases were recorded in which students, who had not taken part in previous activities, enthusiastically participated in the photo-elicitation experiment and managed to express their opinions in a more confident way. We had a good result also for how the use of photographs redefined the role of schoolteachers, while in other types of participatory activities with children they tended to reproduce stigmatizing narratives in the interaction with children (e.g. co-mapping). As in the case I presented, participatory visual research may be suited for researchers that are using visual representations in public housing studies to redefine power dynamics in international research studies that require the researcher's presence on site. Educational sites such as the school may be considered as sites for participatory research with children especially in case of stigmatized complexes and participatory research can have multiple

positive effects in those sites – for the residents of the housing complexes, local operators such as schoolteachers and for the researchers. Based on our experience, it seems safe to say that investigating children's reasons for participating in research (Hunleth 2011) as well as teachers' reasons for joining the activities should not be underestimated.

As for the international research group, we rediscussed the relationships between researchers and young residents. Visual methodologies were of great help in boundary crossing (Liebenberg 2009) and in stimulating other researchers in involving children. Photographs of the five international case studies (used for the photo-elicitation in the pilot project) helped in this purpose because they showed the potential to facilitate connections between academics and non-academics of different ages and between researchers from different units and research disciplines. However, only some of the members of the international group included children – in quality of residents – through schools or families. They did so when, for instance, pre-established links between the researchers and some of the residents already existed. The lack of funds, time, skills and security (due to the spread of the pandemic) we have encountered suggests that specific budgets and flexible research schedules should be considered for the participation of children and fragile groups in research projects in housing complexes. These aspects should be carefully considered, while also looking at the opportunities that the researchers may create when bridging local contexts and international research spaces.

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