From the Metropolis To the Village: The Art Of *Designing Disorder* As a Transitional Practice
An Interview with Pablo Sendra

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Abstract
The interview with Professor Pablo Sendra explores applying design-driven urban regeneration strategies — traditionally used in cities — to small towns and historic villages. Drawing on *Designing Disorder*, co-authored by Sendra and Richard Sennett, the discussion highlights how fostering adaptable, co-designed spaces can stimulate social connections and sustainable transformations. Sendra emphasizes the importance of combining physical and social interventions through an 'assemblage' approach, where interconnected systems shape urban change. Prototypes, as temporary, low-cost solutions, are proposed to test and refine interventions. Collective care and co-creation emerge as critical for nurturing community ownership, social resilience, and climate adaptation. The interview underlines the potential of these methods to enhance fragile territories by prioritizing flexible, inclusive, and environmentally mindful designs.

The interview with Professor Pablo Sendra stems from the insights that emerged during the symposium *Stretch the Edge. Design driven processes for reactivating small walled towns and inland areas* with the intention of trying to propose further insight. Specifically, how design-driven practices of reactivation and regeneration, routinely applied in complex contexts such as large cities, can also be used in smaller areas such as historic villages or inland towns. The reflections start from the book *Designing Disorder* (2020), which Pablo Sendra co-authored with Richard Sennett[1], to expand into possible adaptations of the strategies described in other territorial contexts as well. The aforementioned text brought back to the center of the discussion the practices by which regeneration processes, or more generally the dynamics of transformation of urban contexts, are planned and implemented. Pablo Sendra is Associate Professor at the Bartlett School of Planning - UCL in London, directing the MSc Urban Design and City Planning program and as coordinator of the Civic Design CPD. He combines his academic career together with his work as an architect and urban planner through his urban design practice LUGADERO[2], a firm committed to the creation and facilitation of co-design processes[3].

The critical gaze offered by his research and work pushes design thinking to question traditional practices to foster an original compositional and transformative approach. An application scenario, that of urban transformations, which allows again to highlight the strong mediating power offered by design cultures (Celaschi, 2008; Formia, Gianfrate & Vai, 2021). The designer as a designer of not only physical but also symbolic, technological and service infrastructures, capable of capturing and mediating social, environmental and economic aspects of fundamental importance to foster sustainable development of cities (Gianfrate, 2024). The research cue offered within the book *Designing Disorder* allows one to push curiosity further and ask whether these examples of practices can also apply at different scales, to be accommodated in reduced contexts, such as the many small towns or historic villages found scattered throughout Italy (Cersosimo & Donzelli, 2020).

Places also characterized by complexity and fragility, bent by the travails of depopulation and often by the lack of services, but with a relevant cultural and natural heritage to be enhanced and reshaped to foster new ways of fruition and enhancement (Parente & Sedini, 2018). This means delving into clutter design strategies, testing their applicability at other spatial scales, and highlighting the opportunities for growth offered by this type of design. The concept of adaptability in systems, administrations, and projects, the flexibility of forms and transformations, and finally the processes of formation, are the main aspects discussed here to try to respond in innovative manners to the many crises of contemporaneity, first and foremost the climate crisis.

[1]
Richard Sennett is an American sociologist born in 1943, known for his studies of social dynamics in modern cities, work and culture. He has explored topics such as labor flexibility, the transformation of urban spaces and social inequalities. Sennett has taught at several prestigious universities, including the London School of Economics and Harvard. His work combines sociology, philosophy and history to analyze contemporary experience in globalized societies.

[2]
You can learn more about the firm's various projects at the dedicated web page: https://www. lugadero.com/

[3]
You can follow track of these projects within the Community - Led Regeneration webpage https://reflect.ucl.ac.uk/community-led-regeneration/ and in the text of the same name co-written with Daniel Fitzpatrick in 2020.

LS   Building on the reflections expressed in the first part of the book[4] (Sendra & Sennett, 2020), do you think there is a need for a revision of the concept of the "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1968), particularly in light of the evolving concept of symbolic/physical infrastructure — the difference between cité and ville (Sennett, 2018) — and the increasingly evident tendency for those who govern the fragile territories of the inland areas to increasingly espouse a vision that associates the territory with a product instead of a process (Magnaghi, 2001)?

PS   I am not sure if exactly a revision of the concept is needed. I think the concepts themselves don't need to be revised that much, but rather we need to understand how they apply to different contexts. The book is based on the context of the 2010s, which is actually different from the 2020s, there would be a lot of things I would revise again if I had to rewrite it, but the kind of parallels we draw, particularly around issues about the right to the city or issues like product versus process, is about how the city was produced in the 1960s and 1970s in comparison to how it is being built today. Back in the 1960s-1970s, the city was built from the top-down with a strong state presence: top-down with a strong state presence.
Here in Britain, I think the 1960s was a kind of extension of post-war reconstruction and the creation of the welfare state. In fact, many interventions started from the state, such as the construction of social housing. There was also a strong belief in great infrastructure and the potential of the automobile to shape the city.
During that period, many urban highways were built, both in Europe and America, and many large housing projects, all always with a strong state presence.
One example, where this kind of top-down urbanism is evident, is the highways that were built in New York, or were planned in New York and then stopped thanks to Jane Jacobs. Even today there is still a lot of top-down imposition and imposition of order, but this imposition of order, this pre-determination of functions and this idea of creating the city as a product rather than a process, comes mainly from global finance capital. It is something that had already emerged in the 1980s and even before, but somehow the 2008 global financial crisis provided an excuse, with austerity, to go even further, and we see how cities like London, where I live, are being created by developers, and they are the ones imposing these kinds of order.
So, I think it's more a question of understanding, rather than reviewing the concept itself, how it applies in each context and what problems arise in each context.
To complete, I think it is quite interesting that there is a parallel between that era of the 1960s–1970s and the 2010s–2020s in terms of the imposition of order. There is also a parallel in the resistance to that order and the system that seeks these uses of disorder or this Designing Disorder that we talk about in the book.
That's why we make, in a way, these connections between the activist movements of the 1960s and 1970s and some of the activist movements of today, this connection is very

interesting, and we can learn a lot from it.

LS   Trying to move away from a post-modernist vision that asso-ciates each space with a certain function based on predetermined relationships and top-down designs, what are the design strategies you propose that are best suited to foster an open, flexible and incomplete system?

Do you think these strategies are also suitable for inland areas characterized by historic villages and small towns?

PS   When we talk about disorder, I think it is important to high-light that we do not mean disordered forms or things like that related to urban form. In terms of disorder, it is more about providing conditions for unplanned situations and activities. Sennett wrote in the early 1970s that cities needed a cer-tain amount of disorder to provoke contact between people and cause that kind of unpredictable interactions[5]. What I wonder is: what urban design interventions could provoke this? Specifically, as an architect and urban designer, this is what I wanted to design. I thought that by starting with the infrastructure and having a very wide definition of it-both as what goes underground and as the features and equipment of public space and social life-you could provoke these kinds of unpredictable interactions.

And I think this works on very different scales. In some areas you'll have a context of diversity and a very multicultural city, as in the case of London, and the type of infrastructure will have to respond to those conditions, whereas in smaller cities you might have situations related to different genera-tions, depopulation or the need for social connections, and you'll need a specific type of infrastructure to provoke those social conditions.

So in a way, I think the strategy works in both larger and smaller contexts, but you have to study what the local needs are in order to propose a certain kind of infrastructure that can provoke those kinds of interactions.

What are the issues that prevent people from connecting and interacting? What are those spaces and organizations that support existing connections? How to build new ones?

In the book, we propose that the first step should be looking at the existing social fabric, the existing social infrastructure and the spaces where people connect, so we can explore how to enhance them. And then a second step is, once we are enhancing them, to start proposing new forms of infra-structure that can create new connections between people. But to do that, you need to understand the social fabric and understand what pieces of infrastructure could potentially create new connections.

RM   Bringing the focus back to those processes within small historic towns that try to change the status quo and work with the communities living in these towns, what is your critical viewpoint regarding those processes that try to institutionalize the present neighborhood communities? What do you think are the risks that may emerge and how do you suggest approaching those areas where the social infrastructure is not yet present/recognizable? Do you think it is important to focus initially on the social infrastructure and then move on to the physical infrastructure, or to pursue the processes simultaneously?

PS   I think it's all at the same time. I don't think there is one thing before the other. One thing I struggled with a lot when I was doing my PhD was this dialectic between physical determinism and its opposite, which we might call social determinism. I don't think it's one or the other. I think there is a core dependence between both. So, it is very difficult to separate them. I found the concept of assemblage very useful in this sense. I think it is mentioned in *Designing Disorder*, but I have also written about it in other papers[6].

The concept of assemblage is to understand the different components of the city, both the physical spaces, the political processes, the social relationships, the urban policies, the different actors and the different organizations involved in these social relations, and to consider all these elements as an interconnected system. And when we are in different spaces, we try to understand that space as an assemblage of physical/non-physical, human/non-human components that are in continuous interaction, to understand what assemblage exists in a place, what the social and physical processes are, and how they relate to each other in each context in order to intervene on them.

And when we intervene on them, we cannot say, "OK, now we're going to do the physical intervention and then the social intervention." We do all of them together as a process, because we are working as an assemblage.

For example, the process for building Gillett Square, which is a square in East London, worked in that sense. It was not a project of creating a public space and then adding elements. It was a process of assemblage: the square was previously a parking lot next to an old building, and it was a process of creating a process of refurbishing the old building to make art studios and workspaces, they started putting kiosks on the edge of the parking lot. People started to gather around the kiosks, which had very low rents, which allowed local people and businesses, especially from the Afro-Caribbean community, to be able to lease them. So, people started to gather around the kiosks, creating public space before the plaza was even built. This also created the need to build a plaza, bringing together various cultural venues such as the Vortex Jazz Bar or the Dalston Culture House. Then two ship containers were placed with different elements inside that people, volunteers, and workers could use (ping-pong tables, market structures, outdoor projection screens, visual materials, skateboarding pieces). This

has resulted in a square that is constantly transforming, like an open system. If we think about the process of creating this plaza, it is not physical interventions on one side and social interventions on the other side. They are all made as an assemblage. The idea of putting kiosks would not have worked without considering that they had to have very low rent to include certain businesses that otherwise could not stay there. The deal of putting ship containers to continuously transform the square would not have worked without the other physical interventions. It is about designing with this assemblage approach, not doing the social intervention first and then the physical intervention, but making a set of interconnected interventions, some of which are both social and physical at the same time.

RM   In this connection, participatory processes regarding the use of common goods and active citizenship participation tools have been initiated in some Italian urban contexts (Arena, 2006). These have led to the formalization of *Patti di Collaborazione*[7], a useful operational tool for officially recognizing the actions of citizenship. In light of this important participatory heritage (Michiara, 2016, De Nictolis & Iaione, 2016), I would like to ask you what your point of view on training is. I think that all actions dedicated to training and informing those who are involved in the transformation of the territory now, and those who will be in the future, are very important. Encouraging actions that promote some kind of training for decision makers working in administrations as well is an important step in trying to implement these kinds of initiatives. What are your thoughts on this? Is it possible to integrate this new perspective into the training of designers, policy makers and technicians in administrations?

PS   I think we need that. We actually need open institutions, where there are people in administrations who have that creativity and that curiosity for change and for doing things differently. I think in London local authorities are starting to have more creative planners wanting to do things differently, and I've perceived it especially because I teach. I teach in a master's program in urban design and city planning, I'm the program director, and I've seen, teaching in this field for ten years, how some of my brightest students have gone on to roles in public authorities trying to change things from the inside. It's always difficult, it always takes time because you have to get to more senior positions to be heard and to be able to create change. But I also think the answer here is to create open institutions that want to explore that change. Both The Uses of Disorder and Designing Disorder are inspired by ideas from anarchism. But what we're saying is that we don't really think that government should disappear, but that it should be an open city, a city that is governed in a more open way, in the sense that the city has to continuously learn from below. So city governments can continuously learn from grassroots movements and reproduce those processes that grassroots movements create, but also support those processes that are much more open and do not need to be institutionalized. I think this is something

quite important. Grassroots movements should work as grassroots movements and should simply be supported by city administrations. But at the same time, city administrations should learn from these open processes and start replicating them to make the city much more flexible and adaptable to these initiatives.

RM   Another question: interpreting your writings, you suggest designing prototypes that can activate these types of practices. The monitoring phase is particularly strategic for obtaining useful feedback to modify the design and make it effectively flexible. In this context, what role does the designer play in the management, maintenance and monitoring phases?

PS   It takes time to build all these processes. When you're doing a project that may include larger interventions, and you're building the prototype, you have to do it within a certain timeline, and you have to spend time to see how it works. I think there is always this critical point, and I have also discussed this with different community groups and community organizations in London. They use the concept of meanwhile space, a temporary space that you use almost as a test for future interventions. Some of the discussions I've had with community groups are really about what this meanwhile space leads to. A meanwhile space, or a prototype, is used to test low-cost interventions. They are low-cost and reversible in the sense that if they don't work, you can always go back and test other options. But you need to allow time and resources within a process. For example, if you're asked to do a public space project and your aim is to do a larger intervention, but as part of the participatory process to build that larger intervention you want to make prototypes, it's important to think about how to include people in the creation of that prototype, but then once you've built the prototype, how are you going to monitor its use?
I would add that something I've explored in some of the more recent projects is that when you create these kinds of smaller interventions/prototypes, it's also about creating a collective care process for those interventions. For example: if you envision a planting scheme where you start working with local residents or you see people doing community gardening in their neighborhood and you do it as an initial prototype, you not only monitor how it's unfolding, but you also create the community governance structures necessary to take care of it.
For example, in the case of Gillett Square, we could look at those ship containers as almost prototypes because they are low-cost interventions with different functionalities. They could have been something temporary, something that would have lasted a year, but they were there for many years because people took ownership of them, started to manage that infrastructure. So, this is also how we can make from creating a prototype to creating a prototype that we can develop further and that is not wasted but becomes something that people take care of and continue to use.

LS   The concept of collective care is a theme that is particularly dear to us, especially from a Responsible Innovation perspective (Succini, 2023). And tracing precisely the theme of responsibility, care practices and urban transformations, we have our final question: considering the current climate crisis scenario that society is experiencing, do you think that "designing disorder" is a strategy that climate change adaptation measures can adopt to promote resilient and adaptive territories that can support the ecological transition process?

PS   The infrastructures for disorder, in its main characteristic, is building a public space that is adaptive and ever-changing, and I think this is the kind of city that becomes most resilient to climate change.
First of all, the most climate resilient cities are those that have a strong social infrastructure. If we think about Eric Klinenberg's book *Palaces for the people*, where he begins by explaining how, in a certain place in the United States, there was a natural disaster, and it showed that those spaces where people were more connected were much more resilient than those spaces where people were more individualistic. So, societies become much more resilient when there is a strong social infrastructure, where there are spaces where people come together, meet and connect, spaces and organizations that allow people to interact. That is the first element that would make cities more resilient, then there is a second element that is about thinking collectively about infrastructure. The capitalist life has built on us a very individualistic way of consuming resources, we always think about how we consume ourselves rather than collectively, and moving to this collective understanding of resources may be another way to consume fewer resources, which in the end is essentially what we need to prevent climate change or to minimize it: not only renewable energy, but also to consume fewer resources. Another thing is how to make cities much more resilient by thinking about reusing the building fabric. Here in London, there is a strong debate about demolition or retrofit. In terms of social housing, local authorities still opt in most cases to redevelop social housing developments by demolishing the existing building fabric, which also has a huge impact on the environment. Instead, promoting retrofit practices (which does not mean abandoning buildings to their original state by letting them consume a lot of energy since they were built many years ago) is a more sustainable choice since it would mean making these buildings efficient and fit for the future. Finally, I reiterate that leaving space in our cities for public spaces co-created by people, who can take care of and adapt them, is a good resilience practice.

The exchange reveals promising trajectories for the future of walled towns and inland areas. The practices proposed and implemented by Pablo Sendra could also be adapted to these urban contexts. Indeed, as Pablo describes, London itself can be seen as an assemblage of neighborhoods and boroughs (33 local authorities) and, in a certain sense, shares common characteristics with smaller urban configurations. This suggests, as inferred from the interview, that certain elements of these practices and strategies could serve as a bridge connecting people, communities, and the environment, with the aim of enhancing these territories.

In particular, co-creation (Sanders & Stappers, 2008) stands out as an approach that can engage the community in multi-level collaboration for a shared goal, fostering the concept of collective care. A cross-cutting concept of collective care that runs through both the placemaking and placekeeping phases (Dempsey et al., 2014). A second key element is the development of a prototype of the envisioned project, enabling experimentation and assessment to determine if actions and designs require adjustments. Closely connected to this is the idea of assemblage. Flexibility and adaptability within urban spaces are considered essential features for creating an open development system, one that is more responsive to people, mindful of surroundings, and open to new disordered opportunities.

Pablo Sendra
Dr Pablo Sendra is an architect, urban designer, and Associate Professor at The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL. He leads the MSc Urban Design and City Planning Programme and runs LUGADERO LTD, facilitating co-design with communities. He co-authored *Designing Disorder* (with Richard Sennett). With a PhD from Universidad de Sevilla, he has worked globally in academia and practice, focusing on civic design and community engagement.

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