



# Walkscape as a Non-Formal Education Practice for Grassroot Urban Actions

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## Abstract

*Although it does not constitute the physical construction of a space, the mere act of walking can transform a place and its meaning. University professor and architect Francesco Careri knows it well. He developed "Walkscaping" (Careri, 2006), an artistic/research methodology based on collective walks, which, albeit its evident educational merits, is still unknown outside of academia. Thanks to its horizontal and participatory qualities, Walkscaping would be an excellent educational activity for grassroots organizations engaged in urban regeneration or simply for any citizen eager to actively contribute to the urban policies of its city or neighborhood. Within this paper, it will be aimed to demonstrate Walkscaping's efficacy by illustrating its main characteristics, outputs and their pertinence to Experiential Learning. We will contend that such participatory actions should be extensively used to allow those directly affected by urban policies to express their opinion and actively contribute to the sustainable development of their city and community.*

**Keywords:** urban regeneration, non-formal education, experiential learning, active citizenship, sustainable urbanism

## 1. Introduction

Cities are the engine of the global economy, generating over 80% of the world's GDP, and are where most of the world's population lives (56%) (World Bank, 2022). For these reasons, cities offer enormous social and economic opportunities as the main catalyst for innovation and creativity. However, the speed and scale of urbanization beget many social, economic, and environmental challenges, such as unemployment, segregation, homelessness, excessive energy consumption, and environmental degradation (Opoku & Akotia, 2020).

With the intention of proposing integrated solutions to all these challenges, the concept of **sustainable urban regeneration** has widely spread over the last few years. Sustainable urban regeneration is defined as:

*"regeneration actions, policies and processes within a city, which address interrelated technical, spatial and socioeconomic problems to reduce environmental impact, mitigate environmental risk and improve environmental quality of urban systems, lifestyles and assets" (URBACT II, 2015).*

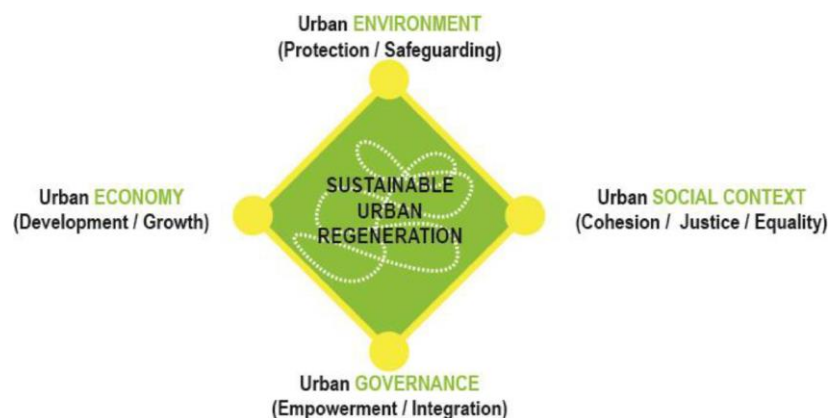


Fig. 1: Four pillars of Sustainable Urban Regeneration (Source: Award & Jung, 2022)



The EU identifies as one of the most important features of its urban development strategy its “*integrated place-based approach to policy-making*”, which means that the design of urban actions always takes into consideration the geographical context of the city, “*with its unique spatial, social, cultural and institutional characteristics*” (European Commission – Joint Research Centre, 2023). This has brought to the spotlight the direct involvement of local communities, which would be inserted in close dialogue with public institutions through a “*multi-level, multi-actor, and multi-sector pattern*”.

However, despite the large consideration that the bottom-up approach to urban planning has received, some researchers contend that it **does not** guarantee the actual participation of local communities. In fact, public authorities often co-opt participatory initiatives to avoid more costly socio-spatial transformations (Rabbiosi, 2017). There is considerable literature discussing “*austerity urbanism*” that warns of the risk of instrumentalization of grassroots actions, which fail to translate into real permanent policy tools (Mayer, 2013; Peck, 2012; Tonkiss, 2013).

It is in this context that “*Walkscapes*” enter. *Walkscape* is an artistic/research practice which consists in collective walks across ignored urban and peri-urban areas to re-imagine their shape and functions. First introduced by prof. Francesco Careri, *Walkscape* has been adopted by his research group from the Roma University Tre, *Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade* during a series of explorations of the banks of the Tiber River and Rome’s ring road, i.e. *Grande Raccordo Anulare* (G.R.A.).

It is from the the results obtained from the research activities of Stalker that **Laboratorio Urbano di Prossimità (LUP)** has designed the project **Walkscapes: Urban Regeneration through Education** (2021-1-IT03-KA210-YOU-000033858). The founding idea of the project was to take Careri’s methodology outside of **academia**, in order to provide local civil associations with an opportunity for dialogue with citizens. Within this project, university and high school students, youth workers and common citizens have been invited to explore the neglected places of two European cities, Parma, in Italy, and Kaunas, in Lithuania, to re-imagine together their purposes and elaborate proposals of bottom-up urban regeneration. In this context, *Walkscape* has been re-purposed as a non-formal educational practice based on the principles of experiential learning.

The present article sets out the educational principles underlying the project and briefly presents the activities carried out, in order to promote the use of *Walkscape* by other European associations and local bodies, thus contributing to increasing citizens’ awareness, active citizenship and the adoption of new bottom-up urban regeneration practices.

## 2. Walkscape as a non-formal education practice

According to André et al., education is a key element in the promotion of socio-spatial cohesion, as it enables to construct “learning communities and the learning context that should support contemporary processes of urban regeneration [...]” (André et al., 2012).

Walkscapes can do exactly this. These shared walks in the ignored spaces of a city make citizens better aware of the meaning of those spaces and make them create new uses for them. For Careri (Careri, 2006), the mere act of walking has a symbolic function that allows people to inhabit the world. A simple and effective example of this principle can be found in the work of the famous sculptor Richard Long “*A Line Made by Walking*”. When he was a student, Long decided to walk every day, on his way from home to the Saint Martin’s School of Art and back, across a meadow in Wiltshire, always the same, in the same place, until a line **appeared**. The artist then photographed the line, which became one of the first and most famous works of Land Art.



Fig. 2: Richard Long – “A Line Made by Walking”

**Experiential Learning (EL)**, a branch of constructivism theory which posits particular emphasis on the concrete experience of the learner to construct knowledge (Corradi & Drășuț, 2022), works in the same way. As explained by Ord (2012), within EL practice, learning occurs through a “transaction between man and his environment”. Long’s line is an emblematic representation of this interaction. While he leaves his mark on the grass, the landscape modified by his path puts him in contact with the meaning of his gesture and allows him to understand more deeply the way in which man relates to the world.

Through Walkscapes, it occurs the same. The landscaper Nicolò Bassetti and Stalker did something similar when they walked along Rome’s ring road (Grande Raccordo Anulare or G.R.A.). Bassetti’s experience is documented in his book “Sacro Romano GRA” (2013), while a detailed description of Stalker’s walkscape can be found on the group’s website (<http://articiviche.blogspot.com/2014/08/a-piedi-nudi-sul-gra.html>). Both Stalker and Bassetti differently experienced territories that have been conceived to be ignored and hastily crossed by car. Summaries of their experiences are documented in the maps they created, maps that rename relevant places of Rome’s junction by subtracting them from their original function. This is a central aspect of Freire’s notion of “praxis”, which is described as “*reflection and action upon the world to transform it*” (Ord, 2012). By renaming places, people change them and give them new meaning. Bassetti and Stalker provided new images of the G.R.A., which is transformed from a non-place to an archipelago of islands inhabited by marginalized people trying to resist the aggressive transformation of urban plans imposed from above. Their actions have been at the same time formative and performative, as they taught while producing something new, exactly as it happens in EL practices.

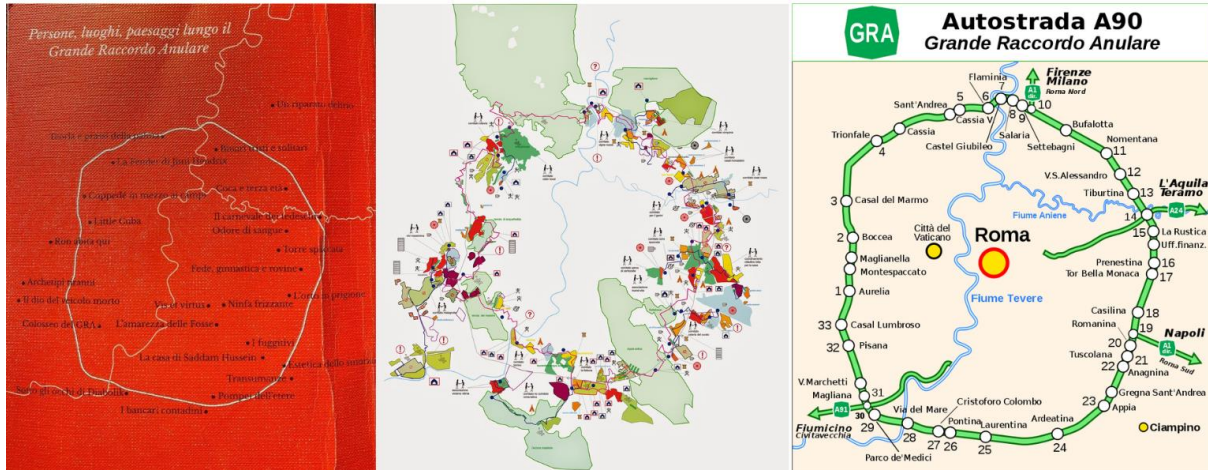


Fig. 3: Three Maps of the G.R.A. On the left, Bassetti's "Sacro Romano Gra". In the middle, Stalker's Walkscape. On the right, a road map of the G.R.A.

The project "Walkscapes: Urban Regeneration through Education" took in consideration exactly this feature of Walkscapes to design non-formal community-centered walks to reach the following three results:

1. To elaborate new meaningful interactions with a place to elaborate urban regeneration proposal from the citizens
2. To support the creation of stronger community ties
3. To help citizens reclaim their place in the city

To achieve these results, it has been decided to make the Walkscapes revolve around a theme, illustrated by a guide (or mentor) with the intent to raise questions to the participants and help them in the realization of a shared and meaningful experience. The Walkscapes of the project deal with the theme of the river, i.e. how the river has shaped the city and how the city has changed the river. Participants, while walking along the chosen paths, have a map, sheets for taking notes and some postcards with questions for reflection and thematic ideas at their disposal. The use of these tools is purely free. Participants are asked to answer the questions and express their points of view and feelings in complete autonomy, choosing the form of expression they prefer. At the end of the course, they are asked to share their points of view with others and we try to work out possible proposals for urban regeneration together.

### 3. Conclusions

The activities carried out and those that will take place in the context of the "Walkscapes: Urban Regeneration through Education" project do not claim to achieve definitive results, but want to propose new insights in the hope of promoting the creation of more connected communities and a more active participation in urban regeneration. The Walkscapes method was chosen for its participatory nature. The codification presented here and proposed within the project also wants to be a starting point for other associations (youth or otherwise) that seek to promote a more heartfelt participation on the part of the citizens. As emerged during the Walkscapes held in Parma, people often do not make their voices heard, not because they are not interested in it, but because they are unaware of the present problems or because they are deprived of a link with the rest of the community. When supported by an appropriate educational framework, Walkscapes can help in this and we hope to promote their adoption as much as possible.



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