

A practitioner's journey of change: Interview with Leon Staines

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Danilo and Miren:

Thank you, Leon, for this interview in International Journal of Action Research (IJAR). We met you in 2020, in the IJAR symposium. You were a PhD student struggling with action research in your dissertation. You have recently finished it successfully, congratulations!

As an introduction to the interview, could you give the reader a perspective of your trajectory?

Leon:

I graduated as an architect in 2007. After working for a couple of years, I decided to pursue a master's degree in the history of architecture at the University of Buenos Aires, where I lived for two years. Upon returning, I initially intended to focus on the historical aspect of architecture. However, having lived in a city with excellent public spaces and a good transportation system for two years, I became increasingly interested in the functional aspect of cities. I began delving deeper into these topics, and a year later, I decided to pursue a second master's degree in urban planning in Mexico. This was aimed at gaining more insights into how cities could be modified to create more human-centric environments with healthier atmospheres. I excelled in my master's program, and in the second semester, I took a class by the then Director of the Urban Planning Office of Monterrey, who invited me to join his team.

As an urban planner, I had the opportunity to work on projects related to traffic calming, sidewalk expansion, and overall improvement of public spaces. Professionally, it was a period of significant growth. However, I noticed that there was resistance from some segments of the population when future projects were announced. For a while, I could not understand why more trees and better public spaces could be met with objections. I realized that while the intentions behind these projects were good, there was a deep distrust of authorities and a lack of effective communication about the projects (and the processes involved). Residents did not see them as positive changes; instead, these initiatives were perceived as impositions.

This realization led me to focus on integrating citizen participation in decision-making processes. As a result, I decided to pursue a PhD at the University of Texas in Austin. My goal was not only to make cities more sustainable and inclusive but also to ensure that this transformation was guided by the collective imagination of the community.

Danilo and Miren:

You come from the field of architecture and urbanism. What is your experience of action research in this field?

Leon:

At first, delving into Action Research seemed counterintuitive, but as I became more familiar with the methodology, I began to see the vast array of possibilities it offered for conducting research. First and foremost, the focus is on the process rather than the final outcome. In other words, the design of the methodology and the quality of facilitation are what lend validity to the results. For me, this was a departure from how I used to work, where the outcome justified any process.

This approach to research has been immensely rewarding. Accustomed to the idea that the designer generates the results, it has been fascinating to witness how communities can arrive at complex outcomes by effectively dealing with contested topics. I have observed that projects based on the facilitation of Action Research processes, involving multiple participants with different perspectives, tend to be implemented more smoothly and with fewer obstacles. Furthermore, the community becomes more invested in the implementation of these projects because they were actively involved in the process.

Danilo and Miren:

How did you get to know about action research? And what exactly made you think it could be interesting for you?

Leon:

My advisor, Patricia Wilson, was the person who introduced me to the realm of Action Research. In a pre-doctoral interview I had with Patricia Wilson, I expressed my interest in generating collaborative projects in the field of urban planning. At that time, I had no idea which avenues could guide me in this endeavor. Patricia Wilson patiently listened to me, and at the end of our meeting, she recommended three papers, two of which directly addressed Action Research. Reading those papers felt like an organized response to everything that had been swirling in my mind. Paragraph by paragraph, it was as if my thoughts were aligning, and my curiosity about the topic was being nourished.

After witnessing failed urban-architectural projects due to the lack of community consent, after failing to understand how young people in an underprivileged community could destroy public infrastructure that could benefit them, I began to realize through the recommended readings and others that followed suit like a snowball effect that community projects must start bottom-up, not through imposition. I reflected on how often individuals with technical knowledge believe they have the solutions to social problems. Especially in architecture and urban planning, we tend to think that the solution always lies in tangible, visible projects. Action Research taught me that, while there may be a tangible component, the real project is about understanding communities. Moreover, it is about empowering them to construct solutions to their problems using their own rhythms, resources, skills, and negotiation expertise.

If we know how to listen and facilitate a discussion, speaking only when we can add value, communities take ownership of the proposals and ensure their implementation.

Danilo and Miren:

When you participated in the IJAR 2020 symposium you came with Patricia Wilson. We guess she has been relevant in your decision to explore action research. What is her main influence in your trajectory? What other influences have been relevant?

Leon:

Patricia Wilson was not just my advisor; she was a tremendous mentor during my doctoral journey. Given that she had worked for a significant part of her career in Latin America and with Latino communities in the United States, she easily grasped the vulnerabilities and complexities of the context where my research was situated. This meant I always had close and precise guidance for what my research journey required at each stage. Her support extended beyond providing methodological support; she also helped strengthen my professional development. She frequently encouraged me to participate in conferences on Urban Planning, Latin America, and Action Research. Moreover, she generously invited me to assist in teaching and research roles, which allowed me to engage with advanced aspects of my own research from an early stage.

At the University of Texas in Austin, Action Research is not universally applied but rather an emphasis that students can choose when selecting their courses. This is where Bjorn Sletto, a mentor who guided my interests in urban planning, came into the picture. Simultaneously, Dr. Wilson helped me connect with Action Research scholars at conferences, and they became important guides in my own research process.

Danilo and Miren:

As we said in the introduction to this interview, you recently finished your PhD using action research. Could you give us an overview of your thesis? Why and how did you use action research?

Leon:

In simple terms, the hypothesis of my doctoral thesis is that urban planning can be improved by involving more stakeholders with non-technical approaches in the planning processes. In cities like Monterrey, as in many cities in Latin America and the Global South in general, there is a strong reliance on a top-down approach in governance processes led by technocrats or specialists, including urban planning. However, this has led to significant epistemological challenges in neighborhoods that have experienced organic and unique growth, such as informal settlements.

My thesis narrates the research process aimed at finding common ground between formal planning conducted by professionals trained in municipal urban planning and planning processes carried out in a contested manner, based on the resources (of all kinds) available in informal settlements.

Since my research took place in an informal settlement, I turned to Action Research to generate a co-created outcome with the community and the formal sphere, which I was more familiar with due to my background as an urban planner in the city. Action Research helped me establish a deep connection with a portion of the community that continues to this day.

Danilo and Miren:

Let us follow that up. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of action research in a PhD? Would you encourage other PhD students to do action research in their dissertations? If so, are there special issues which they should consider?

Leon:

Action Research presents several challenges related to the lack of preparation for effective facilitation, particularly for those of us who have been educated within traditional learning systems. Action Research involves collaborative learning, which means it is not only important to communicate information effectively but also to unlearn preconceived notions and be open to new information, even when it conflicts with the norms of technocratic systems. Achieving authentic Action Research can be difficult because the educational system is designed to teach us how to produce and reproduce what already exists within systems recognized as legitimate by the mainstream sphere.

However, one of the primary advantages of this methodology is that it opens up a wide range of new possibilities. In a world characterized by deep divisions and significant polarization between those who think in one direction and those who think in the opposite direction, Action Research teaches us to build on points of agreement rather than deepening differences. It also encourages the discovery of new answers to age-old questions, and these answers always emerge from deep dialogue, understanding, and consensus.

I highly recommend using Action Research methodologies, especially when aiming to facilitate horizontal dialogue among stakeholders with opposing views. This methodology goes beyond criticism to transform reality effectively.

Danilo and Miren:

In this issue of IJAR you publish a paper based on your PhD action research experience, and you write about personal transformation. How has action research transformed you?

Leon:

Having been trained in a discipline that demands responses in the form of built space, such as architecture and urban design, stepping into a methodology like Action Research compelled me to set aside the pursuit of the creative genius and embrace the co-creation of participatory processes in constant evolution. Deliberately entering the world of Action Research is a transformative journey because it requires us to unlearn our conventional approaches to research.

Shifting from viewing the research subject as an “object” to seeing it as a “subject” fundamentally alters the way we engage with it on a horizontal level, and this shift undoubtedly impacts the outcomes. Ultimately, it is about recognizing that the process is the guiding axis of the project and having confidence that the results emerge as a consequence of it.

Danilo and Miren:

We know that, after your PhD, you now have a position at university. Could you tell us what you are doing now? Is there a place for action research in what you do? What is your experience with action research in university environments? As far as you know, how is action research accepted and/or valued in academic research?

Leon:

Since my return to Monterrey, I’ve resumed teaching at the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, specifically in the field of architecture. While I have been able to incorporate certain practices related to Action Research into undergraduate classes, there is still much to be

changed within the discipline of architecture itself to make these changes more tangible. However, where I have encountered significant resonance and interest in the topic of Action Research is in the graduate-level classes. In my urban inequalities course, there is a substantial emphasis on research methods based on Action Research. In Northern Mexico, Action Research is not commonly explored, so students perceive it as a novel and suitable method for addressing the profound social issues our region faces. Additionally, citizen participation has been on the rise in government contexts over the past five years, leading to discussions about inclusion in decision-making processes. As a result, I believe that Action Research will increasingly establish itself as an appropriate method in the near future.

Something that makes me think that new spaces will open up for the practice of Action Research in the field of architecture and urbanism is that recently my doctoral thesis was awarded at the Nuevo León Architecture Biennial in the Research and Dissemination category, which represents a significant incentive as well as a turning point in my career. Despite the fact that the thesis is critical of the way architects and urban planners work with communities, it was awarded by a jury mainly composed of architects and urban planners. This is generating a buzz in the discussion of traditional architectural and urban planning education that I hope can be leveraged in favor of techniques that involve non-traditional knowledge and wisdom. Recently, I started working as a teacher at the Tecnológico de Monterrey, where I am confident that there will be a fertile ground for more horizontal work with communities.

Danilo and Miren:

You are a young researcher with a long trajectory ahead in times of multifaceted crisis (economic, political, cultural, environmental, among others). Do you think action research has a special role to face these crises? How can action research become (more) relevant?

Leon:

I believe that, especially in times of growing political, economic, cultural, environmental, and social crises, an approach that comprehends and integrates a multisystemic perspective is particularly relevant. In environments where highly hierarchical decision-making is the norm, with technocratic thinking being valued above other forms of knowledge, it is important to be aware that many of the problems our society faces have been primarily created by those entrusted with decision-making.

Opting for an open approach that embraces differences is what needs to take the forefront to achieve results that value and integrate diverse forms of knowledge within a given context. While governments often emphasize the importance of multi and transdisciplinarity, the practical implementation of these concepts remains a challenge. I believe Action Research can fill this gap in public policies.

On the other hand, academics should advocate for and promote the advantages of this family of methodologies. We should also take on the responsibility of educating a new generation of scholars and practitioners who can incorporate these methodologies into their toolkit.

Danilo and Miren:

Let us talk about IJAR now. As we said, we met in a series of special sessions for PhD students that the editors of this journal organized in our IJAR 2020 symposium. What do you remember of those sessions?

Leon:

Participating in IJAR (International Journal of Action Research) was an introduction to a wealth of experiences and resources that allowed me to navigate and find answers to questions and uncertainties related to my own research. What stands out in my memory is our mentorship sessions during the IJAR conference, where we had the opportunity to hear from other researchers who were grappling with similar issues to those I was facing in my research. Hearing that other respected authors had gone through similar situations and, most importantly, learning how they overcame research challenges was a valuable learning process.

Additionally, establishing collaborative relationships with peers who shared similar interests and feeling like a part of an international network spanning various disciplines was highly significant.

Danilo and Miren:

We want to encourage young researchers to use action research in their PhDs and, coherently, we want to help them find opportunities to publish their research. How do you think journals like IJAR can help with this?

Leon:

Although Action Research has been around for over eight decades, it is still contested by those who have more faith in traditional research methods. For this reason, having dedicated spaces for publishing focused on Action Research methodologies is of paramount importance for researchers who are embracing this approach. This is crucial for two reasons:

Firstly, having spaces where editors, readers, and reviewers are well-versed in Action Research ensures a prejudice-free environment for submitting a paper. It provides a platform where your work can be evaluated based on the merits of the methodology and research quality.

Secondly, for young researchers, it can be challenging to find specialized articles and bibliographic sources where Action Research is the primary method employed. Knowing that there is a Journal that encompasses various perspectives and topics related to Action Research is incredibly valuable for those embarking on this path. It provides a valuable resource and a sense of community for researchers just starting their journey in this methodology.

Danilo and Miren:

To close the interview, we always ask interviewees what they see as the distinctive role of IJAR. Do you want to add anything to what you already said about our role to help PhD students?

Leon:

In one word: Mentors. The generosity, availability, and openness of IJAR stand out from any other association I have been a part of. The support provided to students underscores the association's genuine interest in nurturing new contributors who can make an impact in their respective domains. I believe that you have a crucial role in educating, connecting, and promoting Action Research.

Danilo and Miren:

Thanks very much, Leon, for the time you have dedicated to this interview and the readers of IJAR.