

# Designing Hybrid Spaces

ENVISIONING PLURAL ECOSYSTEMS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL  
PRACTICES FOR REGENERATIVE URBAN FUTURES

Edited by

Laura Galluzzo and Salvatore Di Dio



# Design International series

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ISBN e-book Open Access: 9788835183099

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# Hybrid Spaces: values, relations and participation

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According to the Eurispes Report Public Real Estate: An Asset to be Enhanced (2025), Italy's public real estate portfolio is valued at €296.9 billion, of which about €31 billion corresponds to institutional properties no longer directly used by public administrations. Nearly half of this stock is leased to private actors, while around €10 billion remains entirely unused, resulting in missed valorization and potential degradation. The Annual Report on Public Real Estate by the Ministry of Economy and Finance (cited by Eurispes) further estimates that 9.16% of institutional buildings and 6.46% of residential buildings are currently unutilized. A significant portion of this underutilised heritage consists of public interiors, defined as spatially contained environments inside civic buildings and public institutions, such as schools, hospitals, cultural centres, and administrative offices (Pimlott, 2018). In recent years, these interiors have been increasingly subject to de-functionalisation, a process driven by structural transformations in public service provision. One of the primary factors behind this shift is the digitalisation of public services. These transformations have reshaped citizens' relationships with public space, reducing

physical access and interaction. As a result, many public interiors are undergoing profound changes in terms of service functions, spatial organisation, and patterns of use (Legeby *et al.*, 2022). These developments highlight not only an issue of resource inefficiency, but also an opportunity: the reactivation of these underused spaces could support sustainable development goals by reducing waste and fostering social inclusion.

Urban regeneration through culture (Micelli *et al.*, 2024) represents a growing phenomenon in Italy, marked by increasing institutionalisation and diffusion across the country. This process is visible in both policy frameworks and on-the-ground practices. Recent mapping and infrastructural efforts reveal a structured movement that redefines the relationship between space, culture, and citizenship. As Ostanel (2025) observes, the intersection between cultural and social dimensions is generating hybrid practices that challenge traditional sectoral boundaries and contribute to urban revitalisation with a generative, community-driven approach.

Among the most promising forms of spatial reuse are the Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces (SCHS), which function at the intersection of cultural production, social innovation, and urban regeneration in plural ecosystems. These spaces often emerge from grassroots initiatives and are hosted in a wide variety of underused settings: former industrial buildings, farmsteads, kindergartens, churches, cinemas, offices, gatehouses, and market halls. They respond to urban fragmentation and social exclusion by becoming incubators of creative practices and social experimentation (Manzini, 2021). Their adaptive, multifunctional nature enables them to blend cultural, social, and economic dimensions, creating fertile ground for both innovation and cohesion (Krasilnikova & Klimov, 2020). These SCHS promote collaboration and active involvement from diverse stakeholders. They are not merely locations for public interaction, but active parts of the urban fabric – hubs of civic participation and collective empowerment that contribute to a broader, more inclusive idea of plural cityscapes.

The increasing need for more flexible and queer urban environments resonates with the notion of open urbanism as described by Sennett (2017). Within this framework, SCHS are gaining centrality as experimental platforms for participation and inclusion through cultural



and creative processes. They represent concrete sites of social innovation, where cultural practices respond to unmet social needs while fostering new forms of collaboration and community building (Murray *et al*, 2010). Despite their growing significance, local public administrations often struggle to support the scalability and institutional recognition of SCHS. The absence of shared models and evaluation tools limits the potential for replicating these initiatives and systematically assessing their social, economic, and environmental impact. To unlock their transformative potential, it is essential to develop shared and collaborative frameworks and public policies that acknowledge and sustain these practices.

What social role can SCHS play in counteracting urban inequalities and in fostering new forms of active citizenship? How can participatory practices become not only tools for shared design, but real democratic governance devices capable of redefining the relationships between communities, institutions, and urban spaces?

Building on these questions, the action-research project *OS-MOSI*. Observation and Study of Design and Development Models of hybrid Spaces, places of urban experimentation and social Inclusion through creative and cultural activities explores the impact of SCHS in Italy, focusing specifically on the regions of Lombardy and Sicily. Funded by the Ministry of University and Research through the National Research Program and Projects of Relevant National Interest (PRIN) 2022, the project is coordinated by the Polimi DESIS Lab Research Group, operating within the Department of Design at the Politecnico di Milano, within the co-coordination by the University of Palermo through its Department of Architecture. Additional contributions come from the Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering and the Department of Management Engineering at the Politecnico di Milano, as well as the Department of Psychological, Pedagogical, Exercise and Educational Sciences at the University of Palermo.

OSMOSI aims to contribute to the emerging field of study on the impact of SCHS, proposing a framework to support their development and their potential adaptability and scalability across various urban and extra-urban contexts. The overarching objective of the research project is to develop a model capable of guiding Public Administra-

tions and relevant stakeholders in the experimentation and implementation of future SCHS that are socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable. The research benefits from the collaboration of two nationally recognised reference points in the field of spatial hybridisation: BASE Milano, located in the former Ansaldo complex in Milan (Lombardy), is an experiment in the contamination between art, business, technology, and social innovation, and a prominent hub for public-private collaboration and social innovation; and Farm Cultural Park in Favara (Sicily), an independent initiative that has transformed the city's historic centre into a vibrant space for urban and cultural regeneration, promoting active participation and sustainable development. Building on the practices and knowledge developed by these SCHS, the project has initiated two local pilot actions: *Open Casello* in Milan and the *Museo delle Città del Mondo (World Cities' Museum)* in Palermo. Both serve as experimental contexts to test innovative models for the activation and management of SCHS, in close dialogue with local communities and public institutions.

Among its core objectives, *OSMOSI* project addresses the challenge of connecting geographically distant contexts by fostering the convergence of diverse experiences and promoting shared participatory processes. Digital collaborative environments – such as metaverse platforms – are emerging as alternative or complementary venues for public interaction. While often framed as substitutes for physical presence, these digital spaces require further investigation in terms of their potential to enhance participation, accessibility, and inclusion. Rather than replicating physical spaces, the metaverse is conceived as a hybrid ecosystem that can bridge spatial and social divides while supporting Participatory Design practices. The research critically investigates its affordances and limitations, particular attention is paid to user engagement, the role of digital tools in mediating co-design processes, and their broader implications for spatial perception, social interaction, and innovation in design methodologies. The productive dimension is not merely symbolic; the co-created materials function as decision-making tools, communication supports among stakeholders, and operational resources for implementing real-world solutions. Their value lies in this dual role: both as tangible outcomes of the design process and as reinforcements

of participants' commitment and ownership. Co-presence in virtual environments, combined with shared spatial and narrative experiences, fosters collaboration among heterogeneous actors. Furthermore, participants develop new competencies, including digital literacy, communication and collaboration skills, and creative capabilities (Romero, 2016).

Taking into consideration the premises and goals of the OSMOSI project, it is clear that there is an urgent need to foster interdisciplinarity and expand the scope of existing fields of experimentation, adapting them to diverse cultural and territorial contexts. This book aims to serve as an open interdisciplinary forum designed to cultivate a community of scholars and practitioners interested in envisioning plural ecosystems and socio-cultural practices for regenerative urban futures. The diversity of backgrounds and expertise among the contributors has naturally generated overlaps, variations in terminology, and at times divergent perspectives across the chapters. Far from being a limitation, we regard this heterogeneity as one of the book's main strengths: it mirrors the plurality, openness, and experimental nature of SCHS themselves, and offers readers a multifaceted lens through which to approach the topic. At the same time, it represents an essential part of the ongoing dialogue within the project – a point of departure for developing shared reflections and a more common ground for future research and practice. The volume is structured into four sections, each reflecting a specific perspective on SCHS, their functions, design approaches, and transformative potential within contemporary urban and territorial contexts, this volume brings together contributions from an open call and integrates the initial outcomes of the OSMOSI research, establishing a rich and diverse collection of reflections and case studies. The book is organized into four sections:

- Hybrid Spaces as a plural ecosystem;
- The public value of Hybrid Spaces;
- Cultural and participatory synergies in reclaiming public spaces;
- Digital tools for new models of participation.

The first section, *Hybrid Spaces as a Plural Ecosystem*, brings together a range of reflections and case studies that explore SCHS as

adaptive, multifunctional environments capable of responding to the complexities of contemporary urban and territorial contexts. Emphasis is placed on their evolving and processual nature and on their ability to reconfigure underutilised or abandoned places into meaningful and inclusive settings (Chapter 1). From self-managed community hubs to experimental design interventions, the texts highlight how SCHS operate at the intersection of social practices, cultural engagement and urban regeneration. They invite a rethinking of urban environments as plural ecosystems shaped through situated, participatory and iterative practices (Chapter 2). The contributions offer diverse perspectives on the potential of SCHS to foster sustainable regeneration through context-sensitive and adaptive strategies. One paper investigates how participation, procedural flexibility and non-intentionality function as generative forces for long-term social and economic sustainability, illustrated by the case of Il Giardino di Torricola in Rome (Chapter 4), a self-managed community ecosystem that fosters inclusion and resilience. Another contribution focuses on the city of Venice (Chapter 3), where interior design becomes a tool to reconfigure underused spaces in response to tourism monoculture and the decline of stable inhabitation. These interventions integrate cultural, productive and relational functions, offering sustainable and participatory design strategies. In Brazil, the symbolic reactivation of Casa Linhares (Chapter 5) demonstrates how collaborative cultural practices and place-making processes can strengthen social bonds and support territorial development through local engagement. Other works highlight often overlooked dimensions of design, such as environmental comfort – thermal, acoustic and visual – as critical components in the co-design of multifunctional public interiors (Chapter 6). Here, comfort is not only addressed as a technical standard but is redefined through the interaction between users, technologies and spatial configurations. Therefore, a study on Milan's hybrid economies (Chapter 7) explores how design can support inclusive innovation, weaving together manufacturing, education and cultural activity into multifunctional platforms that enhance civic engagement and regenerate peripheral urban areas through relational proximity and new urban imaginaries. Together, these contributions offer a multifaceted understanding of SCHS as dynamic and generative ecosystems that

negotiate complexity, promote social cohesion and support regenerative urban futures.

The second section, *The Public Value of Hybrid Spaces*, explores how these spaces generate civic impact, support new governance models, and contribute to more resilient and inclusive urban systems. Hybrid spaces produce multiple forms of value – social, cultural, environmental, and economic – beyond conventional market evaluations. Grounded in plural and intersectional practices, they challenge dominant governance structures and open up possibilities for more inclusive and participatory models that recognise historically marginalised voices. This section presents contributions that examine different ways in which SCHS act as civic infrastructures, starting from an overview of their social impact emerged from the *OSMOSI* mapping (Chapter 9). The case of Open Casello in Milan illustrates how youth participation and co-management can inform sustainable models of governance (Chapter 10). Other field-based experiences in Milan highlight how hybrid spaces can activate territories, foster reciprocity, and support informal networks through proximity services and relational welfare (Chapter 11). Further contributions analyse the outcomes of the SPACE programme by Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo (Chapter 12), which supported collaborative spaces across Northern Italy by strengthening their management models and competencies. The experience of Fondazione Housing Sociale (Chapter 13) focuses on local commerce as a tool for community building and neighbourhood-based innovation, showing how hybrid spaces can also serve as catalysts for economic and social inclusion. To sum up, these reflections emphasise the potential of SCHS to redefine public value by integrating civic engagement, institutional collaboration, and long-term sustainability.

The third section, *Cultural and Participatory Synergies in Reclaiming Public Spaces*, explores how cultural practices and participatory approaches contribute to the regeneration and reappropriation of public spaces as shared commons. These processes enable new forms of publicness, often driven by collaborations between institutions, local communities, cultural actors, and grassroots organisations. Through co-design, creative engagement, and inclusive cultural production, public spaces become platforms for civic activation and

social imagination. The contributions in this section reflect a diverse set of strategies and tools aimed at reinforcing the democratic role of public space. Several papers focus on how participatory and culture-based design can reframe urban transformation processes, as in the case of the *Museo delle Città del Mondo* in Palermo (Chapter 14) and the *Open Casello* in Milan (Chapter 15), developed within the *OSMOSI* project. Other contributions examine design-led innovation in peripheral areas, such as the Talents HUBs in Emilia-Romagna (Chapter 17), and the use of performative devices in bottom-up regeneration, as exemplified by *Terzo Paesaggio* in Milan (Chapter 18). Also, projects like the School of Neighbourhoods in Milan (Chapter 16), illustrate how distributed and adaptive design frameworks can support citizen-driven initiatives and the emergence of new hybrid spaces across urban territories. Taken as a whole, these experiences emphasise the importance of inclusive participation, cultural infrastructure, and relational dynamics in reclaiming and reimagining public space in ways that are locally rooted and socially transformative.

The fourth and final section, *Digital Tools for New Models of Participation*, investigates how digital technologies are reshaping participatory design in the context of public space, cultural heritage, and collective governance. From immersive environments to digital platforms, these tools expand possibilities for engagement and co-creation while introducing new challenges around access, embodiment, and inclusivity. The contributions explore a range of approaches, from the use of the metaverse for co-design in the *OSMOSI* project (Chapter 19), to the application of sensory design to support embodied and plural participation in hybrid spaces (Chapter 20). Comparative studies of platforms like *Decidim* and *Lisboa Participa* (Chapter 21) offer insights into digital democracy and participatory policymaking, while the ongoing development of a shared platform by Stecca3 and Mare Culturale Urbano (Chapter 22) reflects efforts to build community-driven networks that transcend consumption-based models. Viewed in combination, these projects illustrate how digital tools can facilitate collaborative design, reinforce civic engagement, and articulate inclusive modes of participation across physical and virtual environments. This volume has the ambition to move beyond mere academic reflection and provide a critical toolkit for public adminis-

trations and stakeholders. We challenge the often-ephemeral nature of past experiments in SCHS, which have too frequently resulted in elite, exclusionary models that fail to achieve lasting public value. Our research posits that for these spaces to truly fulfil their promise as engines of urban regeneration, they must become radically more public, open, and accessible. This requires a deliberate shift in strategy:

- From temporary projects to permanent infrastructure: we advocate for embedding these spaces within the long-term strategic framework of the city, moving them from the periphery next to the core of public service delivery.
- From cultural consumption to civic functions: we collected concrete examples and frameworks for integrating essential, strategic public services – from citizen labs and public library outposts to co-working hubs for the third sector – within these environments. This creates a vital public-private functional mix that guarantees daily relevance.
- From top-down to ecosystem activation: contributions in this volume demonstrate how to systematically engage and activate the rich ecosystems of local third-sector actors, positioning them not as beneficiaries but as co-designers and fundamental partners in governance.

By dissecting both successful and failed models, we aim to offer actionable insights into participatory decision-making. Our goal is to empower PAs with the design-led methodologies needed to catalyse this structural change, ultimately strengthening the role of these spaces as essential, democratic infrastructure for community-driven social innovation.

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PART 1

# Hybrid Spaces as a Plural Ecosystem



# 1. Hybrid Spaces: Design and care of urban voids

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the growing phenomenon of underused and vacant public properties as a key indicator of the structural crises affecting contemporary urban environments. It examines how economic, social, and administrative dynamics have led to prolonged non-use, generating spatial and relational gaps. Challenging the modernist notion of fixed functions and monolithic planning, this text calls for a shift toward adaptable, hybrid spaces capable of evolving with community needs. Central to this vision are temporary-use strategies, participatory planning processes, and new governance models that balance public, private, and civic actors. Hybrid spaces have emerged not only as multifunctional buildings but also as dynamic platforms that renegotiate the boundaries between culture, social life, work, and care. They offer a resilient civic infrastructure that can accommodate change, encourage inclusion, and reframe urban regeneration as an open-ended, community-driven process. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a politics of hybrid spaces that transforms inaction into collective agency and urban innovation.

# 1.1 Introduction

When faced with a property that has been neglected for an extended period, it is crucial to examine the underlying reasons for its disuse.

At what point did these spaces disengage from the community they once served? This phenomenon is not a recent occurrence but rather the result of a gradual evolution driven by economic, social, and political changes since the latter half of the twentieth century.

Throughout much of the previous century – from the Unification of Italy to the 1970s – construction efforts were primarily aimed at fulfilling specific societal needs: railways were developed, elementary schools were established in every locality, and civic hospitals and barracks were constructed to support communities and territories. This era is emblematic of the twentieth century as a period of strategic planning and construction.

However, the drive for modernization eventually encountered challenges such as demographic saturation, the IT revolution, and the financialization of urban economies, leading to systemic disruptions. From the 1980s onwards, the demand landscape became fragmented, public spending constraints reduced the ability to maintain and enhance infrastructure, and large service systems became more centralized and digitized. Across the nation, a common scenario emerges: former barracks or hospitals have become vacant shells, posing administrative challenges. Bernardo Secchi, in *The City of the Rich and the City of the Poor* (2013), succinctly articulates that the functional city, organized into specialized zones, can no longer accommodate a society where needs and relationships transcend neighbourhood boundaries. In its place, a hybrid, unstable, 'mutant' city has emerged, where obsolescence of use precedes building obsolescence. Saskia Sassen (2005) describes this as a spatial short-circuit: while certain areas experience economic concentration, others are stripped of function and meaning. This is where the paradox that Rem Koolhaas terms *Junkspace* arises (Koolhaas, 2001): what remains after the design intention is depleted, a remnant of the city that no longer aligns with real life. Jeremy Till, as early as 2005, interprets these interstices as slack spaces: soft spaces, abandoned not due to unserviceability, but because they lose demand more rapidly than the city can rein-

vent them. We have thus entered a new epoch: while the twentieth century was characterized by construction, the twenty-first century is poised to be defined by reuse. This shift presents a structural challenge in restoring function and meaning to structures originally designed for a world that no longer exists. However, within this disruption lies an opportunity: to reconsider not only the utilization of a property but also how to reintegrate it into a community that no longer has linear needs but instead seeks flexible, permeable, open, and shared spaces. This marks the onset of the challenge of urban regeneration and the development of hybrid spaces.

## 1.2 Form and function, a relationship to be renegotiated

The conventional approach to architectural design is rooted in an unwavering belief in a principle that is as robust as it is simplistic: the notion that every form is aligned with a distinct, stable, permanent, and predetermined function. This concept represents the most enduring legacy of modern architecture, characterized by its functionalist determinism and its preoccupation with the idealised machine. In this context, the school is perceived as a machine for instruction, the barracks as a machine for housing troops, and the hospital as a machine for healing. Historical developments have consistently challenged this notion. As early as the late 1960s, influential thinkers began to dismantle this dogma. Aldo Rossi (1966), in *The Architecture of the City*, critiques the naiveté of those who conflate architecture with the urbanism of functionalism, asserting that the city is primarily characterized by the permanence of forms that transcend functional contingencies. Similarly, Christopher Alexander (1977), with his *Pattern Language*, and Herman Hertzberger (2008), in *Lessons for Students in Architecture*, emphasize a critical point: effective architecture must account for the unpredictability of its inhabitants. Bernard Tschumi extends this argument further. In the 1980s and 1990s, through his writings and designs for the Parc de la Villette, he sought to deconstruct function and reconceptualize space as a dynamic field of possibilities open to diverse activities. Central to his

theory is the concept of event architecture, wherein architectural space is not merely a passive container but an active facilitator of actions, movements, and interactions. Within this framework, function transcends rigid constraints, presenting itself as one of many potentialities that space can suggest. This approach is vividly exemplified in the Parc de la Villette in Paris, where a grid of follies – red pavilions scattered like open signs – lacks predetermined uses, ready to serve as belvederes, kiosks, stopping points, or improvised stages, according to the evolving needs of time and communities. In contemporary practice, renegotiating the relationship between form and function is a fundamental design step to counteract the cycle of perpetual divestment. This involves acknowledging the fundamental flaw of functionalist determinism and replacing it with a logic of continuous adaptability, plural appropriation, and evolving use. The future city will not demand monolithic structures but rather resilient, permeable spaces capable of accommodating the unpredictable. The time that public building remains closed is never neutral. This is an unspoken, growing debt. When we talk about cities, time is not an abstract variable; it is a currency. Like any currency, it accumulates or burns out. Non-doing time is one of the most underestimated burdens in public budgets: it does not appear on the balance sheet, it does not generate headlines, but it settles in the plaster of buildings and in the trust of those who live around them. Bureaucracy, conflicts of competence, chains of authorizations, fear of decision-making, protagonism, conflicting interests, and shifting of responsibilities: everything contributes to inflating this hidden tax. Each month of delay contributes to the accumulation of mold on the walls, the development of cracks in the fixtures, the corrosion of locks, and the oxidation of the reinforcing bars. However, the more profound damage is not captured in appraisals; it is reflected in the diminished use value and erosion of trust. A closed building serves as a silent yet resounding testament to neglect, inefficiency, and the abandonment of the common good. It represents a void of administrative incapacity, social disconnection, and urban vulnerability. In recent decades, the management of de-commissioned buildings has emerged as a subject of both debate and practical implementation. Until recently, there was a lack of readiness to address this issue, which also presents a significant civilizational

challenge. Public administrations, despite their formal competencies, initially lacked operational models and appropriate regulatory tools. The existing frameworks, including public accounting laws, property constraints, and the inflexibility of redevelopment procedures, were not aligned with the urgent need to swiftly repurpose these vacant spaces. It is noteworthy that it was not until 2020 that the Italian legislature formally regulated the concept of Temporary Use. Several administrations have since adopted this approach on an experimental basis, yielding promising outcomes. Roberto Camagni (1993), with the clarity characteristic of an urban economist, emphasizes that the significance of public property extends beyond its theoretical market value, highlighting its capacity to foster substantial social and economic advantages. When such property remains unoccupied, this positive impact is negated, leading to deterioration, a decline in the value of the surrounding environment, and a buildup of postponed investments. Thus, as governments become entangled in calls, lawsuits, and financial limitations, the true city suffers: the expense of inaction can surpass the cost of poor action. Effectively managing decision-making timelines, accelerating regeneration processes removing obstacles from cumbersome procedures are not merely exercises in virtuous bureaucracy; they are political acts of care and urban justice. Each month added to the life of a property is a month returned to the city.

## **1.3 Who transforms the city today?**

### **New urban players and the governance of land rent**

Who really transforms cities today? The answer is no longer as simple as it once was, when the state, large public enterprises, and monolithic master plans dictated the shape and rhythm of urban development.

Today transformation occurs within a network of hybrid actors: public administrations remain the custodians of governance, yet they often appear fragile when faced with resource constraints and complexities; private investors have the capacity to steer entire real

estate sectors, though they are less inclined to embrace risks for social experimentation; local communities demand a voice in decision-making processes, contributing civic intelligence, creativity, and networks of solidarity; and foundations, cooperatives, and associations fill the gaps left by institutional inertia with grassroots regeneration practices.

In *The Creative City*, Charles Landry (2000) perceived that a city is no longer just a physical structure, but a system of relationships in motion. Henri Lefebvre (1968), as early as the 1970s, emphasized that the right to the city fundamentally entails the right to engage in the creation of space. In this context, the negotiating power of each participant is crucial. If public administration alone, it risks being the weak link, constrained by spending rules, long lead times, and appeals, whereas when it orchestrates smart partnerships-public-private, public-community-it returns to lead complex processes. If well-constructed, the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) can integrate private investment and public policy, becoming leverage, especially in contexts where the market alone would not venture. Yet, a significant challenge emerges: land rent. David Harvey (2012) discusses the concept of «accumulation by dispossession, where rent, derived from the collective value of roads, services, and infrastructure, often ends up concentrated in the hands of a few. Paolo Maddalena (2021) emphasizes that public land is a common good, essential for ensuring social function. Proper governance requires tangible tools such as urban compensation, equalization strategies, and intelligent taxation. Those who benefit from urban transformations should reinvest value into public spaces, labour, and urban quality.

Milan, exemplified by Porta Nuova area, demonstrates this principle: without compensation agreements, skyscrapers would have yielded only private profit. However, due to specific regulations, the resulting income has been used to fund parks, plazas, and infrastructure. Walter Tocci (2017) articulates it well: rents originate from public decisions and should, therefore, benefit the public. Where this direction is lacking, regeneration slides into gentrification: neighborhoods are reborn for a few while emptied for many. Therefore, now more than ever, governing the city means governing rent, making urban compensation, strategic equalization, and urban taxation a lever of equity and



not speculation. When discussing regeneration, we often overlook that not all real estate holds the same weight in a city's landscape. A large, unused public building presents not just a matter of square footage but also a crucial intersection of scale, location, and socioeconomic context that demands attention. The property's scale should always be considered in relation to the urban scale that encompasses it: a 20,000-square-meter barrack in the heart of Rome, Milan, or Naples is a highly sought-after asset, with a market ready to absorb it and a network of investors ready to develop new functions around it.

The contradiction is evident: unlike small towns or inland areas, metropolitan cities also attract investment in complex properties because the urban scale can metabolize new functions, sustain them on real demand, and support their economic sustainability. Italian regeneration hinges on a delicate balance: either the scale of the property and the context are harmonized, or weaker territories will remain burdened by the costs of inaction, while thriving cities continue to focus on functions, investments, and opportunities. The responsibility for governing this divide falls on those who draft the rules, enforce them, and inhabit these areas. It is a challenging task, yet it is crucial for giving true meaning to the concept of regeneration, beyond promotional materials and within the actual lives of these territories.

## **1.4 Platform cities and soft spaces.**

### **Inhabiting uncertainty as a resource**

Those who continue to view the city through the lens of twentieth-century zoning risk overlooking the silent transformation occurring beneath the urban surface. The logic of monofunctional subdivisions – residential on one side, tertiary on the other, with manufacturing areas pushed elsewhere – has dominated urban planning for much of the past century. However, during this time, work has become dematerialized and mobile, commerce has expanded into digital spaces, and culture has evolved into a hybrid and transnational entity. Richard Florida (2002) argues that a city's strength today no longer lies in sectoral specialization but in its ability to bring together talents, skills, and ideas in one place, fostering unexpected

interactions and spillovers. This transformation returns a platform city with constantly changing activities. Any space can change skin several times in a single day: a schoolyard becomes a classroom in the morning, a civic square in the afternoon, and a concert arena in the evening. Andrea Branzi (2006) said it with dazzling clarity: the contemporary metropolis is 'weak' because it no longer crystallizes in eternal forms, but regenerates itself by thin, reversible layers, open to future uses as yet unknown. Accepting this weakness as a virtue means stopping the desire to predict everything. It also means knowing how to inhabit what Jeremy Till (2005) refers to «slack space»: urban interstices, vacant buildings, wings of abandoned barracks, and uncultivated courtyards. These soft spaces are both cracks and potential incubators of life. Their indeterminacy is what renders them fertile: they are the arenas where artists, associations, and cultural start-ups explore forms of community appropriation and cohabitation that are unimaginable elsewhere. Renata Tyszczyk (2012), in her *Atlas of Uncertainty*, echoes this sentiment: uncertainty is the domain of adaptability and innovation. This uncertain character also attracts the other side of the moon: Soft Gentrification (SG). Consider Monti in Rome, for instance: once a neighbourhood of working-class artisans, it has now been transformed into a glamorous display for tourists, with sky-high rents. Slack turns into rent, rent consumes the hybrid, and what emerges is an urban amusement park – glossy but drained of roots. The challenge lies in not merely filling soft spaces but in managing them, so they remain a reserve of possibilities. We require equity rules, context-specific projects, and destinations negotiated with the actual residents of the neighbourhood. This approach transforms the platform city into an adaptive organism, capable of coexisting with diverse functions, uses, and times simultaneously.

## 1.5 Participation and design project.

### Situated knowledge

Among the many terms at risk of losing their meaning in urban rhetoric, 'participation' stands out. Frequently mentioned at conferences, in calls, and during deliberations, it often remains a mere buzzword – im-

pressive in appearance but ineffective at changing things. Ezio Manzini (2018) has long asserted that participatory design transcends being a mere democratic enhancement in the realms of architecture or urban planning; it serves as a means to reveal truth. He describes these as *The politics of the everyday*: a focus on the intricate details, the concealed needs, and the close-knit relationships that maps, drawings, and renderings often overlook. True participation extends beyond a two-hour workshop or an online survey; it is a continuous, challenging, and imperfect journey. It involves questioning the project when it falters under the scrutiny of an engaged community. It requires embracing conflicts rather than suppressing them to avoid their urgent demands. It is important to note, however, that listening does not entail fulfilling every request from the community or stakeholders; conversely, ignoring them entirely would be equally misguided. In a participatory process, the designer's role is not diminished but rather enhanced: listening becomes an additional, valuable resource for the project, yet it must be treated with critical discernment. This involves accommodating, understanding, evaluating, and selecting what to incorporate into the final project to ensure it aligns with the place's character, potential, and genuine needs. Ultimately, there is a significant political dimension. In a society that often neglects the ballot box but seeks to directly influence its surroundings, participatory planning represents a form of practical democracy: an act of active citizenship that transfers legitimacy from the voting booths to public spaces, worksites, and discussion tables. Clearly, casting a vote every five years is no longer enough to feel connected to a city. Successful regeneration – the one that endures over time – is always the result of this collective effort: a pact of critical listening, resolved conflict, and shared yet rigorous planning. Thus, the city becomes a civic organism in perpetual adaptation and evolution.

## 1.6 Temporary use as sustainable activation

If there is a practical remedy for the costs of not-doing, it is temporary use. Among all regeneration strategies, temporary use stands out

as perhaps the simplest yet most powerful: it doesn't offer permanent solutions, but it immediately stops degradation, breaks the silence, and revives a stagnant engine. Philipp Oswalt (2003), along with *Urban Catalyst*, described it as a fuse that ignites new energy in abandoned spaces. It is not an end; it is a catalyst.

Every vacant building presents a pending question. The temporary solution poses a simple inquiry: what if we open it? What if we enter it? What if we inhabit it under different rules? This simple question already acts as a deterrent to decay. It embodies a resource-saving logic: fewer extraordinary maintenance costs in the future, and more resources available for the final project.

A concrete case illustrates this well: in Palermo, the former Convento dei Crociferi, a historic building of great value that had been closed for years, has been reopened thanks to a temporary-use project promoted by the Agenzia del Demanio. The Farm Cultural Park has launched the *Museum of World Cities*: a constantly evolving space where exhibitions, workshops, and meetings ignite new urban imaginaries, connecting Palermo with experiences of cultural innovation from around the planet.

Hybrid spaces are increasingly prevalent, marking a transformation in the urban policy. These areas are defined by the convergence of various functions, blending of roles, and conversion of boundaries into driving forces for innovation and communities. In Ghent, the De Site port area became *DOK*, a temporary cultural hub that was active for ten years before its final redevelopment. In Berlin, the *ZK/U – Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik* project was created in a former railway depot in the Moabit district, a space for artistic residence, urban research, and creative experimentation, born from the initiative of the KUNSTre-PUBLIK art collective. In Amsterdam, the former *NDSM Werf* shipyard area was transformed into a low-cost cultural incubator, launching Temporary Use with Kinetisch Noord. The true challenge for administrations lies in recognizing that temporary use is not a loophole to conceal inaction, but rather a pathway to shared responsibility. It involves opening a space for citizens to inhabit, care for, and transform in advance, thereby providing valuable insights into its potential. This approach is the antithesis of not-doing; it is about taking immediate steps, even if they are small or imperfect, to arrest degradation.

## 1.7 Conclusion

What we have outlined thus far is not a mere theoretical exercise but a practical strategy: transitioning the issue of vacant and neglected properties from a state of emergency to a well-regulated, thriving system. This approach goes beyond simply occupying empty spaces; it involves creating adaptable environments that can accommodate various functions at different times for a range of audiences. This is the core concept of a hybrid space. The hybrid space is not just a multifunctional building; it is an architecture designed to transform, contaminate functions, and renegotiate roles between culture, sociality, work, economy, and services. It is a space that does not resolve everything with a rigid label – library, theatre, multipurpose center – but becomes an infrastructure of relationships: a hall that hosts coworking during the day and screenings at dusk. It is a place that is difficult to define with a single term.

These spaces are already the new civic infrastructure of contemporary cities: they bring in the logic of adaptability and shared responsibility. Designers must create adaptable structures using durable materials, fluid layouts, and spaces that are neutral yet ready for quick activation. Inhabitants should know how to care for these spaces, modify them without altering their essence, and invent new uses. A hybrid space policy cannot be established by decree; it emerges through intricate processes involving numerous actors who, despite having different roles, share a common goal and are guided by a clear, shared strategy and governance. An effective system is required to unite specific actors, agile tools, and authoritative leadership. The examples of *DOK* in Ghent, *NDSM* in Amsterdam, *ZK/U* in Berlin, and *Crociferi* in Palermo illustrate that success is achieved when four essential elements are harmoniously combined: available public property, hybrid and competent management, an active civic ecosystem, and financial patient. The key players include, on one side, public institutions responsible for managing real estate assets, such as local authorities and agencies, which must ensure clear usage titles, swift procedures, and measurable objectives. On the other side are third-sector operators and social enterprises, the true catalysts of community engagement, adept at co-designing programs, activat-

ing networks, and managing the territory. Additionally, foundations, universities, research centres, and private owners can serve as enablers by offering resources, expertise, new usage demands, and challenges.

In terms of governance, the most effective tools drawn from international examples include development concessions, PSPPs, subsidized third-sector concessions, loans for use, collaboration agreements for functions of general interest, flexible zoning for mixed use, proportionate temporary exemptions, and funds dedicated to hybrid spaces with streamlined tender processes. A public platform that matches spaces with projects can ensure a transparent and swift meeting of supply and demand, whereas a one-stop shop can guarantee specific timelines and standard contracts.

The process can be structured into three stages: minimum opening (what if, 0-6 months), use test (6-18 months), and stabilisation or exit (18-36 months), all accompanied by indicators of social, economic, and cultural impact. It is crucial to incorporate spatial justice clauses – such as social quotas, controlled and/or incentivized rents, and pre-emption rights for those involved in regeneration – to ensure that temporary measures do not lead to gentrification. Regenerating today means transforming rigid places into fertile spaces, building containers into platforms of possibility, and urban voids into catalysts of life and relationships. Hybrid spaces are our infrastructure of resilience and cohesion to deal with crises, transitions, and new ways of working and being together. A permanent trigger of urbanization. Regenerating hybrid spaces governs the flow of time. However, without courage, vision, fair rules, and active citizens, it risks remaining just a slogan. Otherwise, it has the potential the highest form of urban democracy.

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## 2. Hybrid Spaces as Plural Spaces: Reimagining Urban Futures through Post-Anthropocentric Design

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates hybrid spaces as dynamic environments operating as plural spaces. They challenge conventional institutions through collaborative governance, flexible programming, and broad accessibility. The study uses a pluriverse framework to explore how hybrid spaces function as laboratories for post-anthropocentric design, integrating human and non-human actors. Analysis of three Italian case studies (BASE Milano, Cascina Cuccagna, Officine San Domenico) reveals distinct approaches: experimental cultural incubation, place-based sustainability, and ontological critique. Findings show hybrid spaces as dynamic entities defined by transformation capacity rather than static attributes. Their temporal adaptability and participatory experimentation are crucial infrastructures for navigating urban challenges. These spaces could represent a shift toward community-embedded and ecologically conscious practices, offering frameworks for reimagining urban futures grounded in interdependence and more-than-human coexistence.

## 2.1 Hybrid Spaces as Ecosystems of Possibility

Hybrid spaces are dynamic and multifunctional environments that serve as plural infrastructures: they are simultaneously physical places, social platforms, and cultural drivers. Their hybridity is not only functional but also social, enabling interaction between diverse publics and practices. Hybrid spaces act as experimental and relational ecosystems (spaces of proximity, care, and innovation) capable of responding to evolving community needs. In doing so, they represent a new form of cultural institution, grounded in co-creation, inclusion, and regenerative urban practices. They typically arise from the adaptive reuse of abandoned buildings or post-industrial areas.

This contribution explores hybrid spaces as plural ecosystems, examining how they cultivate accessible, sustainable, and adaptive urban environments. This perspective builds upon research into Hybrid Spaces and their potential as platforms for pluralism, positioning these spaces not only as socio-cultural hubs, but as opportunities to reimagine urban life through relational, post-anthropocentric frameworks where human and non-human actors coexist, interact, and collectively reshape the city. The investigation involved mapping hybrid spaces across Milan and other contexts, analyzing their structures, cultural functions, and capacity to respond to shifting cultural changes.

A particular focus was placed on their temporal adaptability, their accessibility to diverse communities, and their experimentation with plural, participatory approaches to spatial and social-cultural production. Hybrid spaces represent a different way of inhabiting urban space, one that prioritizes care, collaboration, and plurality. Understanding hybrid spaces as processual entities, defined by their capacity for transformation rather than static attributes, reveals them as living ecosystems integrated within urban metabolism.

The research positions hybrid spaces not only as social and cultural spaces but as frameworks for envisioning plural urban futures, capable of connecting the plurality of inhabitants of the city.

## 2.2 Hybrid Spaces in Transition

Hybrid spaces now serve as critical infrastructures within modern Italian cities, particularly where rapid social, economic, and cultural shifts reshape urban life. This reflects «the need to re-examine and re-create existing community spaces to ensure their relevance to changing needs of communities» (Johnstone *et al.*, 2016), growing the necessity for the resilience of communities in response to the prevailing neoliberal governance, which strengthens the individualistic narrative. Italy's experience with these spaces began in the latter half of the 20th century through grassroots cultural experiments. Organizations like *Circoli Arci* (in Italy), social centres, and community hubs pioneered what would become today's sociocultural hybrid model, as «they experimented with unprecedented forms of constructing subcultural offerings during the 80's, before coming into more articulate execution in 89's-90's with *La Pantera*» (cheFare, 2019). These early spaces functioned beyond mere cultural venues; they became platforms for social connection, dialogue, and creative experimentation, distinguished by their ability to evolve continuously alongside their communities.

Unlike traditional single-use cultural institutions, hybrid spaces today operate as flexible nodes within the city's ecology. They integrate multiple functions (cultural programming, education, social services, and economic activities), creating what Krasilnikova & Klimov (2020) describe as «a synergistic effect that afterwards contributes to the creation of new functional interactions within the hybrid space structure». Hybrid spaces offer models for adaptive reuse and community-driven regeneration. Their fluid nature enables them to address shifting local needs, functioning as «urban acupuncture points» where social-cultural needs meet spatial transformation.

This adaptive role became evident during economic downturns and periods when traditional institutions retreated. Hybrid spaces fill the gaps left by traditional cultural institutions through innovative collaboration and sustainability models, helping to «constitute presidia of civic innovation in the face of the complexities of new demographics, new intercultural landscapes, new needs, and new desires» (cheFare, 2019). These venues typically operate through

mixed funding streams, shared governance structures, and citizen participation, marking a transition from top-down cultural production toward participatory and community-embedded practices.

Temporality plays a crucial role in hybrid spaces, rather than relating to the lifespan of the space itself, it refers to the changing rhythms of the cultural, social, and educational activities they host. These venues often accommodate a wide variety of programs (exhibitions, workshops, performances, residencies, community meetings) each with different temporal demands. As a result, hybrid spaces must remain structurally and organizationally flexible, capable of adapting quickly to varied scales, durations, and audience needs. Temporality becomes a resource, enabling hybrid spaces to act as dynamic infrastructures that evolve with the communities they serve.

Hybrid Spaces demonstrate also significant cultural and political agency. «They represent places where culture, art, and the exchange of knowledge are not mere entertainment, commercialization of services, or volunteerism, but rather drivers for growth and change in society» (Lo Stato dei Luoghi, 2024, pp. 27). Networks like Lo Stato dei Luoghi position hybrid spaces as active agents in culturally based urban regeneration; Their social hybridity is shaped by the variety of functions they support, which enables them to bring together diverse publics, practices, and perspectives, understanding that «in this range of settings, spaces host relational entities and vice-versa, services take place in physical environments and determine tangible outcomes» (Rampino *et al.*, 2019, pp. 25-38).

## 2.3 Plurality and the Pluriverse

Hybrid spaces extend beyond just reacting to urban needs: they act as incubators of urban change and social practices, transforming abandoned buildings and spaces into new forms of social, cultural, and plural interactions. Through this transformation, they initiate a broader conversation about urban belonging: not simply who has the right to the city, but how that belonging is fundamentally built and experienced. This reconfiguration relies on plurality, an approach that overcomes traditional inclusion models by refusing to channel

participation through predetermined frameworks. Plurality creates conditions where multiple, intersecting identities and values can flourish simultaneously, enabling these spaces to foster urban, queer, and plural ecologies that adapt and transform in response to changing needs, resources, and communities. This conceptual evolution manifests in hybrid spaces like BASE Milano, whose public manifesto considers accessibility and co-creation. Their guiding principles like *nothing about us without us* and Designing with the unexpected person in mind reject top-down definitions of participation. BASE makes pluralism an active design methodology, weaving it throughout programming, spatial configuration, and institutional governance. This approach resonates with transformative movements across Italy's cultural landscape (i.e. Lo Stato dei Luoghi), where «the conquest of these spaces delineates a taking on of a new political value, in a trans-feminism sense of care as a crucial element for the transformation of our cultural action» (Lo Stato dei Luoghi, 2024). This plurality ethic resonates with Arturo Escobar's pluriverse theory, which presents a compelling alternative to the One-World Worldview (OWW): the dominant ontological and epistemological framework underlying modern western urbanism. The OWW operates through binary thinking: human versus nature, culture versus ecology, subject versus object. It systematically flattens diverse world-making practices into a singular dominant logic, eliminating alternative possibilities. As Escobar (2016) argues, «If the crisis is then caused by this OWW, it follows that facing the crisis implies transitions towards its opposite, that is, towards the pluriverse» The Pluriverse asserts that multiple worlds exist, not metaphorically, but materially and ontologically. This vision is captured in «the Zapatista dictum, un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos, a world where many worlds fit» (Escobar, 2016). These worlds comprise distinct yet interconnected ways of being, knowing, and relating, where humans exist not separately from, but entangled with other species, systems, and forces. This perspective is echoed by Bruno Latour (2017), who critiques the concept of nature as an external and passive background to human action. He argues instead for a political ecology that recognizes Gaia «made up of agents that are not prematurely unified in a single acting totality» (Latour, 2017), which inherently eludes any single unifying. Within hybrid spaces, the pluriverse

framework induces fundamental shifts in design practice and opens critical questions: How might we design not for universal users, but for multiplicities of coexisting human and non-human agents? How can hybrid spaces function as laboratories for alternative ontologies, embracing diversity as a foundation rather than an aspiration?

Haraway (2016) calls for «making [...] as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present» viewing relationships with other species, systems, and technologies as a way to stay with the trouble, rather than seeking control or resolution. In this sense, hybrid spaces become zones of multispecies entanglement and co-creation. This approach recognises design's potential to «highlight the re/creation of worlds based on the horizontal relation with all forms of life, respecting the human embeddedness in the natural world» (Escobar, 2018). In a variety of perspectives these methods increase design's possibilities «in terms of matrilineal cultures with feminists; in terms of autonomy and communal modes of living with those struggling to defend landscapes and territories worldwide» (Escobar, 2018).

This transformation aligns with feminist and decolonial design perspectives that critique structural exclusions within traditional urban systems. Plurality emerges not just as a demographic description but as political positioning which gives value to difference, interdependence, and care. Intersectionality becomes crucial for understanding social identities and power relations, revealing both who hybrid spaces serve and who remains excluded through design choices. This iterative, relational approach to space-making echoes Haraway's (2016) concept of response-ability, understood as «cultivating collective knowing and doing, an ecology of practices». In this view, hybrid spaces function not merely as physical infrastructures, but as sites where interdependent worlds, human and more-than-human, can be co-composed through ongoing, situated practices of care, negotiation, and learning. They support forms of worlding that embrace complexity rather than erase it, making space for diverse agencies to respond to one another.

The post-anthropocentric design paradigm, drawing on the reflections of authors such as Arturo Escobar, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour, materializes in practices that transcend the func-

tionalist, rationalist, and human-centered view of design, shifting instead toward ethical, relational, and co-situated forms of becoming. This perspective entails a significant reorientation of design, where interdependence between human and non-human agents is not only acknowledged but embraced as an epistemological and operational foundation.

Through this lens, hybrid spaces become capable of hosting both tensions and possibilities within the *pluriverse*. As incubators of urban change, they provide opportunities to prototype futures that are not only inclusive but structurally plural. They must negotiate complex socio-cultural dynamics to achieve accessible and sustainable environments while safeguarding their experimental nature. The challenge lies in developing design and planning strategies that embrace temporality and flexibility, designing and governing these spaces not as fixed typologies, but as living, relational infrastructures where the city's many worlds can encounter one another, coexist, and collaborate in creation.

## **2.4 Reimagine urban and plural ecologies through three case studies: BASE Milano, Cascina Cuccagna, and Officine San Domenico**

The research presents results from co-design sessions with three Italian hybrid spaces, aimed at understanding the future direction and role these new cultural urban hubs will have in the framework of Plural Ecosystem. BASE Milano, Cascina Cuccagna, and Officine San Domenico present three distinct approaches to hybrid spaces. Each offers a peculiar interpretation of how hybrid spaces can adapt to ecological transformation, social plurality, and post-anthropocentric design.

Their differences are not just methodological but also ontological, reflecting different understandings of urban coexistence, care, and future-making.

### *BASE Milano*

BASE Milano is an example of an urban cultural incubator grounded in the logic of cultural experimentation. Housed in a repurposed industrial building, BASE operates at the intersection of design, culture, and activism. Through programs addressing housing rights, plural accessibility, queerness, and multispecies design, BASE establishes itself as a dynamic space that adapts to contemporary urban challenges, shaping its cultural programming in response to the city's ongoing transformations. BASE is transitioning from using culture to advocate for more-than-human issues towards future directions of Pluriverse, which aspires to co-design with other species. This transition reflects a recognition that hybrid spaces must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward material and ecological participation. Central to this shift is ecofeminism, which underscores the significance of intersectionality and mutual dependence, not only among individuals, but also across different movements and causes. Ecofeminism helps reposition the human figure in a more liminal and less central role within the broader position of the world, emphasizing relationships and interdependence as the foundation for moving beyond a human-centred worldview. Within these principles, BASE seeks to explore what it calls a Pluriversal framework, investigated primarily through artistic mediation, understood as a key method for representing and rehearsing interconnected ecological relationships.

### *Cascina Cuccagna*

Located in a restored 18th-century farmhouse in the south of Milan, Cascina Cuccagna exemplifies a territorially rooted model of hybrid space, deeply embedded in place-based sustainability, community engagement, and social ecology. Its programs range from farmers' markets to craft workshops and job training for vulnerable groups, often facilitated by associations hosted within the space. The organization has emphasized the importance of multispecies design, identifying terms like Pluriculture, Innovation, and Sustainability as foundational pillars. Pluriculture embodies the necessity for hybrid spaces to function as places where a plurality of cultural concentrations, encompassing both human and non-human elements, can be recognized and acknowledged. Innovation functions as both an



economic sustainability driver and a catalyst for ecological and social transition, while Sustainability emerges from the imperative to safeguard urban environments where humans and other species coexist. Central to this approach is the concept of immaterial heritage, preserving and disseminating traditional artisanal practices that work in harmony with Earth's systems, unlike contemporary industrial methods. This philosophy materializes in the organization's garden, conceived as a meeting ground between humans and other species, where relationships develop organically with plants, insects, seasonal cycles, and climatic variations. The space recognizes non-human actors, particularly plants, as providers of essential ecosystem services, notably in mitigating urban heat island effects that benefit both the farmhouse and the surrounding area. This framework is implemented through concrete multispecies engagements: educational gardens, apiaries, and ethical nurseries managed by cooperatives like La Mescolanza. Rather than designing speculative futures, the space enacts ecological relations in the present, making non-human actors (bees, flowers, air, temperature) visible through practices of care and cohabitation. Here, hybridity and plurality are practiced daily through reciprocity, ecological responsibility, and social inclusion.

#### *Officine San Domenico*

Officine San Domenico, based in Andria (Apulia), offers a radically different positioning. The hybrid space a philosophical and ontological critique of hybrid space and how it should transform. Drawing from Southern epistemologies and cosmo-cultural thinking, Officine operates through a design approach as an act of philosophical reflection rather than intervention. Their methodology centres on concepts such as non-individual (a notion that challenges the idea of the autonomous, self-contained human subject by emphasizing relationality, interdependence, and entanglement with more-than-human worlds) and Escobar concept of *sentipensar* (thinking-feeling), which proposes alternative ways of knowing that dissolve the boundaries between self and world. These concepts guide a shift toward an imaginative reality, an elsewhere of thought, that is essential for rethinking the foundational basis of design. For the organization, multispecies design is not a practice to be integrated into existing frameworks but

a call to dissolve anthropocentric foundations entirely. Plurality thus emerges as a foundational value for contemporary cultural centres such as hybrid spaces. It enables these spaces to resist the compartmentalized logics of 20th-century cultural institutions and align with scenarios that seek relations, including mystical ones, with more-than-human entities. This orientation calls for a break from traditional co-design practices, whose rational and ordered methods are insufficient for addressing transformative change. Instead, hybrid spaces must be grounded in processes that allow for fundamental reimagining, free from the necessity of human-centered approaches.

From this perspective, design becomes an act of raising awareness of how partial and situated human worldview truly is. Our reality represents only one fraction among many possible ways of being, defined by human capacity to accumulate memory but blind to other modes of existence. Officine imagines the hybrid space as a counter-space: not only contesting current paradigms but also cultivating the possibility of radical change.

Together, BASE Milano, Cascina Cuccagna, and Officine San Domenico form a spectrum of hybrid spatial practices, from interventionist experimentation to embedded care, to philosophical resistance. These spaces extend the definition of hybrid environments in distinct directions, revealing diverse strategies through which urban and ecological futures can be reimagined (Table 1). Their contributions demonstrate how hybrid spaces can move beyond inclusion

Table 1.  
Comparison between  
hybrid spaces views on  
Pluriverse.

Dimension	BASE Milano	Cascina Cuccagna	Officine San Domenico
Location	Urban (Milan, repurposed industrial building)	Urban (Milan, restored rural architecture)	Small city (Andria, civic center)
Focus	Artistic experimentation, inclusive design	Place-based sustainability, social ecology	Ontological critique
Non-Human Engagement	Artistic mediation, symbolic + practical	Direct care (gardens, bees, soil)	Philosophical engagement, decentering human
Mode of Action	Interdisciplinary design, co-creation, arise awareness	Community programs, social innovation	Conceptual thinking, spiritual reflection
Design Attitude	Experimental, future-facing	Situated, restorative	Ontological, contemplative
View on Plurality	Intersectional and ecofeminist inclusion	Social-ecological cohabitation	Plurality as radical syncretism and non-necessity
Hybrid Space Role	Experimental incubators of relational future	Ecosystems of cohabitation and reciprocity	Ontological counter-spaces

toward genuine plurality, with methodologies ranging from artistic mediation to cooperative agriculture to philosophical reflection. This diversity suggests that the pluriverse manifests not through uniform approaches but through intersecting practices of world-making that acknowledge both human and more-than-human agencies.

## **2.5 Conclusion: Toward Urban Ecologies of Coexistence**

Hybrid spaces are not fixed typologies but living, relational entities that reflect and shape the sociocultural, spatial, and environmental dynamics of their urban surroundings. As this text has explored through BASE Milano, Cascina Cuccagna, and Officine San Domenico, hybrid spaces can operate at different layers, from spatial programming to ontological critique, but all share a common desire to cultivate plural forms of inhabitation. These spaces redefine socio-cultural spaces by focusing on temporality, adaptability, and inclusivity, challenging dominant models of cultural planning and policy. Their hybridity is not only functional but also epistemic: they offer new ways of knowing, relating, and imagining the urban area. Through co-existence, care, and critical design practices, they actively aim to dismantle anthropocentric boundaries that have historically shaped urban environments. As cities face intensifying pressures, from ecological collapse to social fragmentation, hybrid spaces offer a crucial infrastructure for reimagining belonging, sustainability, and interdependence. They operate as urban labs, not only adapting to change but actively shaping new plural and regenerative paradigms of coexistence. Future research and practice must now build on these foundations, exploring how design can facilitate multispecies governance, and co-creation with non-human actors, and change the anthropocentric design point of view. Rather than reinforcing anthropocentric perspectives, these plural ecosystems challenge designers to engage with ontological provocations, foregrounding care, reciprocity, and respect across the boundaries of otherness. As processual and adaptive constructs, hybrid spaces offer fertile ground for reimagining urban life not only through human-centered lenses, but

as entangled, evolving ecologies. Their temporality, flexibility, and responsiveness position them as key infrastructures for nurturing inclusive and sustainable urban futures grounded in interdependence and more-than-human coexistence.

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# 3. Interior Design for Hybrid Spaces in Venice: Enhancing Tangible and Intangible Heritage

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## ABSTRACT

The contribution presents the work developed within the *Hybrid Space & Interaction Design Laboratory* at Università IUAV di Venezia, exploring the role of interior design in shaping hybrid spaces as tools to reinterpret the tangible and intangible heritage of the city. Hybrid Spaces are here understood as relational and narrative ecosystems, capable of integrating diverse functions and stimulating new forms of inhabitation and interaction. The case studies *Toea* and *Baraonda*, developed within underutilized buildings, demonstrate how narrative zoning strategies, spatial flexibility, relational devices and interactive interfaces can transform space into a shared cultural experience. *Toea* highlights culinary culture as a medium for conviviality and the transmission of memory; *Baraonda* proposes a community-based workshop for the safeguarding of lagoon ecosystems. Both projects underscore the potential of interior and interaction design as tools to activate participatory and regenerative processes, capable of connecting tradition and innovation.

## 3.1 Introduction

Abandoned, partially abandoned, temporarily disused and underutilised spaces in the city of Venice were the keywords from which the *Hybrid Space & Interaction Design Laboratory*<sup>1</sup> began developing a series of interior design projects. These phenomena of abandonment and non-use affect a multitude of interior spaces in the lagoon city. While these topics have been widely explored through urban planning and territorial analysis (Fregolent, 2023), the laboratory chose to approach them from the perspective of interior design, focusing on the role that underutilised interiors can play as cultural and relational devices. This approach is aimed at reflecting on the meaning of Venetian heritage and exploring opportunities for its preservation, valorisation, and reinforcement through hybrid spatial interventions.

## 3.2 The Concept of Hybrid Space in Interior and Interaction Design

When interpreted within the domains of interior and interaction design, the concept of *hybrid space* refers to the capacity to design environments where functions, practices and multiple narratives coexist and intertwine – built spaces that exist in-between different activities and uses, between access and presence (Migliore, Ceinar & Tagliaro, 2021). As Brooker and Stone (2009) have noted, interior design is characterised by its inherently adaptive and relational nature, capable of accommodating transformations and functional overlaps. Other interpretations emphasise the ability of such spaces to perform and accommodate various roles and functions, occasionally or simultaneously, including the communication of content (Kassem, 2022; 2019). These are spaces defined by integrated functions and spatial configurations that allow for simultaneous or sequential uses, diverse sensory experiences, and multilayered readings of place. In interior design, hybridisation translates into mobile elements, adaptive devices, and spatial narratives embedded in the configuration of the interior (Austin, 2020), where materials and components evoke stories, traditions, and tangible aspects of a specific material culture, trigge-



ring both physical and digital interactions between space, people and cultural content (Bollini & Borsotti, 2014; De Rosa, 2022).

In the laboratory, interior design education was strongly centred around the meaning of the term *hybrid*, which etymologically refers to the mixing or crossing of heterogeneous elements. In this sense, hybridisation was understood as a design approach that challenges the rigid categories that traditionally structure space – such as the separation between public and private, production and consumption, work time and living time, or physical and digital dimensions. In line with Brooker's (2016) reflections on adaptation as a founding practice in interior design, hybridisation becomes a project strategy that reinterprets existing spaces by introducing new relationships among functions, users, and meanings. Thus, interior design, by virtue of its transformative and site-specific nature, becomes a privileged field for experimenting with hybrid and adaptive configurations. In the Venetian context, hybridisation also extends to the level of user profiles, fostering dialogue between local communities and tourism – two realities often perceived as oppositional, but which, through hybrid spaces, can find new forms of coexistence and mutual interaction.

In the laboratory, interaction design was understood as the design of relational conditions within space, not limited to digital interfaces but extended to gestures, rituals, and forms of proximity. It was addressed as an integrated component of spatial design. Attention was paid to how space could facilitate interactions between people and cultural content through physical and digital objects, interfaces and devices. Students were invited to reflect on concepts such as proximity and distance (both physical and emotional); user engagement and agency; and the temporality of the experience (from quick to prolonged engagement). In this sense, the outputs of the laboratory contemplated hybrid communicative ecosystems in which physical space and narrative environments – including digital layers – interact to shape cultural experiences.

The goal of the lab was to prompt students to envision hybrid space projects that, as an alternative to ephemeral tourism (Bettin *et al.*, 2023), proposed new uses for currently underutilised or semi-abandoned spaces. Within this process, the faculty members identified three key themes of local heritage on which students could focus

their context analysis to support the development of their design concepts:

- the lagoon ecosystem: Venice's lagoon as a result of the interaction between land and sea, shaped by both natural forces and human activity;
- traditions linked to fishing and traditional boats: including Venetian rowing, sailing with the 'vela al terzo,' and artisanal fishing techniques;
- the theme of trade, past and present: considered both as the exchange of goods and as a system of knowledge.

The identification of project sites – often hidden behind impermeable walls – sparked the creation of a map of the city highlighting abandoned and invisible places, potentially capable of triggering a reactivation process with positive impacts for the wider urban context.

These spaces emerge as a heritage to be preserved and reimagined as polyvalent interiors, places of community and interaction between those who live in them, pass through them, or have yet to discover them.

### **3.3 *Ocean Space* and *Microclima*: Two Examples of Hybrid Spaces in Venice**

Two particularly significant examples found in recent local initiatives are *Ocean Space* and *Microclima*. Both show how the interior design of historic spaces can be understood as a relational and cultural medium, capable of generating new forms of inhabitation and activating plural uses. In these projects, space is not only restored or reused but reinterpreted as a narrative and relational platform, capable of connecting tangible and intangible heritage with contemporary forms of participation and cultural engagement.

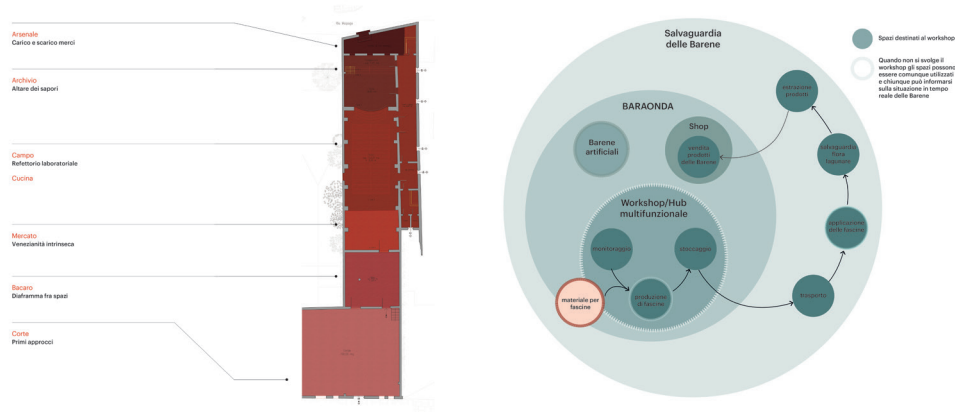
*Ocean Space*, inaugurated in 2019, is a hybrid space where a historic site – the Church of San Lorenzo, closed to the public for over a century – has been transformed into an international centre dedicated to ocean research and environmental awareness. The goal of the project is to promote critical ocean literacy through exhibitions,

collaborative research programmes and public activities, connecting art, science, and civic engagement. In this case, the hybrid space becomes a platform for interdisciplinary knowledge exchange and community participation, encouraging reflection on environmental issues and their preservation.

The headquarters of the *Microclima* association, located in the historic Serra dei Giardini in Venice, represents another example of a hybrid space that integrates artistic programming with the physical and symbolic dimensions of heritage. The greenhouse, built in 1894, was originally used to house exotic plants showcased during the early International Art Exhibitions. *Microclima* aims to renew the space's function by emphasising its historical value and social potential through an ongoing laboratory that explores new ways of engaging with cultural heritage and interacting with the local community. These two local examples demonstrate how interior spaces can activate new forms of inhabitation and cultural narration, offering a conceptual horizon for the experimental work developed in the design laboratory.

### **3.4 *Toea* and *Baraonda*: Two Interior Design Concepts for Hybrid Cultural Spaces in Venice**

Within the context of the laboratory, the projects *Toea* and *Baraonda* were developed as proposals for hybrid interior spaces, in which design engages with the need to reinterpret underutilised places by integrating tangible and intangible heritage into new spatial configurations. Both demonstrate how interior design can play a strategic role in shaping adaptive environments capable of hosting multiple functions, fostering social experiences, and creating dialogue between local communities and visitors. *Toea. Gathering around the table* as a communal act takes inspiration from Venetian gastronomic heritage and from the memory of the building known as Patronato Pietro La Fontaine – a site that becomes the catalyst for critical and multidisciplinary reflection. The aim is to recover and promote Vene-



**Figure 1.**  
**Concepts for Hybrid**  
**Space projects in Venice:**  
*Toea and Baraonda.*

tian culinary culture not only as historical legacy but also as a tool for social cohesion and cultural regeneration. In this perspective, food becomes a relational and cultural device, capable of conveying narratives, collective identities and practices of socio-cultural resistance. The project site features a front courtyard and a long, narrow interior space. Originally designed as a theatre, the building was later converted into a productive space and then, in the 1950s, into a Catholic Action centre. The proposed design serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it is an exercise in spatial and functional organisation through a carefully articulated layout; on the other, it acts as a spatial narrative structured around different zones of activity, intended to immerse users in the symbolic and functional layering of the interior. The narrative aims to transform the experience of space into an immersive and participatory journey. The layout is developed as a narrative sequence that reflects local practices while maintaining a flexibility that allows for interchangeable uses. The project includes six primary zones:

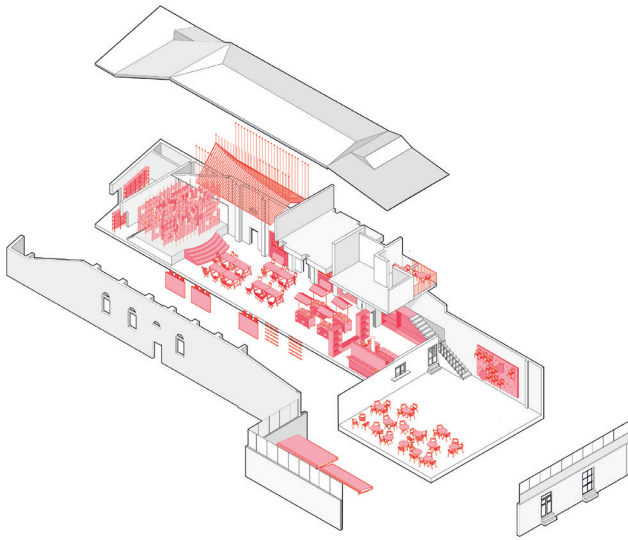
1. Courtyard: an introductory space accessible from outside, designed for welcoming visitors and offering a first taste of local flavours.
2. Bacaro: a transitional area inspired by traditional Venetian meeting places, connecting the public courtyard with the more intimate Market space.
3. Market: a dynamic and interactive environment that recalls the social experience of exchange central to local food culture.

4. Campo: a multifunctional area for production, sharing and learning, closely connected to the historic kitchen.
5. Archive: a contemplative space for documenting and transmitting culinary knowledge, located in the former stage area.
6. Arsenale: a logistical zone with direct access to water, enabling loading/unloading of raw materials and linking to the local supply chain.

The experiential rhythm of the project moves from the quick and public engagement of the courtyard aperitivo toward the more intimate and reflective Archive that preserves historical and cultural testimonies. Traces left by users become part of a shared narrative, feeding a collective process of heritage construction. In this sense, *Toea* acts as a catalyst for the reactivation and reuse of an existing space that already holds a culinary memory. Through the adaptation and refunctionalisation of the building's historic kitchen, the project transforms the site into a centre for production and relationship-building – an accessible and shared space capable of fostering participatory dynamics. The project's objectives include the enhancement of Venetian food culture through documentation, practice and intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge; and the promotion of encounters and exchanges between heterogeneous communities, producers, food professionals, residents and enthusiasts, through the creation of collaborative networks. The act of 'gathering at the table' is reinterpreted as a civic and collective practice capable of regenerating social ties and fostering new awareness about food, environmental sustainability, and the use value of urban space. This approach outlines an integrated vision of cultural heritage and social innovation, proposing a model of urban regeneration that celebrates local identity through shared and participatory cultural practices.

In *Toea*, hybridisation manifests not only in the integration of functions – catering, education, memory – but also in the creation of an experience involving diverse audiences (residents, tourists, professionals), in the coexistence of everyday activities and narrative processes, and in the interaction between material elements – such as the historic kitchen – and digital or documentary devices. The project thus enacts a multilevel hybridisation coherent with the theoretical approach developed in the laboratory.

Figure 2.  
Axonometric view of  
project *Toea*. Designed  
by Elettra Angeli,  
Beatrice Fistarol, Miriam  
La Barbera, Alessandro  
Faccin, Agathe  
Mahe, academic year  
2023/2024.



*Baraonda*, located in the ground floor rooms of Palazzo Canova on Calle Lunga Santa Caterina in the Cannaregio district of Venice, explores the potential of interiors as spaces for shared production and learning. The varied dimensions and heights of the rooms become a design resource for structuring a layout that accommodates manual activities (such as the construction of fascine), educational moments, and a space for observation and dissemination. Here, interior design works to create flexible and interconnected environments that support ecological, cultural, and community processes. These rooms, with significantly differing sizes and ceiling heights and direct access from the street, provide the context for imagining new uses, diverging from conventional restoration and reuse approaches typically applied to Venetian spaces. The design concept emerges from the intention to counter the progressive degradation of lagoon habitats – particularly the barene, which are salt marsh ecosystems vital to the Venetian lagoon yet threatened by erosion and climate change. The project proposes a network of nature-based engineering interventions that employ traditional techniques and local materials, particularly through the manual construction of fascine. These are cylindrical structures made of interwoven branches, used to stabilise

and protect the edges of the barene from water erosion. The construction process, hosted in the largest and tallest room, involves the active participation of the local community.

*Baraonda* envisions a hybrid physical space designed to support three complementary functions:

- Community Workshop: dedicated to the manual production of fascine, as well as training and dissemination of ecological maintenance practices for lagoon habitats. This space plays a pedagogical and empowering role, aiming to transmit traditional knowledge and foster environmental awareness.
- Centre for the Enhancement of Barena Products: an area for promoting and selling local resources such as honey, medicinal herbs, lagoon fish and salicornia – products seen not only as economic goods but as tangible expressions of a balanced landscape and rooted territorial culture.
- Participatory Observatory: focused on environmental monitoring and scientific communication concerning lagoon ecosystem dynamics. Through direct citizen involvement, it encourages greater understanding of ongoing environmental changes, fostering the creation of shared knowledge networks and collective responsibility.

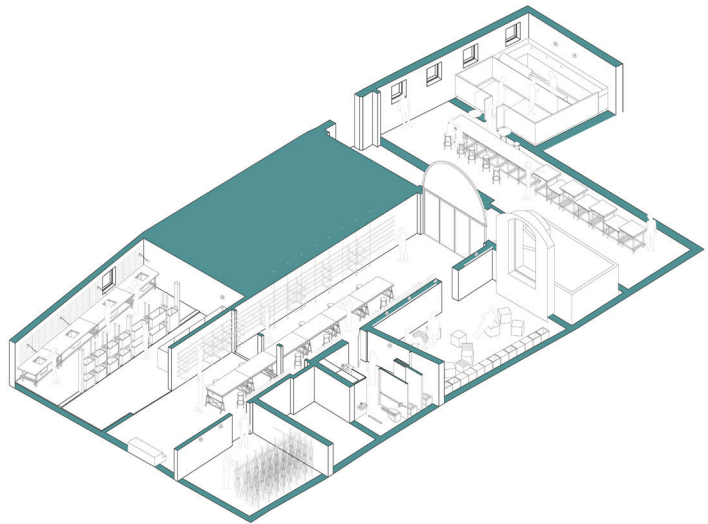


Figure 3.  
Axonometric view of project *Baraonda*. Designed by Leonardo Benfatti, Francesco Fior, Tommaso Maretto, Lorenzo Muraro, Lucio Valconi, academic year 2024/2025.

As in *Toea*, hybridisation in *Baraonda* goes beyond the coexistence of educational, productive and informative functions. It is expressed in the interplay between local communities and visitors, between traditional practices and communication technologies, and between the physicality of manual work and the narrative dimension of the observatory. The project thus enacts a vision of interior design capable of building relationships across cultural, environmental and social dimensions through the hybrid configuration of space. In both projects, interior design does not merely restore functionality to marginal places, but reinterprets them as hybrid spaces open to plural uses and multiple user profiles (local communities and tourism). The proposed solutions demonstrate how interior design can strengthen the links between heritage and contemporaneity, creating new inhabitation scenarios that interweave everyday practices, collective identities and emerging forms of belonging.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The work developed in the laboratory has shown how interior design, when applied to the creation of hybrid spaces, can provide both operational and theoretical tools for addressing urban transformation in historical contexts. Through the investigation of marginal, abandoned or underused spaces, and the development of new spatial configurations, the projects activated multiple narratives, integrated diverse uses, and engaged heterogeneous communities.

The *Toea* and *Baraonda* projects provide concrete examples of how interior design can generate adaptive environments that are sensitive to the cultural and relational dimensions of space, promoting practices of proximity and belonging. In this framework, interior design assumes a transformative role that goes beyond spatial or morphological articulation and acts as a critical tool for interrogating contemporary forms of inhabitation in complex urban settings like Venice. The design experiments conducted in the lab confirm that hybridisation is not merely about combining different functions. It also entails the coexistence of diverse user profiles, the interplay between physical and digital dimensions, and the activation of narrative layers embedded



in the spatial experience. Interior design – owing to its site-specific vocation and capacity to accommodate overlap and transformation – emerges as a privileged field for responding to these challenges. One guiding question remains open, pointing to possible future developments of the research: What specific contributions can interior design – and particularly the design of hybrid spaces – offer in addressing the progressive transformation of historic cities? The cases analysed suggest that interior design, understood as a cultural and relational practice, can not only restore function to residual spaces but also generate environments that reinforce cultural identity, activate local agency, and imagine new modes of coexistence between communities, heritage and future visions.

## Notes

### Note 1

The "Hybrid Space & Interaction Design Lab" is part of the Bachelor's degree program in Product, Visual Communication, and Interior Design (Interior Design track) at Università Iuav di Venezia. The research presented refers to the 2023/24 and 2024/25 editions of the Lab, coordinated by Professors Lucilla Calogero, Davide Giorgetta, and Elena Pedrina, with contributions from Viorica Bejenari, Giovanni Covre, Ilaria Fracassi, and Tommaso Lodi.

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# 4. Enabling drivers for long-term sustainability of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces: the case of "Il Giardino di Torricola" in Rome

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how participation, procedural flexibility, and non-intentionality can operate as generative devices for long term social and economic sustainability within socio-cultural hybrid spaces. The case study of *Il Giardino di Torricola* – a multifunctional, self-managed community ecosystem that arose in a green area of Rome – shows how these principles act interdependently to foster adaptation, inclusion, and resilience. The contribute, through a review of the literature and the analysis of this case study, concludes by proposing a critical operational framework capable of linking the theory of socio cultural hybrid spaces, situated design, and urban pluralism, thereby contributing to a rethinking of the enabling conditions for the self-organized regeneration of complex urban spaces.

## 4.1 Introduction

The concept of flexibility has gradually emerged as a key principle in understanding contemporary urban transformation (Van den Hurk & Tasan-Kok, 2020). Moving away from rigid, prescriptive models, it is now widely recognized as a design and governance strategy capable of adapting to the social, economic, and ecological instability of urban contexts (Cho *et al.*, 2015; Friedman, 1997).

In urban regeneration, this approach takes shape through temporary uses and the adaptive reuse of underutilized or marginal spaces (Di Marino & Lapintie, 2018; Oswalt *et al.*, 2013). Research has shown that both morphological and functional flexibility are essential to ensuring the long-term sustainability of regeneration efforts (Ardeshiri *et al.*, 2017).

Krasilnikova & Klimov (2016; 2020) highlight how hybrid spaces, in particular, benefit from the capacity to accommodate multiple, often undefined, usage scenarios. In this sense, flexibility goes beyond technical adaptability: it becomes a precondition for co-productive practices and the activation of social capital embedded in place (Van den Hurk & Tasan-Kok, 2020). The notion of interpretive flexibility introduced by Geirbo (*et al.*, 2022) – drawing from the sociology of technology – shows how urban infrastructures can be re-signified and re-used by diverse social groups, enabling inclusive, plural urban environments.

This relational perspective is echoed in experimental practices such as those described by Zhu & Yang (2023), who apply the concept of hybrid learning spaces to create flexible environments responsive to evolving functions. Within this framework, non-intentionality – though still relatively underexplored in urban regeneration literature – has gained growing relevance in both theory and practice. Traditional planning has long relied on linear models aiming to control outcomes, whereas contemporary urban processes demand open-ended approaches that embrace uncertainty and change (Tonkiss, 2013).

Fassi & Vergani (2022), analyzing situated co-design, advocate for the design of enabling contexts based on evolving aspirations rather than fixed goals. Similarly, Escobar (2018), in his work on designing for

the pluriverse, frames non-intentionality as an epistemological stance that supports the autonomy of local actors and contexts.

A third dimension, plural participation, is equally central to contemporary urban thinking. It reflects both the social and cultural diversity of cities and the need for democratic, inclusive approaches to public space (Moore, 2012). Moroni & Weberman (2016) argue that urban pluralism must be supported by spatial and regulatory frameworks that tolerate conflict and promote coexistence.

In urban design terms, this calls for environments that can host heterogeneous, and often conflicting, practices (Sepe, 2022). Galluzzo (2024) emphasizes that public space should not be defined by formal ownership, but by its capacity to enable interaction, negotiation, and mutual adaptation among diverse actors. Participation, in this sense, is not merely a consultative tool but a co-productive process embedded in the life of places (Manzini, 2015; 2021).

Foth (2017) and Jiménez Caldera (*et al.*, 2024) offer models grounded in co-creation and inclusive governance, stressing the transformative potential of participatory design rooted in local contexts. Sennett (2018) distills this into a powerful idea: the ethical foundation of the contemporary city lies in its ability to host diverse forms of life without trying to assimilate them.

This ethic is embodied not in fixed rules but in relational spaces, designed to be incomplete, permeable, flexible, and renegotiable. Thus, the concepts of flexibility, non-intentionality, and participation do not appear as separate entities but as interconnected dimensions within processes of urban regeneration and the design of socio-cultural hybrid spaces.

They together contribute to constructing a critical theory of urban space founded no longer on deterministic goals but on the capacity to generate inclusive environments, open to change and co-produced by the communities that inhabit them.

The following chapter analyses how these concepts, applied to a real case study, can act as devices capable of ensuring the social and economic sustainability of socio-cultural hybrid spaces.

## 4.2 Il Giardino di Torricola: flexibility, non-intentionality, participation as sustainability drivers

### 4.2.1 *Il Giardino di Torricola*: an Experimental and Plural socio-cultural Hybrid Space

*Il Giardino di Torricola* project, launched in Rome in 2018 within the Appia Antica Regional Park, constitutes an informal regeneration of an abandoned private agricultural space, promoted through a process of spontaneous appropriation and later formalized by establishing the *Social Promotion Association Il Giardino di Torricola – APS*. This initiative lies at the intersection of bottom up dynamics and flexible processes of urban co production, offering a paradigmatic example of a socio cultural hybrid space born from the synergy among flexibility, non-intentionality, and plural participation.

Over time, the space has taken on a polysemic, multifunctional configuration. In line with Kassem (2022), it can be considered a performative hybrid space, that is, a space whose identity is not predetermined but is dynamically constructed through the practices that traverse it. Spatial and programmatic flexibility – central to many adaptive design experiences (Sanei *et al.*, 2018) – has here manifested as a constant openness to change, to the inclusion of new actors, and to the progressive reconfiguration of uses and activities.

*Il Giardino di Torricola* today presents itself as a social and cultural infrastructure in continuous evolution, articulated into various functional areas: shared urban gardens, a participatory apiary, a vineyard and olive grove managed from an agro-ecological perspective, promotion of cultural events of various kinds, a small mobile kitchen for social dining activities, educational experiences with nursery school children, wellness activities, artistic performances, social inclusion practices, and occasions for social gathering. This configuration has emerged over time not as the outcome of a unitary masterplan but as the result of a flexible process of progressive, relational co construction, in line with the principles of situated design and incremental transformation (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Fassi & Vergani, 2022).

The multifunctional nature of the space and its progressive evolution make it an apt example of adaptive reuse, in which spatial

transformation occurs through collective exploration and continuous learning (Della Spina, 2019; Braifkani & Günçe, 2021), with initially only sketchy intentions gradually defined over time through co design and co production processes.

Socially, the space is traversed by a plurality of subjectivities and practices: founding members, volunteers, educators, artisans, artists, families, children, migrants, agricultural producers, and cultural professionals collaborate in the daily activation and management of the space. This non-hierarchical, inclusive approach to producing urban space recalls the principles of the plural city (Moroni & Weberman, 2016) and of urban diversity (Moore, 2012), promoting forms of active coexistence and mutual learning.

Thus *Il Giardino di Torricola* configures itself as an experimental urban space in which hybridity is expressed not merely through the coexistence of diverse functions but through the capacity to mediate among ecological constraints, social needs, cultural projects, and non-linear transformation trajectories. Ultimately, it represents a case of self organized urban regeneration that exemplifies the possibility of constructing, through flexible participatory practices, new models of hybrid public space that are open, plural, and sustainable.

#### **4.2.2 Participation, Flexibility, and Non intentionality as enabling devices**

The analysis of the practices that have developed within *Il Giardino di Torricola* is based on qualitative research conducted between 2021 and 2024, comprising 27 in depth interviews with founding members, active volunteers, and occasional participants, supplemented by three annual cycles of participant observation and a questionnaire distributed in March 2024, completed by 219 members. The data confirm that participation, flexibility, and non-intentionality have constituted not only the ethical design foundations of the process but also the operational devices through which the socio spatial resilience of the space has been constructed.

One of the most salient aspects emerging from fieldwork concerns the centrality of participation not only as operational involvement but as the expression of widespread design agency (Meroni & Selloni, 2022). Seventy one per cent of questionnaire respondents

reported having participated at least once in the co design of new activities or in the shared management of the space, and 78% stated that such participation allowed them «to feel an integral part of the place's construction, rather than a mere user». Interviews with active members confirm that involvement occurs not through formalized structures but through informal relational practices that strengthen over time and are based on *making room* for individual aspirations in synergy with those of the community inhabiting the space.

These data align with literature that values co creation and design justice as transformative practices (Costanza Chock, 2020; Foth, 2017). Direct involvement in producing the space generates a sense of belonging that translates into autonomous forms of management and innovation, configuring a scenario consistent with the notion of urban commons proposed by Foster & Iaione (2016), according to which the collective production of urban value depends on the shared construction of a space's rules and functions.

Furthermore, field observations have shown that *Il Giardino di Torricola* has, from its earliest phases, been traversed by a wide variety of flexible micro practices that have progressively transformed the space: from building collective gardens to creating spaces for cultural events, and even establishing an outdoor Montessori school. In many cases, these transformations were initiated autonomously by members and then formalized through shared deliberative practices. One interviewee observed:

**no one told us what we had to do. We started planting, then someone brought chickens, others proposed yoga, others culture, and still others education. It's an open space, built flexibly, day by day.**

This operational mode reflects the characteristics of interpretive flexibility (Geirbo *et al.*, 2022; Komendatova *et al.*, 2016) and design flexibility (Sanei *et al.*, 2018), understood not as vagueness or indecision but as the ability to respond adaptively to changing contexts. Sixty five per cent of questionnaire participants underlined that «the possibility of changing activities according to current needs» is among the main reasons for their ongoing presence and commitment in the space. Consistent with literature on temporariness and



adaptive reuse (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Camoncini, 2016), the Garden has succeeded in integrating formal and informal, stabilized and experimental practices, configuring itself as a relational ecosystem in constant mutation. This flexibility is also reflected in the management of material resources: mobile structures, self built equipment, and multifunctional open areas have enabled people to participate not only in the space's functions but also in its morphology (Caliskan *et al.*, 2020).

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect emerging from the case study, however, is the role of non-intentionality in shaping the design trajectory. The absence of a pre existing masterplan allowed the construction of a space open to the unforeseen, capable of embracing contingency and transforming it into value. Eighty one per cent of interviewees acknowledged that «the fact that there was no precisely defined vision but rather openness to aspirations and contingencies» facilitated the expression of their ideas and their sense of legitimacy in proposing them.

This open design attitude approaches what Escobar (2018) expresses in the concept of the pluriverse: a space in which multiple ontologies coexist and where design is less a control process than an act of listening and negotiation. In urban regeneration, Della Spina (2019) likewise observes that adopting non linear logics fosters adaptability and social appropriation of spaces, particularly where multiple actors and competences are present.

The case of *Il Giardino di Torricola* demonstrates how participation, flexibility, and non-intentionality can operate as catalysts of plurality. In a normatively complex context such as the Appia Antica Park, the project avoided rigidity and closure, fostering a multiplicity of practices that today comprise regenerative agriculture, cultural activities, outdoor education, practical workshops, wellness practices, and social inclusion initiatives.

In summary, the analysis of practices shows that participation, flexibility, and non-intentionality are not abstract principles but operational devices which, when activated synergistically and consistently, enable the generation of spaces able to adapt, include, and transform alongside their users. Field data confirm that this design modality contributes significantly to consolidating a sense of belong-

ing, sustaining organizational resilience, and promoting a collective governance model that is non deterministic yet deeply rooted in daily practices (Galluzzo, 2024).

#### **4.2.3 Reflections on Social and Economic Sustainability**

A thorough analysis of the development trajectories of *Il Giardino di Torricola* confirms that widespread participation, process flexibility, and design non-intentionality together form the generative matrix of social and economic sustainability, enabling the space to maintain a long-term outlook. It is precisely the dynamic, circular intertwining of these three principles – widely discussed in literature on adaptive reuse (Della Spina, 2019; Fassi & Vergani, 2022), commons-based governance (Foster & Iaione, 2016), and pluriversal design (Escobar, 2018) – that has allowed the project to evolve from a simple local intervention into a plural ecosystem, rooted in its territory, resilient to external shocks, and potentially replicable in other urban contexts.

On the social side, sustainability manifests – beyond expressly high-impact activities – through participatory practices that progressively democratize access to the space, authorizing anyone – long-time residents, new inhabitants, organized groups, and occasional passers-by – to contribute spontaneously and non-prescriptively to its daily construction. Concrete examples include the informal introduction of new uses by participants: the spontaneous construction of a community gardens, the autonomous creation of playing areas or the initiation of wellness sessions and cultural events without prior institutional mediation. These practices incarnate the principle of non-intentionality not as lack of direction, but as an openness to contingency and emergent needs, as theorized by Escobar (2018). Results from 27 qualitative interviews show that more than 70% of participants perceive the Garden as «a space that allows one to be oneself, thanks to participatory processes that go beyond mere consultation or rhetoric», and as a place «to build identities and relationships that would not be possible elsewhere because they are shaped day by day, also thanks to the ability to change course when necessary». This judgment testifies that open participation and flexibility foster inclusion, mutual recognition, and mixing of social

worlds, consistent with Galluzzo's (2024) concept of plural public space. Plurality concerns not only people but also activities: manual workshops, artistic labs, cultural events, convivial food moments, urban agriculture practices, psycho-physical wellness paths, social inclusion initiatives, educational experiences, and territorial valorization projects coexist without conflict. This coexistence stems from the Garden's governance model, which avoids imposing rigid programs and instead accommodates emerging configurations. Specific practices – such as the collectively initiated Montessori outdoor school, the impromptu organization of different kinds of cultural events or the informal market days where local producers exchange goods – are emblematic of this non-prescriptive logic.

It is no coincidence that 68% of respondents to the 2024 questionnaire state that «the possibility of spontaneously finding a role in the space» is the main reason for their continued participation. In this context, non-intentionality operates as a driver of social sustainability, removing access barriers and encouraging agency. The resulting outcomes are tangible: enhanced interpersonal connections, cross-generational collaboration, and reduced social isolation, especially among marginalized groups, as highlighted in several interview transcripts.

Economic sustainability, in turn, rests on an adaptive model that flexibly hybridizes material resources, distributed competencies, and proximity-based micro-economies. The introduction of a mobile kitchen, the co-organization of cultural and training events, and the activation of courses and workshops on a free donation basis represent elastic strategies evolving in response to changing conditions. These initiatives illustrate how the absence of a rigid business model – consistent with the principle of non-intentionality – enables real-time modulation of costs and revenues.

Seventy-three per cent of respondents declare that «the possibility of supporting the project with small donations or by participating in self-managed activities» strengthens their sense of belonging. This demonstrates that direct participation and flexible management generate a community economy capable of partial self-financing, even without structural funds. The success of seasonal festivals, donation-based courses, and informal repair cafés exemplifies how

economic value is generated through use, trust, and reciprocity rather than formal transactions.

This arrangement corresponds to the model of cultural commons described by Macri (*et al.*, 2018) and the paradigm of «out-of-the-ordinary spaces» outlined by Ostanel (2018), in which a balance between minimal formalization and widespread spontaneity sustains hybrid practices in institutionally complex contexts. The hybridization of functions – social, cultural, productive, educational – broadens the user base and diversifies income sources: a key factor for long-term economic resilience. Here, stability stems not from constant funding, but from the collective ability to generate use value through co-governance and situated practices.

In conclusion, the experience of *Il Giardino di Torricola* shows that the synergy among participation, flexibility, and non-intentionality does not merely produce more livable and inclusive urban spaces – it also establishes structural conditions for long-term sustainability, grounded in interdependent social and economic ecologies. The project thus represents an example of self-organized and replicable urban regeneration, capable of responding to contemporary urban challenges through care, openness, and co-evolution. The practices developed here substantiate theoretical notions such as the pluriverse, cultural commons, and plural public space, affirming that urban sustainability can also emerge from everyday experimentation rather than only prescriptive planning.

## 4.3 Conclusions

The experience of *Il Giardino di Torricola* shows that widespread participation, process flexibility, and design non intentionality constitute the decisive lever for generating long term, interdependent sustainability – social, environmental, and economic. The progressive opening of the space, co design, and co creation have fostered inclusion, plural agencies, and intergenerational learning; a non-intentional processual approach and flexible design dimension have allowed emerging uses to be welcomed without embalming them in rigid schemes; a willingness to accept the unforeseen has fuelled social innovation,

functional diversification, and proximity micro economies. Together, these mechanisms have produced a resilient urban ecosystem capable of self regeneration and of replication in different contexts. Eventually, it suggests some implications for the *Development of Socio Cultural Hybrid Spaces*:

- Design processes, not merely places: sustainability is born of a continuous cycle of co decision and shared care; lightweight governance devices are needed to distribute power and responsibility, foster participation, and focus attention on the processes underlying outcomes.
- Embed flexibility in rules: minimal norms, periodically renegotiated, allow rapid adaptation of functions, layouts, and economic models to evolving collective needs and aspirations.
- Value non intentionality as a method: recognise the possibility of proceeding without predetermined horizons – and the conflicts that result – not as failure but as a generative resource for creativity, adaptability, and cohesion.
- Hybridise economies and competences: combine donations, micro services, culture, food, and proximity supply chains with distributed know how (craft, agricultural, cultural) to build financially autonomous commons.

Epistemologically, these principles return urban design to a pluriverse of human and non-human actors (Latour 1993; Escobar 2018), overcoming modern dichotomies and situating the production of value in the symbiotic exchange among environment, social practices, and proximity economies. Socio-spatially, structuring «progressive participation scales» concretizes the paradigm of plural public space (Galluzzo, 2024), ensuring that increasing degrees of collective agency translate into co governance capacity (Ostanel 2018) and strengthen community ties in the phases of ideation, management, and reconfiguration of space.

The convergence of these approaches configures an operational framework that expands and updates theories on adaptive and cultural commons and on justice oriented design (Costanza Chock 2020; Macri *et al.*, 2018), laying the groundwork for socio cultural hybrid hubs capable of producing multi-level benefits – social, environmental, and economic – and of self-regenerating over the long term.

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# 5. Creative place-making and urban regeneration: the case of "Casa Linhares" in Balneário Camboriú

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how diverse cultural practices and collaborative processes contributed to the symbolic reactivation of *Casa Linhares* in the Barra district of Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina, Brazil. This process embedded *Casa Linhares* as a creative territory tied to place-making. We employed a qualitative, interpretive research approach based on semi-structured interviews with public administration representatives and cultural collective members, as well as institutional documents, photographic records, and materials produced by local stakeholders. Three visualizations were developed as analytical tools to deepen our understanding: a timeline of transformations, a visual representation of the building, and affective cartography connecting the house to other cultural spaces in the city. These resources highlight processes of symbolic appropriation, placemaking, and community activation. *Casa Linhares's* experience demonstrates how collaborative cultural practices can strengthen social bonds and promote territorial development through local initiatives.

## 5.1 Introduction

In contemporary times, the ability of creative and cultural activities to promote economic growth and sustainable development has become more widely recognized. These sectors' products and services are constantly innovating, contributing to more sustainable urban environments and healthier relationships with the surrounding area. The revitalization of urban spaces through collaborative cultural practices has become a key topic in discussions about territorial development and creative economy policies. In this context, spaces that were previously undervalued are being reactivated as sites of cultural creation. This strengthens local networks, fosters a sense of belonging, and opens up opportunities for social innovation. *Casa Linhares*, located in the Barra neighborhood of Balneário Camboriú in the Brazilian state of Santa Catarina, is one such example. Based on this scenario, we aim to investigate how cultural practices and collaborative processes contributed to *Casa Linhares*' re-signification as a creative territory. To this end, we conducted qualitative research with an interpretive approach (Gil, 2008), focusing on understanding the transformation process of *Casa Linhares* through the actions of various cultural agents. We used multiple sources, including bibliographic and documentary research, news reports, photographs, and institutional records, as well as semi-structured interviews with public managers and cultural collective representatives active in the space. We analyzed the data through manual coding and thematic categorization. Additionally, we incorporated visual analytical tools, such as a timeline, a panel illustrating the house's transformation, and affective cartography, to expand the interpretive dimension of the research.

## 5.2 Creative Economy

Cities have become the main arenas of territorial competitiveness within the development of the creative economy and innovation processes across all spheres of social life. Functioning as communities of knowledge, innovation, creativity, and learning, urban centers are becoming more dynamic, complex, diverse, and open (Holubchak *et al.*,

2020). The dynamic growth trend in the number of innovative spaces and the creation of a network of creative cities worldwide confirm this development. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network, established in 2004 to promote cooperation among creative urban centers, currently includes more than 350 cities across over 100 countries. The cities that are part of this network place cultural and creative industries at the core of their development plans. Each of these urban centers was included due to its association with one of the seven creative fields: film, literature, music, crafts and folk arts, design, gastronomy, and media arts (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2024). Evidence of the rise of creative cities as engines of development is found in the normative and methodological recommendations of various international financial and economic organizations, such as the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the World Economic Forum, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the International Alliance among others (Vasylytsiv *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, the United Nations has emphasized the role of culture and creativity in sustainable development in conferences and agreements, and in 2015, culture was incorporated into the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. The new global agenda positions culture as a relevant sector for development, in which cultural and creative industries play an important role in producing new technologies or creative ideas and generating social benefits. From a creative economy perspective, the concept of creative territories is particularly salient. These are sites that are transformed in both aesthetics and utility, rendering the environment dynamic and stimulating for creativity, leveraging economic and sustainable development, and articulating businesses and people in the creation of a creative ecosystem (Teixeira, Piqué & Ferreira, 2022; Teixeira & Catapan, 2023). In Brazil, the Ministry of Culture (2013) defined a creative territory as «neighborhoods, cities, or regions that present creative cultural potentialities capable of promoting integral and sustainable development while preserving and promoting their cultural and environmental values». In this context, creative territories can be represented by the following fields:

- Heritage Field: tangible heritage, intangible heritage, archives, and museums.

- Field of Cultural Expressions: crafts, popular cultures, indigenous cultures, Afro-Brazilian cultures, visual arts, and digital art.
- Field of Performing Arts: dance, music, circus, and theater.
- Field of the audiovisual, book, reading, and literature field, including cinema and video and editorial and print media.
- Field of the cultural and functional creations field, including fashion, design, and architecture (Leoti, dos Anjos, & Costa, 2023).

According to UNESCO, creative territories are essential for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are integrated into the 2030 Agenda (Wittmann, 2019). In alignment with this valuation, Sustainable Development Goals 11 and 12 stand out. These goals advocate for making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable by strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. They also support positive economic, social, and environmental relationships between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. This reinforces national and regional development planning (GTAGENDA2030, 2024).

Additionally, Goal 12 ensures sustainable production and consumption patterns to achieve the efficient use and sustainable management of natural resources. It encourages companies to adopt sustainable practices and informs people about sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature. Furthermore, Goal 12 advocates developing and implementing tools to monitor the impacts of sustainable development, promoting culture and local products (GTAGENDA2030). Regarding urban regeneration processes, activities related to creative territories contribute in various ways:

1. strengthening local identity by basing activities on distinctive local elements such as traditions, crafts, culture, and heritage;
2. promoting connections between locals and outsiders by encouraging meaningful exchanges between residents and visitors, which generates new influences that stimulate innovation;
3. stimulating collaboration and development among different local stakeholders such as artisans, artists, and entrepre-

neurs, thereby strengthening collaborative networks and resource sharing;

4. integrating sustainability and the regeneration of communities, cultures, and landscapes since creative activities focus on small-scale practices.

These contributions demonstrate how creative activities can revitalize communities, preserve cultures, and promote holistic, sustainable development (Duxbury *et al.*, 2021). According to Teixeira *et al.* (2022), regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia are stages for the emergence and growth of creative districts. These districts contribute to the social, economic, and cultural development of their host cities. However, Balneário Camboriú, a city in the Brazilian state of Santa Catarina, has significant potential to generate economic, social, and environmental benefits in this sector. Against this backdrop, the Balneário Camboriú Creative Social Movement (BC Criativo) began its activities in 2015 with the establishment of the Municipal Culture System. The movement is a collaborative network that coordinates and monitors the implementation of public policies to strengthen the creative economy. This diversification of Balneário Camboriú's economic matrix is intended to promote sustainable development. To that end, BC Criativo fosters synergies among creative agents and enterprises, adding value to sectors such as culture, gastronomy, media, and technology (FCBC, 2016).

Affiliated with the Balneário Camboriú Cultural Foundation, BC Criativo operates through specialized technical chambers identified regionally via public assemblies. These chambers bring together professionals from architecture and urbanism, performing arts, visual arts, crafts, audiovisual, communication and events, design, photography, gastronomy, literature, fashion, music, cultural heritage, and software. The chambers function through artistic expressions and manifestations, drawing on each member's creative language. In turn, this contributes to the transformation of the local urban landscape through exhibitions, workshops, and activities in studios and public spaces. According to Junqueira and dos Anjos (2019), such initiatives require requalifying urban spaces to foster places where people can gather, interact, exchange, and play. In this regard, creative placemaking embodies this potential.

## 5.3 Creative place-making

We observe that the emergence of the creative-ecosystem paradigm coincides with recent shifts in how places are conceived. In this new paradigm, strengthening the sense of place is essential for sustaining and augmenting the potential of creative ecosystems. Wartmann and Purves (2018), Ryfield (*et al.*, 2019), Andersson (*et al.*, 2015), and Roberts and Lowe (2024), for example, have demonstrated that authentic place attachment is fundamental to cultural heritage values. Csurgó and Smith (2021) further examine the link between a sense of place and cultural heritage. They show that a place's perceived character and its inhabitants are often tied to historical connotations. This reveals connections between a locale's roots and its identity.

Moreover, design approaches, competencies, and methodologies have the ability to integrate processes of place analysis, construction, and enhancement (Menzardi & Peruccio, 2019). One such approach is *design for territories*, which seeks to conceptualize a place's positioning in relation to its identity, cultural meanings, and geographical context (Krucken, 2009). Geography's extensive study of territorial characteristics offers a dialogic foundation for design, enriching the conceptual basis for understanding design's role in promoting both tangible and intangible elements tied to places.

Within this conceptual framework of landscape, UNESCO (1992) introduced the notion of *cultural landscape* in its Operational Guidelines for World Heritage. Cultural landscapes are the combined works of nature and humankind and may range in size from thousands of acres of rural land to small garden plots. They encompass large estates, farmland, gardens, public parks, university campuses, cemeteries, highways, and industrial sites. Cultural landscapes function as works of art, texts, and narratives of cultures, as well as expressions of regional identity (CLF, 2020; Stoilova, 2020; Saraiva *et al.*, 2021). When associated with territory, landscapes embody two types of values: symbolic values, linked to tradition, authenticity, and uniqueness, and heritage values, which express objective and subjective qualities ascribed to the lived environment across defined spatial and temporal horizons (Saraiva *et al.*, 2021).

The concept of *polygenetic landscape* also applies in relation to

landscape, referring to forms produced at different historical moments by social agents. In contemporary contexts, these forms may be reinterpreted or given new functions. During re-signification, old forms' original functions remain unchanged, yet they acquire new meanings in the present. Conversely, refunctionalization involves old forms receiving new functions that are valued today, either chronologically or symbolically. Examples include factories, cinemas, temples, railway stations, barracks, and prisons that have undergone this transformation to serve new purposes (Corrêa, 2016). Furthermore, combining re-signification and refunctionalization has significant potential to transform marginalized and uneconomic spaces into valuable assets for local development. Thus, the polygenetic landscape reveals a spatial organization that alternates, endures, and reinscribes itself in the present, having been transformed from its original state (Corrêa, 2016).

## 5.4 Methodology

This qualitative study takes an interpretive approach (Gil, 2008) to examine how *Casa Linhares* became a creative space through the efforts of various cultural groups. Multiple data sources were employed, including bibliographic and documentary reviews, institutional records, photographic archives, and semi-structured interviews with municipal administrators and cultural collective coordinators active at the site. The interviews, which were conducted remotely in May 2025, used an open-ended guide organized around two themes:

- the governance of *Casa Linhares* and the Balneário Camboriú Cultural Foundation;
- the experiences and practices of the collectives that occupied the house.

We manually coded all interview transcripts and grouped them into thematic categories. Then, we interpreted these categories in light of the concepts of heritage refunctionalization (Chuva, 2020), polygenetic landscape (Corrêa, 1997), and sense of place (Tuan, 2015). To complement the textual analysis, three visual tools were developed:

- a timeline tracing the house's key transformation stages;

- a visual panel documenting the building's physical evolution;
- affective cartography mapping *Casa Linhares's* connections to other cultural nodes within the city.

These visualizations provided additional interpretive lenses through which to understand processes of symbolic appropriation and community activation. In addition, we created a visual timeline, a panel, and an affective map based on images collected from the social media of the participating groups, the personal archives of the interviewees, the author's personal archive, and articles about the Barra neighborhood. This study focuses on *Casa Linhares* in the Barra neighborhood of Balneário Camboriú as a site activated by cultural collectives from 2024 to 2025. We examined the house's everyday uses, cultural practices, and symbolic appropriations, prioritizing collectives with continuous activity, such as the The Peixaria Cultural Collective, which organizes the Sarau da Tainha; the Maracatu Nova Lua; the Artesãos Sambaquis collective; and the Capoeira Abadá de Balneário Camboriú group. Our goal was to understand how these groups foster a sense of belonging, organize collectively, and contribute social, cultural, and symbolic value through their continuous engagement with the space.

## 5.5 Case Study: Casa Linhares as a Creative Territory

This study focuses on *Casa Linhares*, located in the Barra neighborhood of Balneário Camboriú. This historic building is located in a coastal district and retains traditional urban features, which contrasts with the high-rise development of the city center. Barra is a territory where community-driven cultural practices unfold in dialogue with the built environment and the local cultural landscape. Currently, *Casa Linhares* hosts cultural collectives, artistic workshops, educational activities, and community gatherings. It functions as a nexus for inter-generational exchange and knowledge sharing.

Creative placemaking, as defined by Markusen and Gadwa (2010), involves public, private, community, and artistic sectors collaborating to transform neighborhoods and cities through art and culture. This approach aims to revitalize urban spaces, strengthen local identities,



and promote sustainable social and economic development. *Casa Linhares* fits within this paradigm by acting as a creative territory where collaborative cultural practices activate a sense of belonging and memory, creating new urban centralities and fostering community resilience.

International examples illustrate this dynamic in different contexts. For instance, the revitalization of the Old Market in Bydgoszcz, Poland, demonstrates how urban regeneration can inspire the development of new product concepts (Posadzińska, Sieg & Jóźwiak, 2022). The Digbeth cultural district in Birmingham, United Kingdom, exemplifies urban regeneration plans centered on local culture and identity (García Carrizo, 2021). Additionally, studies on creative and regenerative tourism emphasize the importance of community participation in ensuring the social and cultural sustainability of such initiatives (Richards, 2020; Duxbury *et al.*, 2021). Together, these international cases enrich our understanding of the *Casa Linhares* experience by situating it within the global debate on creative territories and cultural revitalization.

The significance of this case becomes apparent when tracing the building's history: originally a private residence, it has since been repurposed as a political headquarters, an art school, and a cultural center. Now, it serves as a multifunctional warehouse that accommodates various collectives and cultural projects. Groups such as *Maracatu Nova Lua* (a collective that studies and promotes maracatu de baque virado, an Afro-Brazilian cultural expression from Recife, Pernambuco), *Sarau da Tainha* (a cultural movement involving poetry readings, artistic gatherings, and discussion circles that celebrates local artisanal fishing culture, organized by the Peixaria Cultural collective), The *Artesãs Sambaquis* collective is dedicated to local crafts, especially ceramics. The *Capoeira Abadá de Balneário Camboriú* collective practices capoeira as a form of movement, music, and cultural resistance. These groups demonstrate how the space has been embraced as a place of belonging, welcoming collaborative practices, cultural expressions, and diverse ways of life.

Collective members come from various places; some reside in the city or neighborhood, while others hail from different Brazilian states. Because of this cultural diversity, they have built a sense of belonging

in the space. In the case of *Maracatu Nova Lua*, some members belong to Morro do Boi, a recognized quilombola community in Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina (Fundação Cultural Palmares, 2024). These groups do more than occupy the space; they transform it through actions grounded in memory, resistance, and collective creation. The activation of *Casa Linhares* stems from local practices and actions, strengthening community bonds and valuing local knowledge in a context of cultural resistance.

### 5.5.1 Historical and Territorial Context

Since the 1960s, Balneário Camboriú, located on the northern coast of Santa Catarina, Brazil, has experienced intense urbanization, characterized by the verticalization of its waterfront and real estate valorization driven by tourism. This market-driven process has exploited the coastal landscape as an aesthetic and economic asset, which contrasts sharply with the municipality's traditional way of life (Moraes & Tricárico, 2006).

According to Daum (2015), this urbanization was marked by symbolic struggles and profound transformations that affected local livelihoods. Real estate speculation reshaped the central shoreline, displacing communities and disrupting longstanding practices. In this context, the Barra neighborhood emerges as a territory of resilience, preserving sociability, cultural expression, and everyday activities. According to Daum (2018), Barra is the oldest settlement in the city. It was founded by Azorean families who were engaged in artisanal fishing and mutual cooperation. These features underscore the need for policies that integrate heritage conservation with community participation in urban development.

The cultural landscape of Barra intertwines material and immaterial elements that ground memory, identity, and daily practices. Moraes and Tricárico (2006) emphasize how the neighborhood connects the past with the present through shared symbols and local knowledge. This milieu calls for sensitive, context-aware approaches that recognize the neighborhood as a lived territory. Within this framework, *Casa Linhares* stands out as an affective landmark and focal point of local memory, situated at the heart of the main square.

### 5.5.2 Adaptive Reuse of Casa Linhares: Between Memory and Collective Uses

Ademar Linhares and Néia Bastos built *Casa Linhares* in the 1950s. They lived there with their eleven children. The property also housed one of Barra's first businesses and functioned as a bartering point between producers and merchants. Constructed of solid brick in a traditional style, the house became a focal point for socializing and community organization (Institutional Plaque, 2015). In 2004, with the inauguration of the *Singing, Dancing, and Weaving Our History School of Art and Handicraft*, the name *Casa Linhares* was adopted. According to Interviewee A (personal communication, May 4, 2025), prior to its incorporation into the public heritage, the house belonged to Néia Linhares. At the owner's request, the property was never expropriated during her lifetime, but was initially leased to the city government. From 2004 onward, the site hosted cultural projects due to its strategic location and symbolic value to the community.

The main adaptive reuse occurred when the Balneário Camboriú Cultural Foundation (FCBC) established the School of Art and Handicraft. The house was renovated to accommodate workshops in weaving, ceramics, printmaking, theater, music, and local knowledge – such as the traditional arts of making nets and oars. These renovations preserved the original architecture, including an expanded warehouse area with an open-air stage. According to Interviewee A (personal communication, May 4, 2025), retaining the former residents' son's barbershop in one of the rooms was a symbolic decision because it had long served as a neighborhood meeting point. The School of Art operated until 2014. Afterwards, the space was assigned to the

**Figure 1.**  
Visual panel of the building: transformations of Casa Linhares (1993–2025). Composed of photographs by Lilian Martins, Cezar Silveira, and BC Notícias.



Military Police and the Subprefecture. However, it remained active as a cultural venue, hosting FCBC events, a library, fairs, exhibitions, and collective activities. In 2015, the house was declared a public utility (Decree 7956/15). In 2024, a new restoration project began. According to *Jornal Linha Popular* (2025), the warehouse is being renovated to improve accessibility. Interviewee A (personal communication, May 4, 2025) confirms that the restoration preserves the site's history while creating opportunities for new cultural and communal activities.

5.5.3 Cultural Collectives and Practices

To provide a current overview of the *Casa Linhares* warehouse's cultural utilization, we selected four cultural collectives active there between 2024 and 2025, taking into account community involvement and the role of cultural agents.

According to Tuan's (2015) concept of place, a space becomes a place when it is inhabited and imbued with emotional experiences. In our interviews, participants affectionately referred to the warehouse as the *casinha* signaling its symbolic appropriation. Since 2016, Peixaria Cultural has organized the *Sarau da Tainha*, activating the *Praça do Pescador*, *Casa Linhares*, and the warehouse through artistic performances, discussion circles, and workshops. The collective invites local fishermen to share their stories, fostering exchanges between art, territory, and memory (Interviewee C, personal communication, May 4, 2025). Since 2016, *Maracatu Nova Lua* has held open



Figure 2. Visual timeline of Casa Linhares and its cultural transformations (1950–2025). Composed of photographs by Lilian Martins, Cezar Silveira, Junior Koche, Evandro Che, Gabriel Gallarza; images from social media posts; and personal archive of Caroline Santos da Silva.

rehearsals and workshops in the warehouse, focusing on Recife-style Maracatu de Baque Virado and welcoming members from different nations. They collaborate with masters of popular culture to co-create instruments, costumes, and adornments, adapting traditional *loas* with local elements.

Their activities interweave dance, percussion, and Afro-Brazilian symbolism. Artesãs Sambaquis offers free ceramics workshops in exchange for the use of their space, thereby valorizing manual techniques and local knowledge. Capoeira Abadá de Balneário Camboriú holds regular training sessions in the warehouse and the square. These sessions reinforce capoeira as a collective practice of movement, music, and cultural resistance (Interviewee D, personal communication, May 4, 2025).

## 5.4 Concluding Remarks

Our findings suggest that *Casa Linhares* extends beyond its physical structure to serve as a place of memory, social connections, and communal life. Participants reported collective care practices and self-managed interventions, such as group-led painting and repairs, that reveal autonomy and deep engagement. The site's symbolic dimension is evident in its various names (casinha, collective hub, and warehouse), which convey a strong sense of belonging. Reported experiences range from welcoming encounters and discussion circles to workshops and mutual listening. For some, arriving at *Casa Linhares* feels like becoming part of it, and the rhythm is set by the people who pass through it. Interview data show that these collectives operate independently and leverage public grants to sustain activities, even sporadic ones. However, frequent management changes introduce instability, forcing groups to restart and hindering continuity. Nevertheless, *Casa Linhares* has established itself as a symbolic space, brought to life by cultural activities that strengthen local connections. Through collaborative and affective interventions, the site is embedded in the creative economy, enriching debates on culture, urban development, and belonging. The creative economy framework helps us understand these processes by foregrounding symbolic appro-

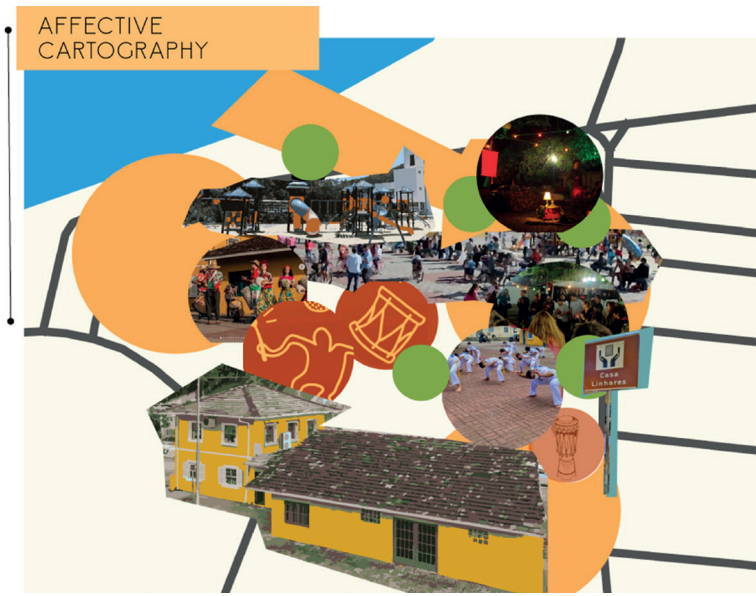


Figure 3.  
Affective cartography  
of Casa Linhares and its  
cultural connections.

priation, diversity, and value creation. In the case of *Casa Linhares*, autonomous and collective practices demonstrate how affective and historical resources can be regeneratively mobilized, creating new centers of activity and strengthening communal bonds.

By addressing these dimensions, our research contributes to the conversation about the role of culture in creating more empathetic and inclusive cities. We achieved our objective of elucidating the symbolic and cultural activation of *Casa Linhares* through the experiences of its collectives. The interviews revealed collaborative and affective practices that transform the house into a space of belonging and creativity.

This study contributes to discussions of culture and urbanism by highlighting shared spaces as agents of urban regeneration and local network building. It reaffirms the importance of community-led initiatives in creating cities that are sensitive to and connected with their territories.

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## 6. Co-designing Multifunctional Urban Interiors: the role of architectural technology for environmental comfort

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### ABSTRACT

In contemporary urban regeneration programs, multifunctional urban interiors are investigated for experimentation and inclusion through socio-cultural initiatives. Usually, these spaces are located in public buildings owned by municipalities, and local associations are in charge of using them. They face difficulties in converting such spaces for the multi-function needed, often addressed through standardised approaches. Within this framework, this contribution explores the role of environmental comfort, thermal, acoustic, and visual, as a critical and often overlooked dimension of spatial performance in reimagining and co-designing public interiors. Through a participatory approach, the study investigates how comfort can be addressed not only as a measurable standard but as a condition shaped by the interactions between users, materials, technological systems, and spatial configurations. This contributes to showing the potential of co-designing with space performance in mind.

## 6.1 Introduction

In contemporary urban regeneration, multifunctional urban interiors are investigated as areas for experimentation and inclusion through socio-cultural initiatives for revitalising public building interiors. These spaces host various activities, including offices, co-working, training, events, and exhibitions. However, their adaptive reuse is challenged by the lack of flexibility and personalisation, in addition to regulatory and spatial constraints. In addition, establishing a sense of belonging among users, which is essential for the success of the space, is a challenge.

Accordingly, co-design practices are adopted to shape spaces reflecting individual and collective needs, enhancing the quality of services and fostering community engagement (Benz *et al.*, 2024). In architecture, they are mainly adopted for spatial regeneration, especially in urban planning (Sanoff, 2000), enhancing collaboration based on deep dialogue and negotiation actions between heterogeneous clusters of actors (Healey, 1997), yet the integration of architecture technology remains limited, despite its relevance in shaping performative spaces (Hensel, 2013).

This contribution, part of the action-research project OSMOSI and the Space Performance workshop, extends participatory urban design into architectural technology. Space performance is not a technical post-condition, but rather a negotiated quality of the project, explored through dialogue, perception, and material choices defined by users' interaction. Grounded in Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005), this approach considers the built environment as an active agent able to produce social relations and patterns of use. In parallel, the concept of affordance (Gibson, 2014) examines how materials and environmental characteristics shape human behaviours, mediating between human intentions and environmental constraints (Yang *et al.*, 2025), while improving comfort and well-being (Pasini *et al.*, 2021).

The study proposes a methodological and conceptual framework using a mixed model of affordance-based diagrams, material exploration, and technical measurements. The work is articulated as follows: Section 6.2 proposes a background on multifunctional spaces and their role in territorial regeneration. Section 6.3 delineated the meth-

odology of the workshop. Section 6.4 discusses results. Section 6.5 analyses outcomes and future developments.

## 6.2 Background

The framework for evaluating environmental comfort in multifunctional indoor spaces is introduced. Performance results from measurable technical parameters and co-produced features derived from user interaction within spatial and material surroundings. Thermal, acoustic, and visual comfort are investigated based on established definitions, regulations, and experimental perceptions.

### *Multifunctional interiors*

In contemporary urban transformations, hybrid or multifunctional spaces arise as strategic infrastructures for inclusive and sustainable territorial development. This is particularly evident in contexts as Italy, marked by building vacancy, where a growing number of public and semi-public building stock is often underused (Pacchi *et al.*, 2020). Regeneration strategies emerged as new opportunities for rethinking those spaces as forms of civic engagement and social experimentation. Often activated through participatory processes, these spaces can adapt to socio-economic, environmental and cultural transformation, fostering long-term results and care (Borch & Kornberger, 2015). On the other hand, hybrid spaces often require working within existing regulatory, historical, and structural constraints, which challenge traditional design approaches and static standards. Through the lens of architecture, hybrid spaces emerge in the grey zone between public and private spheres. A specific architectural form does not define hybrid spaces but their functional adaptability, flexibility, and capacity to support interdisciplinary collaboration, serving as dynamic ecosystems (Fassi & Vergani, 2022). To become powerful tools for territorial regeneration, hybrid spaces need to be designed with confidence and flexibility in mind. In this context, participatory practices become a bridge between designers and users, who are the most direct source of knowledge regarding their spatial needs. Despite this, users are usually excluded from critical stages of design. This topic has arisen

in architecture since the 1970s and is still debated in contemporary thinking (Ratti & Claudel, 2025).

### *Environmental comfort – Space Performances*

The performance of a space refers to its capacity to respond to its users' functional, environmental, and psychological needs (Hensel, 2013). In the 1970s, *A Pattern Language* by C. Alexander described the performance of spaces based on the level of positive human interaction they were able to produce (Alexander *et al.*, 1977). At the beginning of the 2000s, Building Performance Evaluation (BPE) was used to assess energy performance and occupant comfort (Gwilliam & O'Dwyer, 2021). More recent perspectives suggested the active role of spaces (Latour, 2005). They have agency, and their performance depends on the interactions between materials, people, and technologies. Moving away from static standards, which typically assume a passive occupant model, adaptation to the space, such as opening windows or moving, represents a critical model for interpreting the comfort experience. For the sake of the participatory process, the components of environmental comfort, thermal, acoustic, and visual, are investigated. On a regulatory basis, since there are no specific norms on hybrid spaces in Italy, office parameters are considered.

### *Thermal comfort*

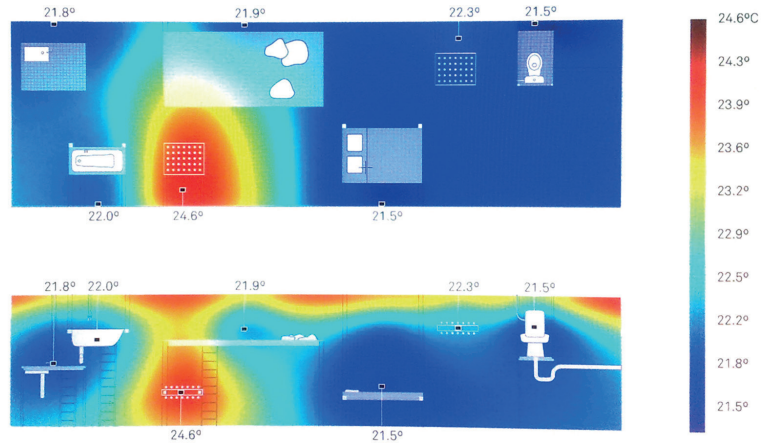
It is defined by the ANSI/ASHRAE Standard 55<sup>1</sup> as a condition of mind that expresses satisfaction with the thermal environment, emphasising a subjective evaluation (Yang *et al.*, 2024). On an objective, measurable basis, thermal comfort is influenced by different parameters such as air temperature, relative humidity, average surface temperatures of walls, floors, windows and doors in a room, air velocity, thermal insulation of clothing, and level of metabolic activity. Referring to the norms UNI EN ISO 7730:2006<sup>2</sup>, the indoor temperature should range from 18°C to 22°C in winter and between 23°C and 26°C in summer. In the realm of office spaces, research indicates that task performance tends to decrease as temperatures deviate from about 22°C. However, setting the temperature at 22°C is insufficient (Novotny, 2024). The limitation becomes evident in multifunctional or hybrid interiors, where spatial adaptability, user agency, and subjective per-

**Note 1.**  
**ANSI/ASHRAE Standard 55-2013: Thermal Environmental Conditions for Human Occupancy.**

**Note 2.**  
**UNI EN ISO 7730:2006: Ergonomics of the thermal environment - Analytical determination and interpretation of thermal comfort using calculation of the PMV and PPD indices and local thermal comfort criteria.**

ception play a crucial role. The adaptive comfort model, against the Fanger ones, highlights how comfort is context-dependent and adaptive through user behavioural, psychological and cultural aspects. An architectural interpretation of this adaptive model can be found in the work of Philippe Rahm, who demonstrates how thermal comfort can be designed spatially rather than relying on mechanical climate control. In *Domestic Astronomy* (2009), Rahm replaces the traditional horizontal way of living with vertical thermal gradients (Figure 1).

Figure 1.  
Domestic Astronomy,  
Philippe Rahm, 2009  
(source: <http://www.philipperahm.com/data/projects/domesticastronomy/index.html>).



### *Acoustic comfort*

For the sake of the workshop, it refers to the quality of the perceived sound environment within a space, which must be appropriate for the activity being performed (Long, 2005). In the educational sector, UNI 11532-2:2020<sup>3</sup> defines a maximum limit of 55 decibels in shared office spaces and 35 decibels in areas dedicated to concentration, such as meeting rooms. Both internal noise sources and external ones need to be considered. The first category comprises sounds from keyboard typing, printers, and conversations in calls or presence. In the second case, traffic can affect occupants' comfort, especially in urban environments, such as grass cutting, and construction works. As stated by (Novotny, 2024), in contemporary work from everywhere, auditory distractions are becoming common, especially from video calls or meetings. Finding a balance of acoustic privacy between open seating spaces for collaboration and enclosed offices is a relevant design issue to enhance social interaction.

Note 3.  
UNI 11532-2:2020:  
Internal acoustical  
characteristics of  
confined spaces - Design  
methods and evaluation  
techniques - Part 2:  
Educational sector.

### *Visual comfort*

By definition, a visually comfortable environment provides adequate light distribution. The factors influencing visual comfort are sufficient illuminance levels, glare, and colour temperature (Baker & Steemers, 2014). For design, UNI EN 12464-1:2021<sup>4</sup> needs to be considered for lighting indoor workplaces. It is important to highlight that the European Standard EN 17037:2018<sup>5</sup> is the first regulation devoted exclusively to natural light, establishing requirements for ensuring adequate access to daylight in buildings. Natural lighting and artificial lighting represent critical elements of an office's workplace design since they enable users to perform tasks while improving performance and well-being (Novotny, 2024).

**Note 4.**  
**UNI EN 12464-1:2021:**  
**Light and lighting -**  
**Lighting of work places -**  
**Part 1: Indoor work places.**

**Note 5.**  
**EN 17037:2018+A1:2021:**  
**Daylight in buildings.**

## **6.3 Methodology: co-designing at *Open Casello***

This study adopts a Research-through-Design (RtD) process, which uses design to explore environmental comfort for performative multifunctional indoor spaces (Sevaldson, 2004). This methodology allows for a generative and participatory design session rooted in the principles of performance-oriented design (Hensel, 2013), in which space is interpreted as the outcome of multiple social, technological, and material parameters. In addition, it embraces a time-based logic typical of multifunctional and hybrid spaces, in which the performance needs to change during the day based on activities and users' interactions (Sevaldson, 2004), resulting in a research process that is more likely to meet the participants' needs (Benz *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, the assessment and environmental comfort become part of the participatory process rather than a technical specification. The following sections outline the context of the proposed framework's application, the session's structure, and the tool used, focusing on the experiential integration of material affordances and comfort perception.

### *Context of application: Open Casello*

The Space Performance session took place in the multifunctional hybrid space of Open Casello, Piazzale Cantore (Milan) on April 16th,



2025, between 4.30 pm and 6 pm, in person. The workshop represented the third participatory session of the regeneration strategies for indoor public spaces, involving the municipality, local associations, and community members. After identifying users' needs and expected activities, the third workshop enacted a form of co-performance where spatial and environmental qualities emerged from users' embodied interactions and collaborative design choices (Davidová, 2018). The workshop was facilitated by researchers from the OSMOSI team and conducted in Italian to maintain familiarity and ensure accessibility for all the participants who had already participated in the previous meetings. The facilitators did not take part in the co-designers group. The participant group included eight users, organised as follows:

- Two representatives from the Municipality of Milan dealing with youth policies.
- Four members from local associations, BASE Milano, Atypic, Lato B, Collettivo 90, dealing mainly with project management and artistic board.
- One student from the Design Department at Politecnico di Milano.
- One active community stakeholder.

The workshop was divided into two main phases: a first session of design imagination and a second session of material experimentation.

#### *Phase 1 – Imagining Function and Atmosphere*

After a theoretical introduction to spatial performance and environmental comfort, participants were divided into two subgroups (indoor space and outdoor space focus). Each group was provided with a mood board kit, including images of furniture, lighting, and fabrics. They were asked to visualise possible configurations of Open Casello, considering the timing and diversity of activities hosted in the space. This exercise allowed for functional hypotheses and atmospheric intentions to emerge, expressed through collage and verbal discussion.

#### *Phase 2 – Material Affordances and Adaptive Design*

In the second part, participants were introduced to a material-based design session. A selection of materials and architectural compo-

nents, provided by the Material Balance Research Lab from Politecnico di Milano, was displayed on a central table. Participants could interact with samples directly, evaluating their texture, weight, and colour. In addition, the facilitator illustrated each material sample's acoustic and thermal properties, helping participants by providing new tools to enhance the comfort of the space. This hands-on practice aimed to translate the theoretical comfort concepts into real design possibilities, allowing co-designers to imagine spatial interventions based on the installation of acoustic absorbing panels on walls, ceiling elements, and flexible textile systems. The goal was to support the integration of sensory and material knowledge into participatory design thinking. Both theoretical insight and hands-on practice enabled the articulation of comfort in quantitative terms and as a negotiated quality embedded in user-space-material relationships. Mood boards, sensory observation, and physical samples act as support for the research. Materials reference and technological components were presented during the workshop and collected in the Material sample matrix (Table 1), each chosen for its adaptive potential and relevance to comfort performance.

### *Environmental comfort Assessment*

The environmental comfort of the space was assessed using a mixed approach: qualitative on-site observation and basic simulation tools. Acoustic comfort was evaluated with OPENoise, a web-based application. The tool enables the evaluation of environmental noise exposure within specific interior configurations. Visual comfort was explored through direct observation of lighting conditions (natural and artificial), supplemented by user feedback on brightness, glare, and light distribution. Participants were invited to evaluate the quality of daylight exposure and to annotate areas perceived as too dim, too bright, or visually unbalanced.

Lastly, thermal comfort was explored through direct feedback from the participants. Participants were encouraged to express doubts and uncertainties on spatial discomforts and preferences, helping to frame perceptual gradients while identifying design opportunities. The workshop closed with the return of results and a brief discussion on the new experience gained.

	Sample 01	Sample 02	Sample 03	Sample 04	Sample 05	Sample 06
Material component						
Function	Acoustic absorption	Flexible partitions/ darkening	Acoustic absorption	Acoustic absorption	Acoustic absorption/ modular partitions	Modular partitions
Properties	Lightweight sound-absorbing circular	Sound-insulating tactile variation	Natural breathable customizable	Biodegradable insulating	Lightweight recyclable dual-sided finish	Lightweight recyclable customizable finish
Source	Slalom - acoustic & partition systems	Slalom - acoustic & partition systems	Material Balance SAPERLab	Material Balance SAPERLab	Material Balance SAPERLab	Wood Skin - Decorative wall panels

Figure 2.  
Material sample matrix.

## 6.4 Results and discussion: introducing co-design for architectural technology

The workshop demonstrated the potential of enrichment that environmental comfort can give to regeneration strategies for indoor multifunctional spaces. It emerged that space performance is the result of multiple aspects, co-produced by users, space, and material context. The goal is not to propose a generalised approach, given the limited sample size and the exploratory nature, but a replicable framework for further research.

The natural light proved sufficient for the workshop, rightly shielded by white curtains. As was highlighted by the municipality members, the amount of natural light was insufficient during other activities, such as orientation meetings for young people and study moments. Participants suggested that a more illuminated environment could be more welcoming and help perform these activities. Concerning glare, no problems were encountered. A suggestion from the partici-

pants of the local associations and noted by the co-designers on the municipality side, concerned the possibility of inserting a second layer of curtains in addition to the existing ones. A heavier, higher-performance curtain could be helpful when Open Casello hosts art installations and events to create an immersive environment. In addition to the visual function, this element could also fulfil an acoustic function, dampening the noise coming from outside. The current artificial lighting system was judged to be inflexible by the representatives of the local associations, who had organised events at Open Casello both during the day and in the evening. The representatives of all associations agreed that the existing system should be implemented. Contrasting opinions concerned the possibility of incorporating lights of different colours and shades, which could transform the environment that now represents an aseptic white box into a warmer and more welcoming space. A concern with this change was related to flexibility and adaptability.

Regarding acoustic comfort, both subjectively and by digital tools, external traffic has the highest impact on life at Open Casello. Located in a central city location, the area is on the corner of two main arteries, between Viale Papiniano and Corso Cristoforo Colombo. In addition to the passage of numerous cars, public transport was also problematic. In fact, during the session, it was not easy to speak without raising voices. The analysis of noise levels measured through OPENoise showed a range between 41 dBA and 51 dBA. These values were compatible with collective activities but exceeded the recommended thresholds for environments dedicated to concentration. The perceived acoustic condition was found to be partially satisfactory, and the need to introduce sound-absorbing elements was highlighted, as shown in data extracted from *Table 2*. Concerning the internal sources of noise, municipality members raised the possibility of inserting movable doors between the open space and the corridor that divides the Casello. The corridor houses the entrance door to the space, which, by opening and closing, can generate discomfort, and a photocopier, a possible source of internal noise. In addition, doors or partitions could also help with the back-office activities performed on the other side of the corridor, ensuring concentration and privacy for operators and users.

Evaluation	Parameters								
	Location	Condition	Motivation	Duration	LAeq(t)*	LAeq(t) min	LAeq(t) max	Dominant source	Participant perception
	Open Casello (interior space)	Window closed	Experimental/ study	12 min 15 sec <div><div>start 18:34:23</div><div>end 18:46:38</div></div>	~ 46 dBA**	41.00 dBA	51.10 dBA	Voice Urban traffic	Neutral Discomfort

\*the equivalent sound level detected since the start of the measurement, expressed in dBA.

\*\*frequency-weighted sound level measurement parameter according to the response of the human ear ('A' weighting).

**Figure 3.**  
Data extracted from OPENoise evaluation (<https://www.snpambiente.it/snpa/arpa-piemonte/le-nuove-funzionalita-dellapp-openoise-per-la-raccolta-e-la-condivisione-dei-dati-acustici/>).

*Material and technological strategies*

In general, both the Milan municipality’s representatives and local associations proposed thoughts in line with each other, demonstrating how much the problems detected are real and impactful for all the activities hosted in the space. For spatial performance, the main thread of the discussion concerned strategies for improving the flexibility of space through materials and technologies that are also attentive to functionality and reversibility throughout the entire life cycle. In this sense, the participatory process mediated by the facilitators was fundamental in introducing adaptive solutions that were unknown or had not been thought of before, moving towards innovation and sustainability. By considering further developments, the quality and quantity of light and external noise, which rise as critical points, also need to be investigated. In addition, air quality can also be assessed to ensure safety and health.

6.5 Conclusions

This contribution focuses on the spatial performance of hybrid spaces by using co-design practices as a strategic tool for assessing environmental comfort. Drawing on the OSMOSI project, the study has illustrated how environmental qualities can move beyond technical standards to become participatory parameters (Latour, 2005). The process revealed opportunities and challenges: difficulty in translating technical concepts into accessible language for every participant, balancing subjective needs and regulatory constraints, while ensuring the feasibility of proposals. The research produced interest and concrete proposals, also thanks to the opportunity for participants to handle materials as visual and tactile mediation tools, helping gener-

ate awareness among users. While some of the proposed interventions require further technical and economic feasibility checks, the findings highlight the value of co-design in fostering environmental comfort as a spatial and social affordance.

The proposed framework offers a basis for extending these methods to other contexts, integrating larger user groups and digital simulations, and aligning design transformation with environmental and social sustainability.

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# 7. From Making to Meaning: Hybrid Economies and the Role of Design in Urban Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the emergence of hybrid economies in contemporary urban contexts, with a focus on the Milanese experience. It investigates how design contributes to reshaping local economies through inclusive innovation, network creation, and civic engagement. Drawing on a qualitative study based on mapping, interviews, and workshops, the chapter highlights how hybrid enterprises, especially in urban peripheries, merge manufacturing, education, and cultural practices into multifunctional platforms. Design plays a pivotal role not only as a discipline and output but also as a strategy for fostering relational proximity, social cohesion, and territorial regeneration. By examining hybridity across dimensions such as offer, goals, team composition, and user engagement, this contribution frames design as an infrastructure for navigating complexity and enabling new urban imaginaries.

## 7.1 Introduction

In a complex society, where traditional forms of economies are shrinking, the creation of hybrid activities is needed not only for economic survival but also for social support and in general for the broader well-being of citizens. To be functional, sustainable, and prosperous, these economies need to be based on a strong sense of community, sharing of values, and networks.

Within this framework, design, dealing with complexity, plays an essential and multiple role, resulting in both a driver and a possible content to support and create these forms of economy. The research presented here, employing a Grounded Theory approach, maps and analyzes hybrid practices operating at the intersection of design, manufacturing, and social inclusion. Special attention is paid to the role of design as a driver of systemic change, one that fosters proximity, enables cross-sectoral collaboration, and supports the development of new civic infrastructures.

## 7.2 Proximity and the Hybrid Economies

Talking of hybrid economies means talking of proximity. As discussed in the positioning paper *A Systemic Approach to Proximity through Design for Relations* (Sedini *et al.*, 2022), the concept of proximity can be explored through various disciplinary lenses, ranging from sociology to economic geography and urban planning.

Three main layers of the systemic approaches to proximity were identified: economic proximity, accessible and attractive proximity, and living and relational proximity. These layers reflect a shift from viewing proximity solely in spatial or economic terms toward understanding it as a multifaceted and dynamic system composed of tangible and intangible elements, actors, and interrelations. Rather than isolating proximity as a single variable, this systemic perspective emphasized the interconnected nature of spaces, experiences, and relationships, making it crucial to consider how proximity is enacted and shaped through design.

The economic proximity layer can be analyzed from the perspec-

tives of the users (consumers) and entrepreneurs. Neighborhood shops provide the basic necessities of local life, while also offering culture and entertainment. Moreover, the presence of meeting places for both business and leisure purposes, where knowledge and relationships are exchanged (Musterd *et al.*, 2007), can foster the creation of a creative and cultural environment (Fassi & Sedini, 2017). Indeed, Design can be a cultural act, addressing the need for new (cultural) meanings of places and actions (Zurlo, 2019).

In the Systemic Proximity approach (Sedini *et al.*, 2022), the accessible and attractive proximity layer defines a useful neighbor as the one that guarantees numerous and diverse services within a walkable distance from the user's residence (Speck, 2013). While the living and relational proximity layer highlights the importance of diversified, relational, and hybrid contexts, which provide various options in terms of services and activities, the dynamic interweaving of functional and relational networks (online and offline) (Baek & Manzini, 2012).

This premise was necessary to address the concept of the hybrid economy, which serves to avoid the usual overlook of non-monetary activities (Buchanan, 2016; Altman, 1987), considering also social and cultural contexts. The Evolutionary Economic Geography (EEG) perspective explains how new organizational forms and collaborations emerge to pursue both financial and social returns (Gong & Hassink, 2019). Within EEG, institutions play a key role in supporting and adapting to firm and regional development, much like Marshall's Industrial Atmosphere. Researchers focusing on EEG emphasize micro-scale routines and network-based knowledge creation, where weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) and various forms of proximity are crucial. Boschma (2005) expands the concept of proximity beyond geography to encompass cognitive, organizational, social, and institutional forms. These forms of proximity interact dynamically within networks, which Boschma and Frenken (2010) argue must be adaptable to foster innovation. In this complex panorama, hybrid economies shape physical hybrid places that extend beyond their economic identity, also pursuing socio-cultural innovation.

The application of the 15-Minutes city model requires careful consideration of the hybrid use of space to provide necessary functions and services to residents and citizens (Moreno *et al.*, 2021). According

to Cirilli (2025) hybrid spaces are open in terms of schedules and accessibility; flexible in terms of social and cultural offerings; fluid because of the governance models adopted, the heterogeneity of the composition of users, up to multifunctionality in the management of spaces; reclaimed because they often located in regenerated buildings/areas; changeable because their activities are subject to constant revisions. The hybrid spaces are also defined as platform spaces (Tricarico, 2022) because they constitute learning contexts where open social innovation processes take place, involving local communities, collaborative interactions between different stakeholders, and aligning individual and territorial development goals. Therefore, hybrid economies might not have an immediate and direct result in terms of big economic revenues, but over time can activate other kinds of economic and social spillovers.

To conclude, hybrid economies are characterized by embracing hybridity across multiple dimensions (Sedini, 2022). First, hybridity emerges in terms of the offer itself. This involves reflecting on the nature of the goods, services, and activities being provided, and under what conditions they are made available. Second, it concerns the goals and impacts pursued. It's essential to understand the overarching vision and mission that guide the initiative. Third, hybridity can be observed in the composition of the founding group. The founders' backgrounds and areas of expertise are particularly relevant, as they shape the nature and direction of the project.

Similarly, the composition of the team or staff reflects this hybridity. While similar to the founders' analysis, this aspect also requires attention to the specific roles and responsibilities taken on by the individuals involved, shedding light on how the initiative is managed on a day-to-day basis. Finally, hybridity is also evident in the relationship with customers or users. The way users are involved and connected to the initiative is key to understanding its hybrid nature. Altogether, these layers of hybridity contribute to shaping complex, adaptable models that integrate multiple sectors, purposes, and communities. All these levels are co-dependent, connected, and influence one another. We will look at these levels in the specific context of the city of Milano.

## 7.3 The Milanese context

Cities can be seen as hybrid eco-systems, balancing sustainable growth, justice, engagement, and economic diversity (Pradhan & Pradhan, 2002). As Mazzucato (2015) notes, public institutions must clearly define their purpose, promoting both economic innovation and social cohesion by supporting new markets and inclusive practices. To stress the relationship between public authorities, economic success, and social enhancement, it is important to describe the Milanese context starting from the declaration of interest made by the Milanese municipality on five main series of (economic) activities related to innovation and social inclusion<sup>1</sup>:

Note 1.

Source:

<http://boostinno.org>.

- hybrid Enterprises & Urban Regeneration;
- sharing & Collaborative Economy;
- startup & knowledge-intensive economy;
- new Craft & Urban Manufacturing;
- smart city & Smart citizens.

Hybrid enterprises, combining profit and non-profit goals and involving multiple sectors and stakeholders, are closely tied to urban regeneration, often by repurposing spaces like former factories for new productive uses.

The Milano Municipality has been strongly addressing the topic of proximity economies and hybrid places. To do that, as part of the Three-Year Program for the *Proximity Economy*, the City dedicated funding calls, such as *La Scuola dei Quartieri* and the *Civic Crowdfunding*, to micro and small businesses, social enterprises, and informal groups of aspiring entrepreneurs. From 2012, the Milano Municipality launched a series of initiatives aimed at the reuse, regeneration, and enhancement of underutilized municipal properties by entrusting said spaces to private or private social entities for the implementation of social and cultural projects. It established a qualified directory to survey and network hybrid spaces as social and culture-based urban regeneration experiences in the city's neighborhoods, which now collects 26 places that combine entrepreneurship, innovation, social inclusion, and rootedness in local communities, through original forms of organization, management, and production of products and services.

While many economic sectors can take hybrid forms, New (or Traditional) Craft & Urban Manufacturing stands out as particularly inclusive. This sector embodies hybridity by blending technological innovation, economic development, and social goals such as inclusion and participation, aligning with Smart City principles.

This hybrid model builds on the city's historical culture of making, suggesting a path-dependent process rather than a break from tradition. Designers, due to their social and cognitive proximity to artisanal and manufacturing domains (Boschma, 2005), often take on productive roles, valuing craftsmanship knowledge (Tajani & Micelli, 2019).

In Milan, the municipality promoted this sector through the Manifattura Milano program (from 2017), which supported new crafts, digital manufacturing, and Industry 4.0, closely linked to urban regeneration and social inclusion. Key strategies include bottom-up neighborhood revitalization, cultural initiatives, and support for shared innovation platforms like fab labs and makerspaces.

This manufacturing revival not only drives new business creation but also supports R&D partnerships that further hybridization (Tajani & Micelli, 2019). Situated often in suburban areas, fab labs and makerspaces contribute to the economic and cultural revitalization of peripheries (Armondi & Bruzzese, 2017), reinforcing the social economy (Zandonai *et al.*, 2019). Rediscovering craft, as Friedmann (1987) notes, enhances the connection between people and their work. It also enables diverse professional growth, benefiting technicians, artisans, designers, and ITS graduates (Tajani, 2019). Moreover, craft practices thrive on mutual learning and collaboration, requiring dialogic competencies (Sennett, 2008).

However, it must be said that the hype for manufacturing faded away in the last few years, probably also because of the economic sustainability that these kinds of economies were struggling with. As Tajani, former councillor for productive activities and labor of the Municipality of Milano, stresses (2025), the maker's utopia of a reinvention of the economic and social model, based on the extreme autonomy of subjects who went from consumers to producers, or co-producers, faces another prevailing model, that of immense concentrations of capital, computing power, and space. However, Tajani states that investing in the physiological dynamics of a neighbor-

hood, including manufacturing, is central. A neighborhood with shops and services is a good investment that pays off in terms of the value and attractiveness of the area, as distinct from the stereotypical nonplaces of chains and shopping malls. Repairing manufacturing in the city and working to bring it back is thus not only good governance, but it is also good business (Tajani, 2025).

## 7.4 The study

The study<sup>2</sup> presented here adopts a Grounded Theory approach, centered on the concept of civicness, a set of shared values, institutions, and practices that foster civic engagement and collective well-being (Putnam, 1993; Bagnasco, 1999). Fieldwork included mapping, interviews, and a workshop. The mapping phase identified initiatives related to work, creativity, and community, aligned with priorities set by the Municipality of Milano.

From this mapping, composed of 180 realities, 10 case studies were selected for semi-structured interviews, to which we added two public sector key informants and seven artisanal entrepreneurs, bringing the total to nineteen interviews<sup>3</sup>. These participants later joined other stakeholders in a workshop.

As fully discussed in previous works (Sedini, 2019; 2022), the initial mapping activity involved places and initiatives of (and for) (new) work, creativity, and encounter: coworking spaces; fab labs & makerspaces; service centers and hubs; incubators; cultural centers; spontaneous engagement spaces; cafés; events.

The selection for the interviews was based on three main factors:

- mission: more or less focused on social innovation;
- location: peripheral;
- originality: they had not already been investigated by other recent research.

Our analysis focused primarily on manufacturing-related cases (e.g., jewellery, lute, textile, typography, bakery, bicycle, brewing), categorized under the Municipality's areas of interest. While cafés and events were less relevant, we concentrated on Fab Labs, Makerspaces, and New Craft & Urban Manufacturing. We also included one case

**Note 2.**  
Made in Milano / Made in Chicago was a joint research experience developed by the Design System of Politecnico di Milano and the Institute of Design of the Illinois Institute of Technology of Chicago within the Sister Cities Policy Program (2015-2018).

**Note 3.**  
The nineteen interviews lasted on average 45 minutes; they were recorded and fully transcribed.

from Spontaneous Engagement Spaces, as it featured manufacturing activities. Notably, all the typologies of spaces taken into consideration are included in the hybrid enterprises and urban regeneration priority.

## 7.5 Results: The Role of Hybrid Making, Networks, and Design

The analysis of the selected case studies confirms that hybrid enterprises are key enablers of socio-cultural and economic innovation. Integrating multiple activities, which creates multifunctional spaces, serves economic and civic purposes. Such hybridization is a survival strategy in uncertain markets, but it also reflects a deeper cultural orientation toward collaboration, inclusion, and place-based development. Indeed, as the offer is concerned, many of the analyzed initiatives exhibit hybrid characteristics by combining various activities (e.g., manufacturing, education, consulting, co-working, etc.) and functioning as inclusive platforms. This hybridity is often necessary for market survival, with revenue commonly derived from space rental, training, and consulting services. The balance between innovation and tradition in their methods highlights unique working models. Hybrid offers are both enabled by and generators of hybrid networks, which rely on both internal team composition and external collaborations. Enterprises with more diversified offers tend to have broader and more cross-sectoral networks. Design emerges as a central element, both as a service and a strategic approach, enabling business reinvention, product quality improvement, and the development of comprehensive, innovation-oriented systems.

Many of the interviewed initiatives pursue sustainability goals, integrating sustainability principles into their products and services; they are often driven by personal values and a commitment to responsible production, favoring small-scale, customized goods over mass-market models. Social impact is also a central goal, with several initiatives empowering marginalized individuals or supporting career transitions through training programs. Most are located in urban peripheries, either by municipal incentives or by choice, to foster



local identity and community engagement. These diverse objectives contribute to a hybrid impact, combining environmental, social, and economic sustainability, often pursued through networking and strategic design approaches.

The hybridity of the offer is thus mirrored in the heterogeneity of teams, founders, and user communities. The founders of the analyzed initiatives often emerged from pre-existing informal relationships,

Hybridity key factors	Questions for the investigation	Exemplifying quote
Offer	What goods, services, and activities are offered? What are the offer conditions?	"The typography carries out printing activities, in particular, offset printing, letterpress printing and digital printing. We do training workshops. Then, there is also a small bookshop [...]. We had an analogue coworking area, but it never really started due to lack of resources." Typography
Goals and impacts	What are the vision and mission? Is there information on the typologies of impacts that their activities have/might have?	"We have projects in collaboration with refugee tailors. One is an Afghan tailor, since he knew how to make shirts well, we did things together. Now he has his private clients." Collective bottom-up association focused on tailoring
Founders composition	Who are the founders (private or public subjects)? What are their biographies (especially as their expertise is concerned)?	"We met at the Ambrosian goldsmith school. I worked and followed the courses with Valentina, coming from Rome, and Debora, who studied at Politecnico. We met, and this sympathy was born." Jewelry artisans
Team/Staff composition	Similar questions to the previous point but with a focus also on the specific roles covered by the team/staff members.	"The passion for the "crossbreeding", for the heterogeneity of people and practices is very important and it is a common element." Old farmhouse recovered into a social hub
(Relationship with) customers	Who are the people attending this place? How do they communicate with them? How they are reached?	"We want to have a relationship with the neighborhood [...]. We aim at residential neighborhoods, inhabited by Milanese people. Word-of-mouth has been fundamental since it has attracted the press, which seems to have fallen in love with us." Bakery artisan

**Table 1.**  
**Synthesis of the**  
**hybridity key factors.**

sharing common values and interests. Formal networks, frequently involving institutional support, funding, or access to space, played a key role in facilitating the creation of these enterprises, particularly in makerspaces and Fab Labs. While informal networks were rooted in shared backgrounds, formal networks tended to be more hybrid, connecting diverse stakeholders. Design was a recurring element in both types of networks, with institutions like Politecnico di Milano and artisanal schools serving as key meeting points and enablers. The teams of workers are expected to possess a range of skills, showing both internal hybridity (multidisciplinary abilities within individuals) and external hybridity (diverse, complementary team members).

This hybridity is even more pronounced than in the founders' composition. While the diversity of activities requires varied expertise, limited resources often lead to teams being primarily composed of designers. Some initiatives also intentionally promote social mixité (Wirth, 1938), aiming for diversity within their teams and among users and clients. The hybrid nature of these initiatives results, therefore, in a diversified customer base, often intentionally fostering encounters among different social groups. Customer networks are both pre-existing and formed within these hybrid spaces, which serve as platforms for connection. Design plays a strategic role in shaping this diversity, influencing the customer composition and the communication strategies used to reach them.

## 7.6. Conclusion

This study reflects on hybrid economies as socio-spatial configurations shaped by multiple forms of proximity, civic engagement, and collaborative making. The research emphasized the importance of networks and design in facilitating hybrid organizational models that operate at the intersection of economic production and social inclusion. Six key factors shape the hybridity of an enterprise: offer, goals and impacts, founders, team composition, and customer/user relationships. While founders are often not hybrid themselves, their vision strongly influences the hybridization of goals and offerings, shaping team diversity and customer mix.

Achieving hybrid impacts, social and economic, depends on these interconnections and user feedback, which may lead to reassessment of goals and offers. Networks play a crucial role in enabling this hybridity cycle by supporting the offer's effectiveness, shaping team and founder composition, reaching target audiences, and even serving as part of the offer itself. However, they typically have limited influence on goal-setting unless at a personal level.

The study identifies four types of networks essential to hybridity:

1. Pre-existing/new: existing networks support the development of new, more innovation-oriented ones.
2. Local/global: both are important; proximity is not just spatial but also cognitive.
3. Formal/informal: institutions and informal ties are equally crucial for support and knowledge exchange.
4. Homogeneous/hybrid: while homogeneous networks focus on specific competencies, hybrid networks bring together diverse fields and are strengthened by being layered across the previous categories.

These enterprises and initiatives, especially in Milan's peripheral areas, act as nodes of local innovation, capable of redefining both urban spaces and social relationships.

However, the revitalization of manufacturing practices, a central pillar of these hybrid economies, faces growing structural challenges. The enthusiasm surrounding makerspaces and micro-factories has been dampened by economic constraints and the systemic power of centralized platforms and global capital. As observed in Milan, the maker movement struggles with long-term sustainability despite public policy support. Yet, the re-embedding of manufacturing within neighborhoods remains vital. It contributes to community identity, diversified economies, and civicness. Design's role in this scenario is systemic and transformative: it mediates between actors, aligns values, and enables future visions. Its systemic and participatory approach is fundamental to both interpreting and shaping hybrid economies as ecosystems. Moving forward, further research should focus on developing metrics for hybridity and sustainability, and explore the scalability of these practices beyond manufacturing sectors, embracing service design, culture, and care-related domains.

# Aknowledgement

A special thanks to Francesco Zurlo, Dean of the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano; Luisa Collina, Full Professor, School of Design of Politecnico di Milano; and Vanessa Monna, Research Fellow, Design Department of Politecnico di Milano.

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# 8. From Signage to Relational Infrastructure: a situated taxonomy for environmental Graphic Design in Hybrid Spaces

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## ABSTRACT

This contribution redefines the role of Environmental Graphic Design (EGD) in light of the evolving nature of hybrid urban spaces, shaped by participatory processes, collective narratives, and informal regeneration practices. Moving beyond conventional notions of signage as merely informational, the study conceptualises EGD as a relational infrastructure – a design tool that connects physical space, social actors, and urban imagination. Adopting a qualitative and comparative methodology based on six international and national case studies, the research develops a typological framework comprising six categories: wayfinding, narrative, participatory, interactive, critical, and temporary signs. The analysis highlights the potential of graphic signs to enhance urban livability, stimulate social engagement, and convey symbolic meaning. Introducing the concept of inhabited graphics as both a design perspective and a critical stance, the contribution provides theoretical and practical tools to support the development of contextual, inclusive, and relational graphic interventions. Ultimately, it contributes to the reinforcement of the civic and cultural dimensions of contemporary urban space.

## 8.1 Reframing Environmental Graphic Design: Toward Relational Infrastructures

In the contemporary context, urban transformations are no longer limited to the mere physical regeneration of space but increasingly involve cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions. So-called Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces – places that combine cultural production, collective practices, and participatory governance models – are emerging as strategic devices for activating processes of urban innovation (Manzini, 2021; Ostanel, 2023). In these settings, Environmental Graphic Design (EGD) (Calori & Vanden-Eynden, 2015) assumes a potentially significant, yet often overlooked role. Traditionally, the discipline has developed within a techno-functional paradigm, focused on signage efficiency and cognitive aspects such as orientation, legibility, and spatial comprehension (Lin *et al.*, 2025). While this functional perspective – exemplified by Calori and Vanden-Eynden (2015) – emphasizes clarity, branding, and wayfinding within built environments, it often overlooks the potential of graphic signs to operate as cultural and relational devices in complex urban ecosystems. As such, it proves inadequate for addressing the layered nature of hybrid urban contexts, where symbolic, communicative, and relational dimensions are central.

This study proposes a critical revision of the dominant paradigm, framing EGD not simply as an informative tool but as a relational infrastructure capable of connecting people, practices, memories, and possibilities. This repositioning rests on three main theoretical assumptions:

- The sign as a cultural and social device: research in social semiotics and visual communication emphasizes the transformative power of signs to generate meaning, raise awareness, and shape behaviours (Vallverdu-Gordi & Mariné-Roig, 2023). Signs do not merely convey messages – they construct relationships among people, places, and narratives.
- EGD as a regenerative agent: contributions in regenerative and place-based design (Malik, 2024) highlight the capacity of graphic design to activate latent resources, reinforce local



capabilities, and enrich cultural and ecological environments.

- The spatiality of the sign: theories of spatial semiotics (Guan & Wang, 2023) offer analytical frameworks for understanding signs as spatial mediators that organize, interpret, and perform space.

From this perspective, the concept of inhabited graphics serves as the interpretive core of the research. A sign is inhabited when it is co-created by communities, activated by everyday practices, and embedded within the rhythms and meanings of lived space. It operates as a semantic interface – sensitive and dynamic – supporting processes of transformation at both social and spatial levels. EGD is therefore seen as a mediating device between built environments and collective dynamics, and as a design tool for fostering proximity, belonging, and experimentation. This rethinking calls for overcoming traditional dichotomies between designer and inhabitant, function and expression, communication and narration. In contexts marked by instability, transition, and plurality, graphic systems should be conceived not just to inform, but to negotiate.

Grounded in these foundations, the research develops a theoretical and operational framework for interpreting EGD as a relational infrastructure in hybrid urban contexts. This framework is articulated through a situated taxonomy of signs derived from qualitative analysis of six international case studies. The objective is to explore how graphic design can actively contribute to community regeneration, the construction of shared identities, and the symbolic activation of urban space.

## 8.2 A Situated Taxonomic Approach

To explore the role of graphic signs as relational infrastructures within hybrid contexts, this research adopts a qualitative approach based on the comparative analysis of case studies. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the study is grounded in a selection of emblematic examples that clearly illustrate different relational functions of graphic design across a range of urban conditions.

The six case studies were selected through a critical and purpo-

sive sampling process. They span five countries and include interventions in metropolitan areas, transitioning neighbourhoods, depopulated villages, and post-industrial spaces. Some are promoted by public institutions, others by independent collectives; some are temporary and experimental, others are structural and long-term. This diversity allows for the investigation of graphic signs across a variety of spatial, temporal, and organisational configurations. The analysis combined multiple sources: project documentation, design analysis, press reviews, and, when possible, in situ observations.

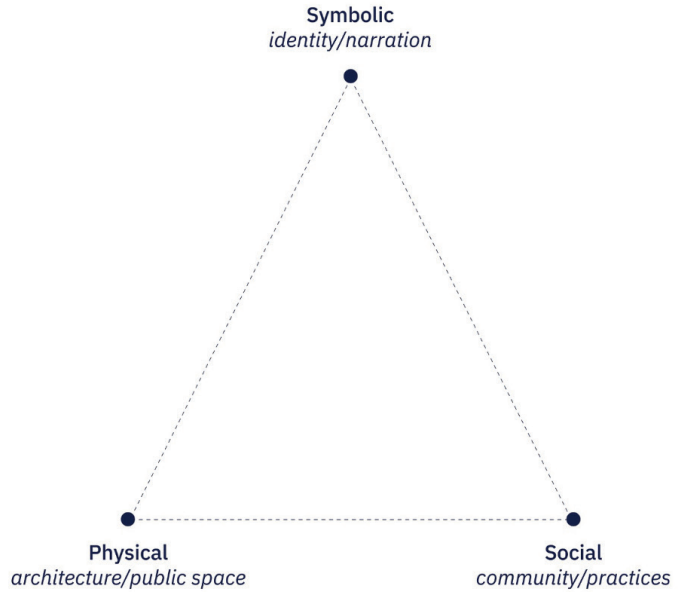
Each case was examined through a multi-scalar and interpretive reading, taking into account spatial configuration, social activation, symbolic function, and participatory dynamics. The six categories emerged through an open and iterative coding process, supported by cross-case comparison. The aim was not to impose predefined typologies, but to identify recurring operational patterns that connect space, practices, and imaginaries in situated ways.

The resulting taxonomy is both situated and dynamic: it does not prescribe, but rather orients. It is derived from the recurrence of operational categories observed across the six case studies, identified through an analytical matrix based on:

- the spatial function of the sign (orientation, narration, interaction);
- the degree of participation involved in its design process;
- the relational and symbolic intensity it generates.

These three dimensions form the basis of the tripartite model (Figure 1) that underpins the entire taxonomic framework. As shown in the diagram below, the model visualises the intersection between spatial function, participatory process, and symbolic-relational intensity, offering an interpretive lens to understand the graphic sign as a relational infrastructure. Data interpretation drew on tools from design research, urban studies, and spatial semiotics. Each case was analysed through multiple lenses to explore how environmental graphic design operates as a relational infrastructure capable of mediating between materiality, practices, and meaning. The resulting taxonomy is not intended as a prescriptive model, but rather as an analytical and operational tool for guiding designers, institutions, and communities in the development of context-sensitive graphic interventions. In particular,

Figure 1.  
Tripartite Model of  
Environmental Graphic  
Design as Relational  
Infrastructure.



it aims to support the growth of hybrid spaces in which graphic signs do not merely communicate, but actively construct: relationships, identities, and possibilities.

## 8.3 Typological Framework for Environmental Graphic Design

The typological framework developed in this research identifies six categories of environmental graphic design (EGD) interventions (Figure 2) that operate as relational infrastructures within hybrid urban contexts. These typologies outline different design approaches, each capable of activating specific connections between physical space, social subjectivities, and symbolic layers. The selected case studies (Figure 3) are not intended as exemplary models to be replicated, but rather as situated situations that reveal the potential of EGD as a relational device and an urban meaning-maker.

### *Wayfinding and Informational Signs*

This category includes interventions designed to support navigation

and spatial comprehension. These include directional signage, maps, explanatory panels, architectural graphics, and supergraphics that facilitate physical and cognitive orientation.

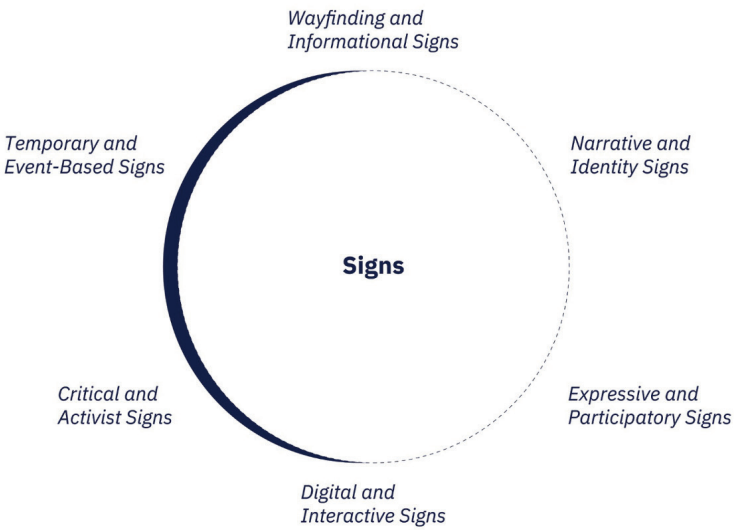


Figure 2.  
Situated Taxonomy of  
Relational Graphic Signs  
in Hybrid Urban Spaces.

Often interpreted as neutral tools, these signs are fundamental to the everyday urban experience, contributing to the construction of perceived and lived spatiality. In hybrid contexts marked by plural and dynamic programming, the effectiveness of such systems depends on design sensitivity to the cultural, linguistic, and symbolic specificities of place.

An emblematic example of this category is the project for *Place du Château* in Strasbourg (2013), designed by Intégral designers. The intervention addresses urban wayfinding through a graphic system integrated into sandstone street furniture that guides visitors among the main museums and monuments surrounding the square.

The signage is carved directly into the material, creating multiple levels of reading and use, with raised inscriptions inspired by the typographies and engravings found in the Cathedral.

Typographic spacing and multilingual layout contribute to a coherent textual landscape, balancing informational function and symbolic value, and harmonizing with the architectural and cultural context.

### *Narrative and Identity Signs*

This category includes graphic interventions that operate on the symbolic and emotional levels to reinforce local identity by promoting narrative, memory, and recognizability.

These signs mediate between space and community through visual storytelling and the construction of shared imaginaries. In hybrid contexts, where collective identities are fluid, multiple, and constantly evolving, narrative signs contribute to building a sense of continuity and belonging.

An emblematic example of this category is the *Rockaway Beach signage* project in New York (2015), designed by Pentagram / Paula Scher. The intervention transformed the Queens waterfront – affected by Hurricane Sandy – through large typographic letters placed along the boardwalk, displaying street names and local micro-toponyms. The signage serves simultaneously as a wayfinding system, a visual landmark, and a symbolic affirmation of post-disaster identity. By embedding the sign into the materiality of the space, the project conveys resilience and rootedness, giving visibility to a collective memory integrated into everyday life.

### *Expressive and Participatory Signs*

This category includes graphic interventions that invite interaction, co-creation, and active involvement from local communities. These signs often emerge through participatory design processes and respond directly to locally expressed needs and desires. In this context, graphic design transcends its communicative role to become a tool for relationship-building, collective care, and civic engagement. An emblematic example of this category is the *Bruce Grove Bridge Wall Mosaic* project in London (2023), designed by Office S&M in collaboration with local residents. Developed through a participatory co-design process, the intervention transforms an anonymous infrastructure into a narrative surface composed of individual mosaics. Each piece tells personal and collective stories of the neighborhood, reflecting identities, memories, and tensions. Beyond its aesthetic value, the project fosters local empowerment and symbolic appropriation of space, demonstrating the role of EGD as a relational and enabling device.

### *Digital and Interactive Signs*

This category includes graphic interventions that incorporate digital technologies, interactive interfaces, or mobile devices, transforming urban space into an augmented communicative environment. Here, EGD intersects with interaction design and media art, generating dynamic, personalized, and context-sensitive experiences.

These signs engage users actively, often responding to gestures, voices, or presence, creating new forms of urban dialogue. An emblematic example of this category is the *TYPOMANIA* project in Bobigny, designed by Malte Martin in collaboration with Agrafmobile. This site-specific installation combines graphic elements with public performance, emphasizing linguistic diversity through the interaction of words and space. The project includes a digital app that transforms spoken words into animated typographic compositions projected onto buildings and surfaces. Featuring a custom typeface responsive to rhythm and intonation, *TYPOMANIA* blends digital expression and physical space, offering a playful and socially engaging graphic experience.

### *Critical and Activist Signs*

This category includes graphic interventions that use visual language as a tool for protest, provocation, or social critique. Often ephemeral, unauthorised, or guerrilla in nature, these signs interrupt the visual continuity of urban space to make visible issues that are marginalized, contested, or ignored. Rather than decorating the city, they disrupt it – generating friction, awareness, and engagement. An emblematic example of this category is the project *I borghi muoiono, i paesi vivono* carried out in Belmonte Calabro (2022) by CHEAP. The intervention consisted of a temporary poster campaign applied directly to building facades.

Through a critical rewording of the common marketing narrative around borough, the project reclaims the grounded and tangible Italian meaning of village as lived and inhabited space. The graphic action acts as a counter-discourse, revealing tensions between commodified identity and authentic place-making, and showing how graphic signs can serve as political and narrative agents within the urban fabric.



Figure 3. *Temporary and Event-Based Signs*

A collage of case studies illustrating Environmental Graphic Design as relational infrastructure. From left to right: *Place du Château* (Wayfinding and Informational Signs), *Rockaway Beach* (Narrative and Identity Signs), *Bruce Grove Bridge Wall Mosaic* (Expressive and Participatory Signs), *TYPOMANIA* (Digital and Interactive Signs), *I borghi muiono, i paesi vivono* (Critical and Activist Signs), *Green Oasis* (Temporary and Event-Based Signs).

This category includes ephemeral, mobile, and easily removable graphic interventions designed to temporarily activate urban space. Their transitory nature allows for greater design flexibility and the projection of prefigurative scenarios – speculative visions that invite reflection on possible urban futures. These signs often operate through color, pattern, and material presence to stimulate sensory and symbolic engagement with space. An emblematic example of this category is the *Green Oasis* project in Frankfurt, a temporary graphic system applied to a construction hoarding during the renovation of an urban building. The intervention, designed to screen ongoing construction work, uses abstract graphic elements inspired by both real and fictional botanical species to transform the barrier into a visually active and imaginative surface. While fulfilling a technical function, the project enriches the public space symbolically by evoking alternative ecologies and new possibilities for inhabiting the city. Its temporariness thus becomes a narrative and relational resource, capable



of activating imagination and enhancing the urban experience even in phases of transition. These typologies are not rigid categories but may coexist within the same project. Their value lies in providing an open design grammar aimed at creating graphic interventions that are not only legible but also negotiable, inhabitable, and transformative.

## 8.4 Community Agency and Relational Infrastructure

The analysis of the case studies highlights how EGD can function not merely as a communication system, but as a genuine relational infrastructure, capable of activating connections between physical space, social practices, and symbolic narratives. In this perspective, the graphic sign is not a finished object, but a dynamic device that inhabits space and transforms its meanings. A transversal theme that strongly emerges is the role of community agency. Projects that transcend top-down communication logic show greater capacity to trigger long-term regenerative processes, precisely because they integrate inhabitants into the design process. The categories of expressive, participatory, and identity signs clearly demonstrate how active community involvement generates appropriation, a sense of belonging, and care for space. However, participation is not exclusive to self-managed or small-scale contexts. Projects promoted by public institutions or well-established studios – as in the cases of Strasbourg or New York – also demonstrate that semantic flexibility and interpretive openness can be successfully embedded into graphic systems. In these cases, design becomes an adaptive process capable of accommodating cultural, linguistic, and symbolic plurality.

The issue of cultural authenticity emerges as a critical concern: in highly diverse or rapidly transforming contexts, there is a high risk of symbolic flattening or superficial branding. The most effective interventions are those based on situated research and co-design practices, which are capable of generating shared and complex narratives rather than homogenizing representations. From this perspective, the graphic sign assumes a reflective function rather than a merely



representative one. The integration of digital technologies also plays a crucial role in reinforcing the relational dimension of graphic design. However, such potential must always be balanced with attention to technological accessibility and maintenance sustainability, especially in contexts characterized by infrastructural fragility or socio-technical inequalities. The ability of a project to be updated, managed, and appropriated over time becomes a key indicator of its effectiveness.

Finally, the issue of economic sustainability is central: projects that incorporate post-installation management strategies, shared maintenance, or local capacity-building prove to be more resilient and enduring. EGD, if understood as infrastructure, should not be conceived as the final phase of urban design, but rather as a structural component to be planned across the entire life cycle of a space. In summary, when conceived as relational infrastructure, environmental graphic design becomes a strategic tool to support civic practices, stimulate multiple forms of belonging, and promote the shared habitability of places. The sign becomes a negotiable medium, capable of mediating between systems, actors, and meanings, and of amplifying the transformative capacities of hybrid urban contexts.

## 8.5 Toward an Ecology of Inhabited Graphics

The findings of this research confirm that EGD, when conceived as a relational infrastructure, can significantly impact the quality of hybrid urban spaces by supporting practices of participation, identity-building, and urban experimentation. The developed typological framework – articulated into six operational categories – demonstrates that graphic interventions can extend far beyond their informational function, actively contributing to the production of meaning, the emergence of local narratives, and the mediation between physical space and social needs. The concept of inhabited graphics, proposed in conclusion, encapsulates this paradigm shift: the graphic sign is no longer understood as a decorative surface or prescriptive system, but as a co-evolving component of the urban environment. A sign is inhabited when it is activated by everyday practices, co-cre-

ated by those who live in the space, and transformed over time along with the context in which it is embedded. This vision calls for a re-thinking of the designer's role – from author to facilitator of collective processes and mediator between functions, symbols, and subjectivities. Such an approach entails a methodological shift: from prescriptive, centralized design to a situated, dialogical, and process-oriented logic. Environmental graphics thus become devices of listening and care – semantic infrastructures capable of revealing, activating, and amplifying latent relationships within urban contexts.

The proposed framework functions as an operational tool to guide design in complex environments, offering criteria for selecting strategies that align with the specificities of place. Far from being exhaustive or normative, the taxonomy invites future development: testing its applicability in diverse contexts, expanding it with new categories, and adapting it to emergent transformations. In an era marked by ecological crises, social inequalities, and identity tensions, rethinking EGD as an inhabited and relational infrastructure opens new and urgent design scenarios. The graphic sign, understood as a multidimensional connector, can act as both a design and political lever to critically inhabit the urban transformations of our time.

## Authorship attribution

The present contribution is the result of a joint reflection by the authors. However, sections 8.1 and 8.5 were authored by A. Caccamo, while sections 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4 were authored by A. Turco.

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PART 2

# The Public Value of Hybrid Spaces



# 9. The social value proposition of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces: insights from the OSMOSI Mapping

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the preliminary partial results of the OSMOSI mapping, which investigates socio-cultural hybrid spaces as enablers of social innovation through cultural practices. Based on 24 survey responses from Lombardy and Sicily Italian regions, the analysis presented here focuses on the social dimension of a broader sustainability framework that also includes economic and environmental aspects. The chapter explores the spaces' social value propositions, including their origins, promoters, identity, main activities, accessibility and the types of publics they engage – key elements that contribute to fostering social innovation. The findings highlight the relational and public-oriented nature of these spaces and outline a shared set of values, ranging from social inclusion and cohesion to territorial and cultural regeneration, including artistic and cultural innovation, critical education, and sustainability. Key patterns emerge that may inform broader policy and research on socio-cultural infrastructure.

## 9.1 Why and How Mapping Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces

In recent years, socio-cultural hybrid spaces (SCHS) have gained increasing relevance in the reconfiguration of urban environments, as catalyst spaces central to processes of change within the social and urban fabric of a city (Ostanel, 2017). These spaces often operate at the intersection of culture, social innovation, community engagement and urban experimentation (Sica *et al.*, 2024, Trapanese & Mariotti, 2022): a hybridity that challenges conventional categorizations and identification within established public governance and policy frameworks.

Mapping these spaces is a way for recognising their impact on cities and communities, through their economic, cultural, and social value, and understanding their role in processes of urban and social transformation. The mapping results can provide evidence-based insights to inform public strategies and supporting policy and governance. Furthermore, the mapping presented in this chapter aims for a deeper analysis of the diverse identities, governance models, and spatial configurations of SCHS across different regional contexts. It is hoped that this process of mapping will contribute to fostering networking and knowledge sharing among these spaces, thereby encouraging collaboration, peer learning, and the co-development of innovative practices.

In Italy, previous mapping initiatives have laid important groundwork for recognising socio-cultural hybrid spaces: the national Call to Action by cheFare<sup>1</sup> (2020–2021) collected data on more than 720 spaces through an open survey, offering the first large-scale snapshot of their diffusion and characteristics. At the city level, the 2021 Milan survey – conducted within the creation of the *Hybrid Spaces Network*<sup>2</sup> – mapped 26 entities and emerged as a bottom-up policy tool, still active, aimed at supporting de-functionalised spaces through formal recognition and tailored public strategies. Within this framework, OSMOSI positions itself as action-research which, among other actions, includes a research-driven mapping initiative focused on the Italian regions of Lombardy and Sicily. As presented in the paper *OSMOSI research Project: a mapping process for Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces* (Galluzzo *et al.*, under publication) the process was

### Note 1.

The *Call to Action* was a research project led by cheFare, based on a public questionnaire addressed to new cultural centers, cultural operators, and their audiences, with the aim of creating a national mapping of these initiatives across Italy. Active from February 2020 to December 2021, the Call collected 845 spontaneous submissions from owners, organizers, and visitors of new cultural centers, leading to the identification of more than 720 spaces. The results: <https://www.che-fare.com/publicazioni/lacall-to-action>.

### Note 2.

The document *Hybrid Spaces of Milan. 1 Manifesto, 1 Questionnaire, 1 Map for the 15-Minute City* became the starting point for dialogue with the municipal administration, which in 2022 recognized these spaces as local hubs and promoters of welfare. On an experimental basis, the City established the *Network of Hybrid Spaces* serving as a platform for dialogue and an incubator of new initiatives. The Manifesto: <http://www.lasteccia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/sSpazi-ibridi-socioculturali-BOOK-compressed-1-1.pdf>.



developed through a mixed-method approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2007), combining desk research, surveys, in-depth interviews, and follow-up activities. This methodology aimed to comprehensively understand SCHS by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The first phase included desk research and interviews to key actors and part of the OSMOSI support network, such as BASE Milano and Farm Cultural Park. These engagements, together with the previous mapping and the literature, helped identify the key characteristics and challenges of SCHS and informed the development of the survey structure. The questionnaire – the core data collection tool – was structured around a sustainability framework that incorporates three interrelated dimensions: social, economic, and environmental (Dempsey *et al.*, 2011; Folke *et al.*, 2005). Eight sections were developed, presented in the Table 1. The survey includes both open- and closed-ended questions to balance structured data with interpretive insights.

**Table 1.**  
Sections and topics of  
the survey.

Sections	Topics
Contact Information	Full name, role within the organisation, email address
Identity and History of the Space	Name, location, self-definition, founding year and initial conditions, promoters, legal status, affiliated organisations, ownership of the space
Size and Context	Square meters, number of staff and visitors, geographical context, nearby similar spaces
Value Proposal	Vision, mission, social innovation as outcome
People and Content	Collaboration network, target audience, main activities and functions, participation, and community engagement
Accessibility	Physical barriers, sensory and cognitive accessibility, plural communication, economic accessibility
Resources and Management	Revenue sources, turnover, net income, amount of public/private funding, relationships with public administration
Built Environment	Floor plan, spatial performance, acoustic, thermal, and visual comfort

The survey was distributed to 80 identified socio-cultural hybrid spaces (62 in Lombardy, 18 in Sicily), selected based on criteria of multi-functionality, cultural focus, public permeability, and through nominations from other SCHS and experts. After a 12-month data collection window, 24 (15 in Lombardy, 9 in Sicily) spaces responded, data up to

June 2025. While the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional contexts of Lombardy and Sicily differ significantly this chapter adopts a unified analytical lens. The data collected have been treated without disaggregating by region, to identify common patterns, shared values, and recurrent practices across the diverse realities involved. Although regional specificities influence how SCHS operate, the aim here is to highlight transversal tendencies and structural features that may inform broader reflections on the role of SCHS within the socio-spatial configuration of contemporary cities. It should be noted that these data presented here are exploratory and derive from a relatively small number of responses compared to the total sample identified. As such, they should not be considered statistically representative of the wider population of SCHS. The findings are instead intended to provide indicative insights and to stimulate further investigation. Data analysis was conducted through a combination of quantitative processing (to identify patterns, distributions, and typologies) and qualitative coding (to extract emergent themes and narratives). This mixed-method approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the data by integrating numerical trends – even if not representative – with contextual insights (Christensen *et al.*, 2015). The open responses were particularly valuable for identifying issues not fully captured by predefined indicator.

This chapter focuses on the results emerged from the social dimension of the survey, examining the drivers and value propositions that shape these spaces, as well as the activities they carry out to foster inclusion, participation, and community engagement. The primary emphasis is on how these cultural practices contribute to social sustainability.

## **9.2 The genesis of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces: drivers and values.**

The emergence of socio-cultural hybrid spaces in Italy illustrates a complex interplay between spatial availability, social demands, and grassroots initiative. These spaces are not the result of top-down planning but rather evolve from contingencies, where needs, actors,

and opportunities converge in specific configurations. An analysis of the initial promoters of SCHS reveals a strong prevalence of bottom-up actors – cultural associations, informal collectives, social cooperatives, and individual professionals – who play a foundational role in activating and managing these places. Public institutions are present but seldom act as sole initiators, and their involvement tends to emerge later, mainly through partnerships or property concessions. In fact, in about one-third of the cases (9 in total), the spaces are publicly owned and granted through concession agreements, often tied to specific funding programmes or policy contexts. In the remaining two-thirds, however, spaces are rented (in 8 cases), privately owned (6 cases), or held under mixed public-private arrangements (1 case).

The survey revealed that, in some instances, SCHS originated from the need to provide a physical home for cultural or social initiatives already in progress. These were projects that required a stable venue to expand and systematize their activities. For example, certain associations or artistic collectives sought environments in which to consolidate their practices, deliver workshops, or engage local populations in ongoing creative processes. A clear example is Everest – Spazio alla Cultura, in Milan, which was established to provide a home for an already active cultural association focused on performance activities. In other cases, it was the space itself that initiated the process. Abandoned or underutilized buildings posed challenges to owners or municipalities, including safety concerns and degradation, but also opened possibilities for reactivation through cultural and civic engagement. The availability of such spaces catalysed new projects that transformed these voids into resources for public use. Badia Lost & Found in Sicily exemplifies this trajectory: the cooperative promoted the cultural reactivation of an abandoned public spaces to reconnect local communities with their heritage. Sometimes happens that these two conditions emerge simultaneously: a latent project in search of a site and a space in search of purpose. Artepassante initiative, in Milan, was developed at the intersection of two complementary needs: on one side, a network of educators and parents sought locations to pursue their cultural mission; on the other, the property owner (in this case, a public transport infrastructure entity) faced pressure to re-

habilitate non-secure transit areas lacking programmed investment. Through this confluence, a form of low-cost but high-impact urban intervention became possible.

### 9.2.1 Constructing Identity: self-definition and shared values

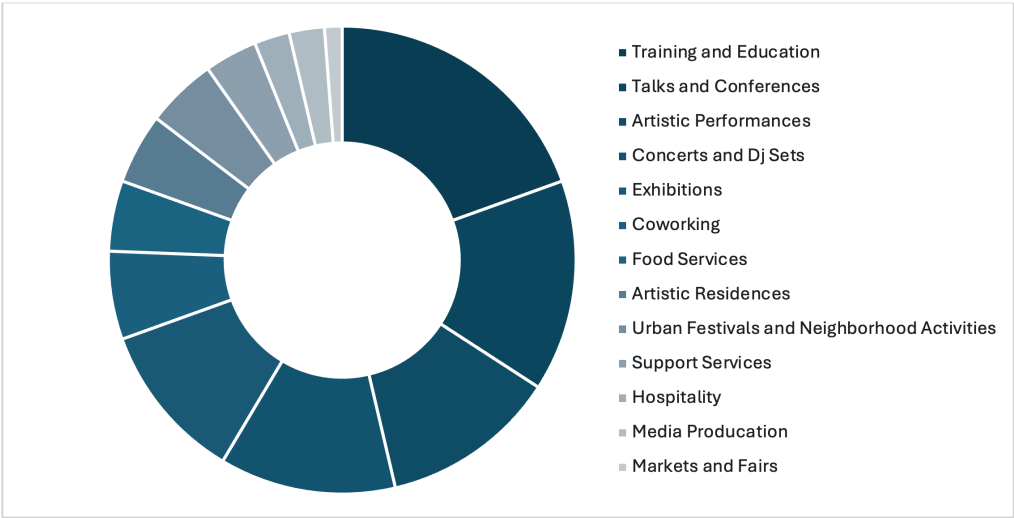
In the survey, socio-cultural hybrid spaces were asked to provide a brief self-definition, from which key patterns and shared values emerged. Two notions figured out: «*space/place*» and «*culture*». These constitute the conceptual core of their identity. Culture, whether mentioned as *culture*, *cultural*, or *socio-cultural*, is the most dominant theme, reflecting the role of these centres in producing, hosting, and enabling cultural and artistic practices. Equally significant is the recurrence of the term *space (or place)*, which evokes the importance of a spatial dimension where things can happen, where relations, activities, collective experiences are enacted. The term space is often qualified with adjectives such as «*multifunctional*», «*multidisciplinary*», or «*hybrid*», revealing a dynamic and fluid environment where artistic, social, and civic uses coexist. Around these ideas of space and culture, values such as community and social inclusion emerge strongly, highlighting a focus on citizenship, collective agency, and participatory practices. Notably, when asked if they would characterise their organisation as a gathering place, all but one of the spaces gave an affirmative response. As well as, the use of co-design processes for activity selection is denied by only two of the twenty-four of them. These responses reinforce the idea that these spaces operate not only as cultural infrastructures but also as relational and community-building environments. Also, the urban and territorial dimension stands out, in fact terms like «*urban regeneration*», «*redevelopment*», and «*territorial activation*» point to SCHS' active role in transforming cities and neighbourhoods. Someone described it as an «*urban refuge*», suggesting a safe and welcoming environment strictly connected with the surrounding. Lastly, many of these spaces define themselves through terms such as «*hub*», «*living lab*», «*laboratory*», or «*platform*», underlining their experimental, open, and enabling nature. They are seen as sites for testing new models of cultural production, civic engagement, and sustainable living. The analysis of the value frameworks shared by the surveyed

SCHS reveals a coherent set of orientations that closely mirrors their self-definitions. Simplifying the responses given to the question «*Mission: what are the results and the value that you aim to generate? How? For whom?*» recurring themes point to a shared cultural and social grammar. At the centre of this framework there is a strong focus on social inclusion and cohesion, followed by values linked to community life, proximity, and participatory practices, as exemplified by the statement: «*The value is represented by the creation of symmetric and reciprocal relationships between individuals and communities*» (survey respondent, Moltivolti). Other prominent themes include territorial and cultural regeneration, where spaces act as engines of urban renewal – «*The initiative transforms culture into a collective exercise of well-being, regenerating urban spaces and creating a sense of belonging and local identity*» (survey respondent, Badia Lost & Found). Artistic and cultural innovation and dissemination are also recurrent, highlighting the role of these spaces as experimental and interdisciplinary laboratories. Finally, additional values such as critical education and sustainability in various forms further expand this vision, for instance in the mission «*to spread systemic thinking and stimulate curiosity, research, and the design of sustainable solutions to improve human conditions*» (survey respondent, C.I.Q.). Altogether, these orientations contribute to a broader vision of culture as a democratic and transformative force.

## 9.3 Accessibility as practice of social innovation

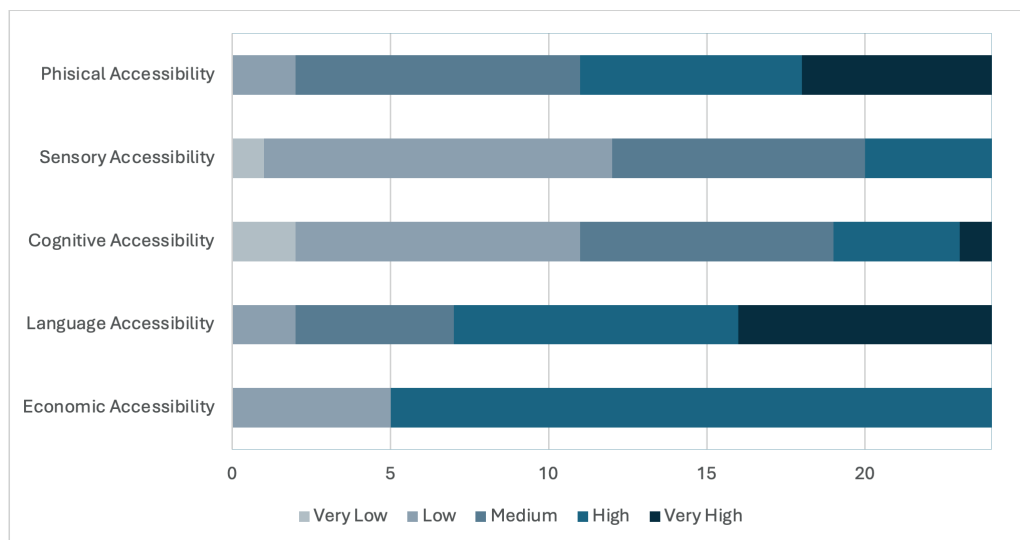
Socio-cultural hybrid spaces host a variety of activities and functions, which, among other goals, aim to foster social inclusion and community engagement. While most of these activities are cultural, some are non-cultural – either because they are closely connected to cultural practices or because they help ensure the space's economic sustainability. The Figure 1 outlines the main activities carried out by the SCHS involved in the OSMOSI survey. While the categories listed here serve as general descriptors, it's important to note that each label conceals a rich variety of formats, audiences, and approaches. What

is generically referred to as training and education for instance, may include informal workshops, technical labs, or peer-to-peer learning sessions. Similarly, artistic performance ranges from experimental theatre to site-specific events, and hybrid music-theatre experiences. Despite these specificities, the data highlights recurring clusters of activity that reflect shared operational models and purposes. Training and education are among the most widespread activities, indicating a strong capacity-building focus across spaces, linked to the value of critical education. Others public engagement formats such as talks and conferences are also very common, suggesting a drive to foster debate and cultural dissemination. These are often combined with artistic production and performance, particularly theatre, music, and multimedia, which remain central both in identity and programming.



Accessibility emerges as a crucial condition for ensuring that SCHS truly serve their public-oriented vocation. To capture this dimension, survey participants were asked whether their spaces included freely accessible areas. Out of the 24 initiatives surveyed, 20 reported having areas open to the public. However, the permeability of this access, understood as the degree and modalities through which accessibility is enacted, varied significantly. In some cases, entry was restricted to specific times (e.g., «during events», «once a week») or conditional

**Figure 1.**  
Prevalent activity categories in Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces.



**Figure 2.**  
Distribution of  
Accessibility ratings by  
dimension.

upon membership. Only 16 out of 24 respondents stated that they offered spaces which are always accessible, without requiring participation in specific activities. While accessibility refers here to the general condition of public openness, permeability highlights the nuanced spectrum between openness and restriction that characterizes how this condition is concretely practiced.

Building on this, the survey adopted a broader understanding of accessibility inspired by the *Un'IDEA Manifesto* promoted by BASE Milano (2023). This framework expanded the analytical lens beyond spatial or physical entry, incorporating cognitive, sensory, language and economic dimensions, with the aim of capturing how SCHS enact accessibility in a holistic sense.

As illustrated in Figure 2, physical accessibility is generally well addressed, with several spaces reporting the absence of structural barriers. Language accessibility shows a similarly strong performance, with most respondents placing themselves in the medium to very high range, while strategies addressing cognitive and sensory barriers remain limited. Economic accessibility was examined through a specific question, to which the majority responded positively, confirming the existence of pricing models aimed at having a plural public. The overall picture points to an orientation towards *plurality* that, although widely recognized as a value, is not yet systematically implemented

across all dimensions. These different levels of accessibility directly shape the kinds of publics that hybrid spaces are able to engage. All surveyed initiatives involve local residents, thereby reinforcing ties with their territorial contexts. Some attract national or international visitors, while others describe their audiences as «heterogeneous and transversal».

Yet follow-up interviews reveal a discrepancy between the aspiration to inclusivity and the actual composition of publics: participants are often students, creative professionals, or culturally engaged individuals, while groups with lower educational attainment or greater socio-economic vulnerability remain underrepresented. Few spaces explicitly design activities for youth, families, or people in fragile conditions.

## 9.4 Final Remarks

The data and reflections presented in this chapter show how socio-cultural hybrid spaces function as infrastructures for social innovation through their cultural vocation. They originate from the encounter between local needs, abandoned spaces, and grassroots initiatives, and in doing so they transform urban voids into civic and cultural resources. This regenerative orientation positions SCHS not only as cultural venues, but also as experimental platforms for participatory approaches and sustainable urban development. Their practices to openness, community engagement, cultural activation, and shared use of space are more than programmatic choices: they operate as mechanisms for fostering social innovation. The ways in which these spaces define themselves, articulate their missions and activities, structure accessibility, and engage with publics confirm that their primary value lies in their relational function. They provide physical platforms where communities can gather, express themselves culturally, and co-create meaning and belonging, through the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991) and collaborative design practices (Manzini, 2015).

This research also faces some limitations. Although the OSMOSI mapping involved outreach to over 80 spaces across two regions, only



24 completed the survey over a 12-month period. While this partial response rate limits the generalisability of quantitative trends, the depth and richness of the responses provide significant insight into the operational logics and values of these spaces. The sample remains qualitatively meaningful, even if numerically limited. Importantly, data collection is not yet concluded, and several months remain to enrich the survey pool. This continuation is expected to broaden the sample and reinforce the analytical and comparative capacity of the dataset. The exploratory nature of this study suggests the need for further investigation.

Expanding the OSMOSI framework to other regional or international contexts would allow for comparative analysis and contribute to understanding whether the observed patterns reflect structural features of SCHS or context-specific configurations. Future research can thus not only extend the sample but also advance the discussion on how SCHS can be situated within broader debates on cultural policy and urban regeneration. In doing so, these spaces can be interpreted as laboratories for experimenting with new models of governance, co-operation, and cultural production, where questions of accessibility, sustainability, and participation intersect. Their hybrid nature makes them relevant for addressing contemporary urban challenges – from the reactivation of underused public spaces to the fostering of social cohesion and urban commons.

## Aknowledgement

The data collection for this research was carried out by the OSMOSI research team. I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Laura Galluzzo, Ambra Borin, Andrea Manciaracina, and Mathew Spialtini of the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, as well as Salvatore di Dio and Paola La Scala of the Department of Architecture, Università degli Studi di Palermo. I would also like to thank all the staff, managers, and people of the Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces who responded to the questionnaire, making this research possible.

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# 10. Transformative Places: Governance and Impact in Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces

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## ABSTRACT

**Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces (SCHS)** are emerging as key infrastructures for civic engagement and urban regeneration, yet their hybrid nature challenges conventional governance and impact evaluation models. This paper investigates Open Casello, a youth-oriented SCHS in Milan, developed through a partnership between the Municipality and local organizations. Drawing on co-design workshops facilitated by Politecnico di Milano, the paper presents a shared Social Business Model Canvas (SBMC) and a multidimensional impact framework (cultural, social, economic-administrative, and relational). Findings highlight how co-management, youth participation and place-based identity are crucial elements that guide the management strategy. The case offers insights into designing and governing SCHS in other urban contexts.

## 10.1 Introduction and reference literature

In the context of increasing spatial and social transformations of urban areas, Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces (SCHS) have emerged as strategic infrastructures for community-driven innovation and urban regeneration. These spaces, often located in formerly disused public buildings or underutilized urban areas, combine cultural production, social services, and participatory governance. As highlighted by Pimlott (2018) and Poot *et al.* (2015), these hybrid interiors function not merely as physical containers but as nodes of relational activity within the urban network. Their hybrid nature implies a multi-stakeholder governance structure, typically involving civil society actors, creative industries, local authorities, and public administrations. This multiplicity of partners inevitably increases the complexity of the business model, making traditional management strategies insufficient. As noted by Manzini (2015), these are not merely service providers but agents of social innovation, whose functioning depends on the alignment of visions and continuous negotiation among diverse actors. These spaces may act as enablers of collaborative design, offering a platform where diverse knowledge systems and stakeholder perspectives can converge in the co-creation of shared visions and operational models. Their participatory and adaptive nature aligns with what Branzi (2006) describes as a form of «weak urbanisation»: flexible and reversible frameworks that evolve in response to local needs, through iterative processes grounded in relationships, experimentation, and situated knowledge.

The business models of socio-cultural hybrid spaces (SCHS) are inherently complex due to their multi-layered governance structures and hybrid missions. Unlike traditional cultural institutions or purely commercial entities, SCHS often bring together a diverse ecosystem of stakeholders, including associations, creative professionals, public administrations, and private actors, each with distinct priorities, resources, and temporalities. This multiplicity complicates not only strategic alignment but also operational sustainability. As highlighted by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010), a business model articulates the logic of value creation, delivery, and capture; in the case of SCHS, this logic is continuously negotiated across institutional, social, and cul-

tural domains. On the economic side, SCHS typically operate through mixed revenue streams, combining public funding, project-based grants, and ticketing income. This results in highly volatile revenue structures, while fixed costs for maintaining and activating physical spaces coexist with the unpredictability of funding cycles and the labor-intensity of community engagement. According to Eynaud and Mourey (2016), social enterprises and hybrid organizations often face tensions in aligning their economic and social value propositions, requiring ongoing balancing acts between mission coherence and financial viability. Moreover, the co-production of activities with local communities adds another layer of complexity, as value is not only created for users but also with them, blurring the boundaries between beneficiaries, co-creators, and governing agents (Doherty *et al.*, 2014). This calls for business models that are both flexible and reflexive, capable of evolving over time in response to shifting institutional conditions, user needs, and territorial dynamics.

A main aspect of interest for SCHS, and still underexplored, is related to the impact generated by such spaces. Traditional forms of evaluation, focusing primarily on outputs or economic metrics fail to capture the multidimensional nature of these spaces, which often operate at the intersection of culture, community, and territorial regeneration. As argued by Zamagni *et al.* (2015), social impact should not be understood as a static measure of results, but rather as the capacity of an initiative to generate changes in the life conditions, agency, and capabilities of individuals and communities over time. This implies moving from a logic of accountability to one of generativity, where value is co-produced in relational and often non-linear ways. In this view, SCHS function not only as service providers, but as platforms for civic empowerment and innovation, whose impacts unfold across multiple and overlapping dimensions: social, cultural, institutional, economic and relational. The emerging literature on the application of impact evaluation to SCHS recalls the challenges that typically emerge in the cultural and social innovation sectors, due to the intangible and often transformative nature of the outcomes involved (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). Scholars such as Belfiore and Bennett (2010) have critically examined the dominance of instrumental logics in cultural policy evaluation, advocating instead for frameworks that recognize

the role of cultural and civic initiatives in fostering empowerment, inclusion, and collective agency. Similarly, Julier (2017) has emphasized the relational and processual dimensions of cultural value in hybrid and community-based initiatives, arguing that traditional evaluation frameworks often fail to capture the slow, iterative forms of engagement that characterize socially engaged cultural practices. For Julier, valuing these practices requires not only new indicators but also new epistemologies – ones that acknowledge the co-creation of meaning between institutions, communities, and space over time. As example of application, Vermeulen and Maas (2021) propose a concise yet robust conceptual framework to support cultural organizations in measuring and managing their social impact. Structured in five phases, the model enables institutions not only to legitimize their role to stakeholders but also to translate empirical insights into strategic planning and continuous organizational learning. Given these premises, this contribution addresses two key research questions:

- What are the main features of the business model of a Socio-Cultural Hybrid Space (SCHS) when developed collaboratively with its key stakeholders?
- What are the main dimensions of impact generated by a SCHS, understood as a co-developed space for cultural and social innovation?

In tackling these questions, the paper draws on data and insights from the OSMOSI project on the basis of co-design workshops organised on the business model and impact of a SCHS called Open Casello, located in Milan. The ultimate objective is to propose a replicable framework that can inform future practices of socio-cultural space design, policy-making, and impact evaluation.

## 10.2 Theoretical Framework

### 10.2.1 Social Business Model Canvas

The Social Business Model Canvas (SBMC) is an analytical and design tool adapted from the classical Business Model Canvas developed by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010), specifically tailored to address the dual logic that characterizes social enterprises and hybrid organi-

zations: the tension between social impact and economic viability. This tension is not a barrier but rather a generative axis around which innovation can occur, especially in contexts where organizations aim to serve both a mission-driven purpose and a set of operational or entrepreneurial functions. The SBMC retains the original nine components of the Business Model Canvas, but introduces key re-framings and additions to better account for participatory governance, and social value creation (Vial, 2016; Nair, 2022). Each component is accompanied by specific reflective questions that guide the co-design and strategic alignment of mission, activities, and outcomes in socially-oriented initiatives. The dimensions of the SMBC are described in the Table 1 (next page).

### **10.2.2 Focus on what does impact mean for Hybrid Spaces**

While the notion of impact in hybrid socio-cultural spaces resists singular definitions, it is possible to identify recurring domains of transformation that such spaces tend to activate over time. Rather than framing impact solely in terms of quantifiable outputs, recent literature (Zamagni *et al.*, 2015; Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014) emphasizes the need to account for qualitative, situated, and process-based forms of value, often co-produced with communities. In line with this approach, impact can be articulated across four interdependent dimensions: cultural, social, economic-administrative, and relational, each associated with specific enabling conditions and practices.

*Cultural impact* refers to the capacity of a space to foster shared cultural production, symbolic innovation, and the reappropriation of urban narratives. This includes the co-curation of programming, artistic experimentation, and the activation of underutilized spaces (McCarthy, 2006; Sacco *et al.*, 2014). The ability to valorize the local cultural fabric and allow diverse communities to participate in content creation constitutes a key marker of cultural efficacy.

*Social impact* relates to the processes of empowerment, inclusion, and civic learning triggered by the space. Hybrid infrastructures often act as enablers for the growth of individual and collective agency. Impact emerges here through the assumption of responsibility, the cultivation of civic sensibilities, and the shared negotiation of public value (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2014).

Dimension	Description	Guiding Questions
Key Stakeholders and Partners	The network of actors who contribute to the mission of the organization, beyond mere operational support. It includes public bodies, non-profit organizations, grassroots associations, foundations, mission-oriented private firms, and impact investors.	Who are the key actors that support or influence the project? What kind of partnerships are strategic for reaching our social and economic goals?
Key Activities	The core activities that must be performed to deliver value and sustain the initiative. In hybrid settings, this often includes both operational and participatory activities.	What are the essential actions we must take to fulfill our social mission? Which participatory or community-based activities are part of our model?
Value Proposition	The value proposition encompasses both commercial and social dimensions. Hybrid organizations typically offer not only services or products, but also symbolic, cultural, or relational value.	What specific societal or community problem are we addressing? What solutions, products, or services do we provide? What kind of value are we creating for beneficiaries and communities?
Beneficiary and Customer Segments	SBMC distinguishes between direct clients, indirect clients (e.g., funders or institutions); and beneficiaries, the individuals or communities the organization aims to positively impact.	Who uses our services or participates in our activities? Who are the intended recipients of our impact? Are there customers who pay for the service, and beneficiaries who receive it?
Customer and Community Relationships	How the organization interacts with its audience, not just in transactional terms, but in terms of engagement, empowerment, and co-creation.	How do we maintain relationships with users and beneficiaries? How can beneficiaries become active co-creators or part of a community?
Channels	The ways in which the organization communicates and delivers its offerings, but also how it reaches and connects with its intended audience. In the case of hybrid spaces, this often includes physical presence, digital platforms, and informal community networks.	Through which channels do we reach our beneficiaries and users? Are these channels accessible, inclusive, and participatory?
Key Resources	Tangible and intangible assets necessary for the functioning and sustainability of the initiative, such as spaces, competencies, networks, and legitimacy.	What resources do we need to deliver on our mission? Which resources are already available, and which need to be mobilized?
Cost Structure	Not only operational expenses, but also the often invisible costs associated with social innovation, such as time or training.	What are the specific costs associated with generating impact? Which costs would not exist if this were a traditional for-profit organization?
Revenue Streams	In hybrid models, revenues can originate from a variety of sources: commercial activity, public funding, grants, donations, or in-kind contributions. Revenue may also include social returns, understood as non-monetary outcomes that nonetheless sustain the organization's legitimacy and value.	Who pays, and for what? What is the balance between earned income and social value creation?
Social Impact and Metrics	The expected social outcomes and the indicators used to track progress.	What changes do we want to generate for our beneficiaries and communities? How do we measure social impact in ways that are meaningful, situated, and participatory?

**Table 1.**  
**Description of SBMC's Dimensions.**



*Economic-administrative impact* concerns the ways in which hybrid spaces contribute to value creation through co-management models and new forms of organizational learning. This includes the development of transferable competencies, the emergence of micro-entrepreneurial practices, and the negotiation of sustainable governance frameworks (Evers & Laville, 2004). While these impacts may not always translate into profit, they generate institutional capacity and foster inclusive models of shared resource stewardship.

*Relational impact* refers to the quality and density of the networks activated by the space, both internally and externally. Hybrid spaces often function as connective tissues within urban ecosystems, offering safe environments for dialogue, bridging diverse communities, and acting as mediators between formal institutions and informal practices (Manzini, 2015; Moulaert & Van den Broeck, 2018). The creation of a trusted relational infrastructure is not simply a side effect, but a central goal for long-term sustainability and transformation.

These four dimensions are not exhaustive nor mutually exclusive; rather, they provide a heuristic for identifying and reflecting upon the multiple and overlapping ways in which hybrid socio-cultural spaces generate impact. As such, they serve as an interpretive framework for evaluating value creation beyond traditional economic indicators.

## 10.3 Research setting

### 10.3.1 Open Casello

Building on the reflections outlined above, this section explores how the theoretical and operational challenges associated with SCHS take shape within the concrete trajectory of Open Casello, a socio-cultural infrastructure currently being developed in Milan. Open Casello is situated in a former customs toll booth (*casello daziario*) in Piazzale Cantore and is promoted by the Municipality of Milan in collaboration with BASE Milano, Codici, and Avanzi. Designed as a multifunctional hub for people aged 14 to 35, the space combines orientation and training services, youth-led programming, and a broader policy agenda around civic engagement and urban regeneration. The project was initiated in early 2024 as a response to the need for new forms of youth infra-

structure capable of addressing the spatial and social fragmentation affecting younger generations in Milan. The development process has been explicitly participatory and multi-phased. On a functional level, Open Casello operates through a dual programmatic structure that mirrors its hybrid mission. During daytime hours, the space offers a range of services aimed at supporting the autonomy and empowerment of young people, including job orientation, educational guidance, skills training, information services, and dedicated support for NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training). These services are provided in collaboration with *Giovani Milano*, the city's official youth policy branch (formerly Informagiovani), and are complemented by informal repair workshops (e.g., bicycle maintenance), legal advice desks, and digital literacy sessions. In the evenings, the Casello transforms into a cultural and social activation hub, hosting creative laboratories, exhibitions, screenings, performances, and DJ sets, many of which are conceived and curated by youth collectives selected through open calls. From a governance perspective, Open Casello currently operates through a distributed yet coordinated model that reflects both its public ownership and its hybrid mission. While the space is formally owned by the Municipality of Milan, the project management and strategic coordination are entrusted to BASE Milano, which acts as a central operational node. Rather than functioning as a top-down manager, BASE assumes the role of facilitator and connector, coordinating a diverse and evolving constellation of actors (youth groups, associations, informal collectives, cultural producers, and individual citizens) who inhabit and activate the space. The governance structure thus reflects a polycentric logic, in which institutional oversight coexists with grassroots initiative and civic participation. Through the public call and co-curation mechanisms, young people are not merely consulted but actively involved in the definition of both strategic directions and everyday programming. This approach allows Open Casello to function as a relational infrastructure, put its social purpose at the center.

### 10.3.2 Workshops

As part of the OSMOSI project, a design-led research initiative exploring governance models and impact strategies in socio-cultural hybrid

spaces, a cycle of six co-design workshops was conducted between February and June 2025 within Open Casello. These sessions were co-organised and facilitated by an interdisciplinary team from the Politecnico di Milano and involved a core group of stakeholders, including representatives of the Municipality of Milan, BASE Milano, and several youth associations actively engaged in the life of the space. Workshop durations varied from two to three and a half hours and were held on-site, allowing participants to engage directly with the material, spatial, and organisational dimensions of the project.

The first four workshops progressively explored the foundational aspects of Open Casello's development, and were mainly focused on service and spatial design. The final two workshops, on which this paper concentrates, shifted the focus to the governance and impact dimensions of the space. The fifth session, dedicated to management strategy, was structured around the collective exploration of a SBMC, pre-filled with a set of preliminary responses derived from the synthesis of insights collected during the previous workshops. These initial hypotheses served as a stimulus for discussion: each component of the canvas, such as key activities, value propositions, stakeholder relationships, and governance structures, was examined one by one in an open and dialogic format. Participants were invited to engage with the canvas as if they were the newly appointed management board of Open Casello, thus adopting a strategic perspective with the time horizon of two years. Participants were invited to comment, expand, revise, or challenge the proposed elements, allowing for the emergence of multiple perspectives and previously unarticulated dimensions. In the sixth and final session, the notion of impact was addressed through a reflective and co-creative process aimed at generating a shared understanding of what impact means for Open Casello and its community. The discussion was initiated using a selection of keywords, which served as prompts to stimulate personal and collective reflection among participants.

The workshops were generally well received: stakeholders appreciated the opportunity to reflect collectively on the mission and strategic direction of the space. The visual and structured nature of the SBMC helped clarify roles, resources, and relationships, especially for actors less familiar with managerial vocabulary. However, several chal-

Challenges emerged. First, the diversity of participants, institutional representatives, youth associations, cultural practitioners, meant that expectations and priorities were not always aligned. At the beginning of the session, participants encountered some difficulty in engaging with the framework, partly due to their unfamiliarity with the tool and its terminology. This impasse was gradually overcome thanks to the pre-filled version of the SBMC based on previous workshop insights: these initial entries served as a shared reference point, helping participants orient themselves and lower the cognitive barrier imposed by the canvas structure. Once the conversation gained traction, stakeholders began to actively comment and reframe the various components, bringing in situated knowledge and diverse perspectives. This experience underscores the importance of mediation when introducing planning tools into participatory processes. The SBMC was not used as a rigid template to be completed, but rather as a generative prompt: its categories adapted to the specific language, culture, and values of the group. The canvas thus functioned as a facilitative device: it enabled a shared strategic vocabulary to emerge while making space for reinterpretations and evolving ideas.

These workshops were not merely instrumental to the development of operational tools, but constituted the core of a relational, iterative, and embedded research practice. By positioning stakeholders not as passive informants but as co-designers, the process enabled the emergence of shared knowledge and long-term visions.

## 10.4 Results

The co-design process carried out with local stakeholders has led to the development of a shared SBMC, that captures the strategic and operational dimensions of Open Casello as a SCHS.

### *Social value proposition*

The value created by Open Casello is articulated across three interrelated dimensions, each represented in a different colour on the canvas reported in Figure 1. First, Open Casello as a cultural space offers access to artistic expression, creative experimentation, and informal

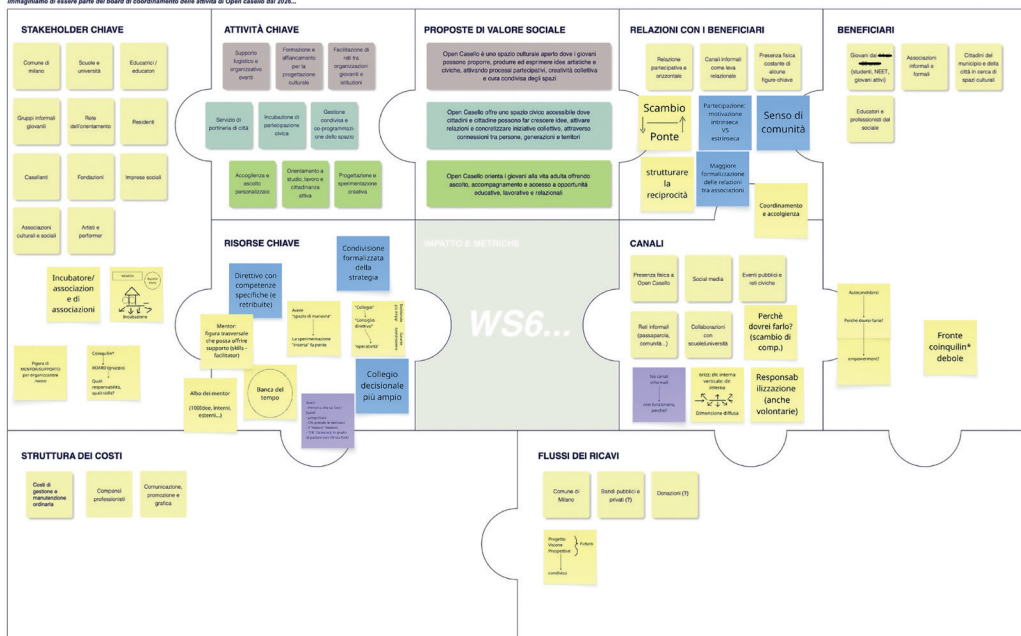
learning. It functions as a community-based cultural infrastructure that fosters accessibility and participation in cultural life. Second, Open Casello as a civic space serves as a platform for public engagement and social activation. It supports active citizenship through co-design practices and connections between people, generations and territories. Like the cultural dimension, this is also coordinated mainly by the associations through collaborative governance mechanisms. Third, Open Casello as an orientation space provides guidance, mentoring, and support, especially for youth navigating transitions in education or work. Unlike the previous two, this dimension is primarily overseen by the Municipality.

### *Key Activities*

The activities of Open Casello are closely aligned with its threefold value proposition and are carried out through distinct yet interconnected operational areas. First, as a cultural space, the core activities involve co-designing and curating a shared programming calendar that hosts artistic and community-building initiatives. These activities are collectively designed and managed by the network of associations, with a strong emphasis on accessibility and grassroots creativity. Second, as a civic space, activities focus on participation and shared governance. Within this civic function, Open Casello also embraces the role of a *portineria di città* (city's gatehouse). Inspired by the metaphor of the doorkeeper, this model promotes proximity-based relationships, everyday accessibility, and informal civic infrastructure that supports both intentional and spontaneous participation. Third, as a space for orientation, the activities include mentorship, guidance, and soft-skills development for youths.

### *Key Stakeholders*

The stakeholder landscape is notably diverse, including public institutions (such as the Municipality), informal youth groups, social enterprises, cultural associations, and artists. This multiplicity reinforces the hybrid identity of the space and its embeddedness in the local urban ecosystem. Particularly relevant is the notion of the «incubator of associations,» which points to the space's meta-function, not only as a venue for activity but as a catalyst for organizational growth and network formation.



## Beneficiaries

Beneficiaries include youths, students, artists, local associations, and residents. These groups differ not only in their modes of engagement with the space, but also in the type and intensity of the impact expected. Local associations tend to have a structured and ongoing relationship with Open Casello, contributing to both governance and cultural production. Conversely, individual beneficiaries, particularly young people and residents, may engage in more fluid and informal ways. In their case, the space is expected to generate more personal and developmental forms of impact: increased self-confidence, skills acquisition, or the experience of belonging.

## Relationships with Beneficiaries

The canvas emphasizes relational values such as reciprocity and trust. Relationships are not transactional but are based on ongoing interaction and mutual engagement. Open Casello acts as a bridge, facilitating exchanges across generations, sectors, and social groups, and supports a deeper, more sustainable form of engagement that goes beyond episodic participation.

Figure 1.  
Open Casello's Social  
Business Model Canvas.

### *Channels*

Both physical and digital channels are used to maintain contact and visibility. These include in-person presence at Open Casello, social media, informal networks, and public events. In the initial phase of the project, communication and coordination relied heavily on informal networks and personal relationships. This approach allowed for flexibility and experimentation but also led to fragmentation and limited transparency. Looking forward, there is a recognized need to move toward greater formalization, particularly in defining and communicating the roles and responsibilities of the associations involved. The importance of informal circulation of information (word-of-mouth, proximity ties) is thus matched by the emerging need for intentional, structured storytelling and coordinated outreach, responding to the question: Why should I engage?

### *Cost and Revenue Structure*

The economic model of Open Casello is primarily based on public funding, with the Municipality playing a central role in covering the core operational costs, such as space maintenance, coordination staff, and communication. This foundational support enables the infrastructure to remain accessible and active. A defining feature of the model is that all activities led by the associations must remain free of charge for participants, as well as for associations (all costs are covered by the Municipality). This principle reinforces inclusivity and characterizes this SCHS, and represents a peculiarity compared to other similar spaces.

### *Key Resources*

Resources include a wide range of human capabilities and organizational tools. This section was developed through a scenario-based exercise in which participants were asked to imagine the competencies needed within a future governance board of Open Casello, assuming they would be part of it. This forward-looking activity helped surface a range of key roles and capabilities, many of which reflect existing informal practices that are expected to evolve into more formalized structures over time, as summarized in Table 2. These roles reflect the hybrid nature of the space, blending creative, managerial, civic, and

Role Category	Core Competencies
Operational Manager	Space management (local “doorkeeper”), technical support
Cultural Manager	Artistic direction, event curation
Youth Engagement	Outreach, motivational skills, informal (peer) education
Communication & Outreach	Internal/external communication, territory relations
Strategic & Institutional	Institutional knowledge, budgeting, grant writing

**Table 2.**  
**The board roles.**

relational capacities. As the space evolves, ensuring clarity and support for these roles will be crucial to maintain operational coherence and foster sustainable participation. These elements position people, and not infrastructure, as the core enabling resource of the model. The collective discussion held during the final co-design workshop led to the development of a shared interpretive framework for understanding the kind of impact that Open Casello seeks to generate.

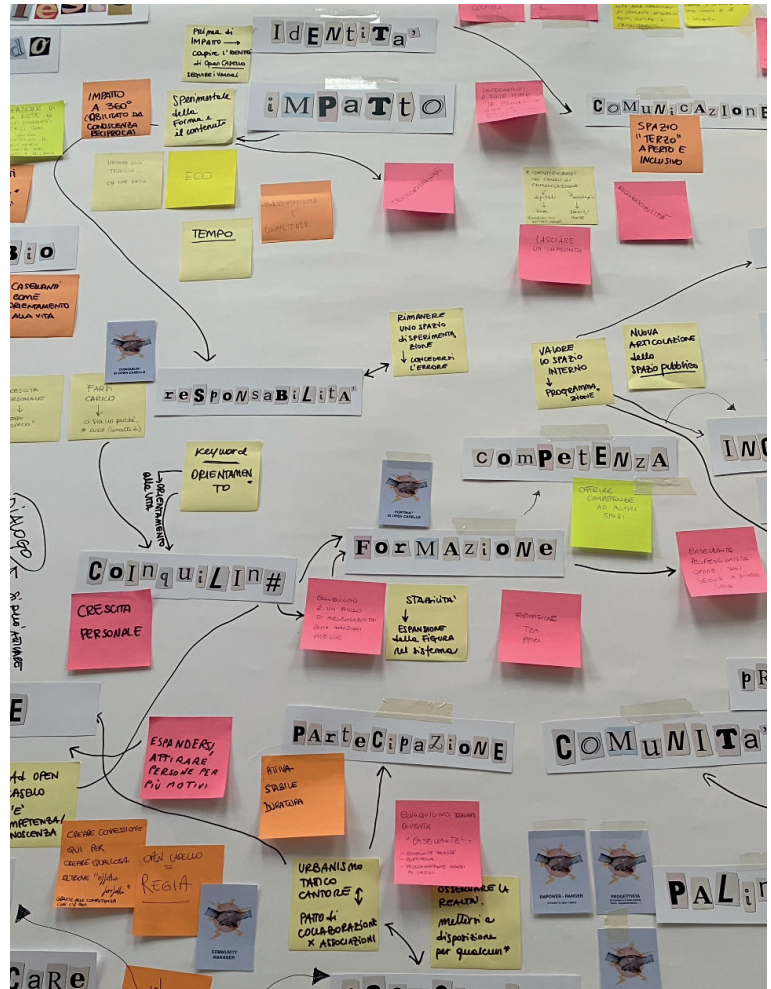
To frame the impact, participants articulated a multidimensional vision that was formalized into a *Open Casello Manifesto* (Figure 2) and subsequently structured along four interconnected dimensions: cultural, social, economic-administrative, and relational. Each of these domains corresponds to a set of enabling actions and practices that reflect the transformative potential of the space. The Table 3 synthesizes the core elements identified for each dimension, offering a situated interpretation of impact as it is co-imagined and co-produced by the ecosystem of Open Casello.

## 10.5 Implications and conclusions

The co-design process developed at Open Casello offers insights that extend beyond the specificities of the Milanese context, providing reflections that may inform the governance and strategic orientation of other socio-cultural hybrid spaces. First, the approach adopted demonstrates the potential of participatory frameworks, such as the Social Business Model Canvas, to foster collective ownership and align operational logics with shared social missions. The workshops



Figure 2.  
Open Casello Manifesto.



facilitated not only strategic reflection but also the construction of a common language among actors with diverse backgrounds, enabling the articulation of a coherent yet adaptable vision of the space. A particularly significant implication concerns the governance configuration of Open Casello. The project exemplifies a model of co-management in which public institutions and civil society actors collaborate as equal partners. While the Municipality of Milan maintains institutional responsibility and financial control, the daily functioning and strategic direction of the space are co-shaped by a network of associations and youth collectives. This distributed governance model emerges as one of the key strengths of the project, enabling a

Impact Dimension	Enabling Actions
Cultural	Open Casello aspires to become a shared cultural platform where programming is collaboratively curated, encouraging artistic experimentation and bottom-up cultural production. The curated schedule (palinsesto) is seen not as a static calendar, but as a flexible framework for inclusion, creativity, and plural expression.
Social	The space fosters individual and collective empowerment through active responsibility, skill-building, and the development of civic awareness. Its role as an inclusive and open “third place” enables young people to take ownership of their engagement, contributing to a broader sense of belonging and public agency.
Economic-Administrative	Through co-management practices, Open Casello promotes the co-creation of value among multiple actors. This includes horizontal dialogue between institutions and communities, and the development of hybrid professional skills: what participants referred to as the role of the casellante, a civic-professional profile emerging from within the space itself.
Relational	The space is imagined as a central and safe environment for dialogue, where people can build trust, experiment, and connect. It functions as a node within a broader territorial network, generating resonant “echoes” that extend beyond its physical boundaries and bridge the gap between orientation services and cultural engagement.

**Table 3.**  
Dimensions of impact  
and enablers.

dynamic and plural engagement that may serve as a reference point for policymakers and practitioners interested in institutional innovation and inclusive urban governance. At the same time, Open Casello presents a distinctive feature that differentiates it from other SCHS: its economic model is not based on financial self-sustainability, but rather on medium-term public funding.

The Municipality plays a central role in covering operational costs, ensuring accessibility and allowing activities to remain free of charge. While this relieves the pressure of market-based revenue generation, a constraint many similar spaces face, it also shifts the emphasis toward social sustainability: the capacity to maintain civic trust, foster meaningful participation, and produce lasting value for individuals and communities. In this sense, Open Casello invites a rethinking of sustainability, positioning social impact and collective empowerment not as by-products, but as primary criteria for evaluating the legiti-

macy and longevity of hybrid urban infrastructures. Ultimately, the experience of Open Casello underscores the value of co-produced strategies in shaping inclusive socio-cultural spaces. Its shared programming model, and community-centered vision of impact represent not a final blueprint, but a living prototype, open to adaptation and replication in other urban contexts. This dynamic is also reflected in the co-design experience with the SBMC. The process revealed some of the intrinsic tensions in applying managerial frameworks to hybrid, community-based initiatives. The SBMC proved useful not as a rigid planning tool, but as a *relational device* that helped align perspectives and support collective meaning-making. Rather than aiming for immediate consensus, the co-design process embraced complexity, allowing different stakeholders to voice their views and negotiate roles, resources, and values over time. This reinforces the idea that governance models and business tools in socio-cultural settings must be approached as adaptable and co-evolving frameworks, rather than fixed solutions. It is worth to mention a limitation of this study: while the value of impact evaluation strongly relies in the quantitative determination of indicators, the pilot investigation of this research study did not arrive to such an application. Future studies could take advantage of the impact dimensions defined in this research to move a step forward the creation of qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact metrics.

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# 11. What publicness for Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces?

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## ABSTRACT

Hybrid sociocultural spaces fit within a framework of socioculturally based regeneration policies and projects for abandoned or awaiting transformation spaces and areas. But what kind of publicness, what kind of shared values, civic uses, and public spaces do they return to our territories? Hybrid sociocultural spaces challenge the 5-star model and dimensions of publicness, partially expand the notions of shared resources according to urban commons theory, and set new goals for civic-use policies in Italy. They will be discussed here: New models of collaborative management; Community devices and practices for territorial animation and conviviality; Networking and visibility tools. Possible future scenarios for publicness: Hybrid sociocultural spaces hosting public activities; Public services that hybridize and accommodate a multifunctional program and new audiences; Hybrid sociocultural spaces designed as collaborative public services in new transformation areas; Independent sociocultural centers that provide self-organized services and exchange reciprocity with citizens.

## 11.1 Introduction

How do Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces arise? Today what is the role of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces for publicness in overcoming traditional hierarchical governance models in favor of processes of extended governance? How is it possible to activate and manage Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces while balancing their economic sustainability and maintaining public accessibility? What are the forms of collaboration and subsidiarity of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces, as subsidiary and collaborative services to traditional welfare? Which strengthen a framework of collective values to guide public action? How can we monitor the social, economic, and cultural impact of a network of independent cultural spaces dedicated to public engagement and self-organized community services? What practical methods can be adopted to assess and improve the usability and accessibility of these spaces for diverse groups? Which strategies are most effective for enhancing communication – both among network members and with the wider public – to support collective life and conviviality? How can we limit the erosion of public space, traditional public services and give space to the will to participate, without fueling forms of appropriation, collectivization and privatization that also lead to gentrification? These questions, rooted in both theoretical reflection and lived experiences in Milan and beyond, highlight the ongoing challenges and possibilities for Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces as engines of urban innovation and social inclusion.

## 11.2 How do Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces arise?

Since the 2009 economic crisis, and continuing today, state property and municipalities have been investing in culturally-based regeneration projects and temporary concessions to the Third Sector, startups, and private individuals to immediately deliver social and economic value. Social cohesion, urban regeneration, and regional revitalization – including economic revitalization. From Milan to Palermo, passing through Turin, Parma, Ascoli Piceno, Naples, Bari,

and Agrigento. Leveraging cultural reuse and the temporary reuse of spaces managed by the State Property Agency, whether owned by local governments or private individuals – and leveraging regional laws, memoranda of understanding, and city regulations – many cities are transforming the appearance of spaces that, pending longer-term redevelopment processes, can be brought back to life, maximizing social impact and reducing management costs for public administrations.

The State Property Agency provides subsidized concessions for certain buildings to third-sector entities (registered with Runts) for their development for socially beneficial initiatives.

In Milan, in 2012, over 3.2 million square meters of space was abandoned. Following public policies aimed at reducing land consumption and promoting urban regeneration, numerous public tenders were launched for the allocation of municipal spaces for socio-cultural reuse and temporary reuse projects. These included the allocation of municipally owned properties, such as entire buildings or the ground floors of former gatehouses and commercial shops, for temporary reuse of six months or one to three years; former farmhouses and uncultivated land or sports facilities for 10 to 15 years; and former factories and warehouses for 30 to 40 years. This meant not only large-scale competitions like *Reinventing Cities*, C40 Cities<sup>1</sup>, or *Vision for the City* on Milan's former railway yards, but also sociocultural regeneration policies based on the allocation of abandoned properties to associations, the third sector, and social enterprises. In the case of temporary reuse with the public administration, the contracts also required the signing of a code of ethics, meaning there would be no rent, but a fee for expenses and time to be donated for the maintenance and opening of the spaces to the public.

**Note 1.**

C40 is a global network of nearly 100 mayors of the world's leading cities that are united in action to confront the climate crisis. <https://www.c40.org/about-c40/>.

So how did Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces come about? In Milan, in recent years, different spaces and ways have been created to produce generative welfare, create culture and participate in the renewal of a material and immaterial cultural heritage of the city in continuous transformation. In the last 15 years, hybrid multicultural spaces have been created that have been able to regenerate and activate former industrial spaces, farmhouses, kindergartens, churches, cinemas, theaters, offices, markets, concierges, but also new architectures

that have catalyzed new formats and attempt to mix functions such as association hubs and bicycle workshops, fab-labs and exhibition spaces, co-working and hostels, cinemas and bars, bookshops, garden-bistros. Hybrid socio-cultural spaces are spaces that blend the functions of traditional cultural hubs with flexible, multi-purpose uses such as workshops, performances, and community gatherings. The physical configuration is changing. Hybrid spaces are characterized by dedicated, single-purpose spaces and areas (workshops, kitchens, offices) and multifunctional spaces (halls, large atriums, terraces, flat roofs, courtyards, arenas, open fields) that change activities daily with a constantly evolving schedule that can accommodate the unexpected. These spaces offer a crossover of new contents, open to a plurality of populations and uses, propose new cultural formats and moments of aggregation, attempt to combine innovation and social inclusion.

## **11.3 Milan manifesto of ideas and requests for public administration**

These spaces, which the scientific community increasingly refers to as «new cultural institutions» (Niessen, 2019), due to their adaptive and innovative cultural programming, were forced into virtual interaction by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Milan in mid-February 2020. The opportunity for dialogue among managers of socio-cultural centers shift to online platforms, necessitated by social distancing. Faced with these unprecedented obstacles, the discussions quickly revealed deeper, systemic problems: management fragilities and regulatory gaps that hinder the effective operation and recognition of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces by public authorities. To clarify, management fragilities included difficulties in coordinating staff and activities amidst constantly changing regulations and public health measures. Regulatory gaps often manifested in ambiguous or outdated policies; for example, some centers found themselves unable to secure permits for temporary events because city ordinances did not account for hybrid or multi-use venues. Others struggled to access public funding or tax relief due to their legal status not fitting



**Note 2.**  
The investigation initiated by the informal network of hybrid spaces, the mapping, and the requests to public administration are described in the text del 2021: Gli spazi ibridi di Milano. 1 Manifesto, 1 questionario, 1 mappa per la città a 15 minuti. <https://www.spazibridisocioculturali.it/en/spazi-ibridi>.

existing categories. Recognizing these persistent challenges and a lack of acknowledgement from local government – the Public Administration was often unprepared to classify or support these complex, innovative spaces – participants were motivated to develop collective responses. This led to the conception of a Manifesto of Ideas<sup>2</sup>, accompanied by a comprehensive questionnaire distributed among different spaces, with the goal of mapping these sites within the evolving geography of Milan and articulating their needs, identities, and contributions to the city's cultural and social landscape.

In 2021, the informal network of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces in Milan gained recognition. This recognition opened the door to fruitful collaboration with the Mayor and various city departments. As a result, a technical table was established to define rules and practices that would facilitate projects. Alongside this, a political table was created to shape the emerging identity of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces. On September 24, 2021, these collaborative efforts culminated in City Council Resolution n. 1231, which established the *Hybrid Spaces Network of the City of Milan*. The creation of this network marked a pivotal moment, as it formally recognized Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces as innovative community hubs within the city. This step set an important precedent for other cities in Italy, highlighting Milan's leadership in supporting new models of cultural and social engagement. In February 2022, the city took another significant step by establishing a Qualified *List of the hybrid spaces network of the city of Milan* (Figure 1), in partnership with the Department of Economy and Urban Innovation. This list provides a formal register of recognized spaces, making it easier for these places to access support and participate in public initiatives. But before understanding which tools and devices to deploy to address and initiate a co-design process to support Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces for their public value, let's look at the theoretical framework of publicness.

## 11.4 Milan, Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris

Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces are today engines of Infrastructures of care (Boano, 2017), which have materialized as resistances, as adap-



Figure 1.  
Principal investigators  
*Hybrid Spaces Network  
of the City of Milan*. Photo  
by the author.

tations and as needs, as attentions to the body and space, revisiting collective rhythms, redefining proximity, and codifying new positive passions, but also reimagining spaces, adapting perspectives. Between 2022 and 2025, fruitful exchanges of experiences took place among networks of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces in Milan, Italian national level, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Paris. This was achieved through public seminars, international workshops, guided tours, and interviews with the protagonists, initiators, and managers of hybrid spaces in various cities.

And at the national level? In Italy, Lo Stato dei Luoghi is a network of over 100 cultural entities, organizations, and individuals working for urban and cultural regeneration. The primary goal is to transform abandoned or underutilized spaces into dynamic, inclusive, and community-friendly cultural centers. The network promotes the dissemination of knowledge and public discussion on culture-based urban regeneration, with a focus on social impact and the creation of hybrid spaces that foster encounters and exchanges. Lo Stato dei Luoghi network stands out for its practical approach and its desire to create vibrant, participatory places that respond to the needs of local communities. The initiative presents itself as a model for urban regeneration that places culture at its core as a driver of social change.

In Berlin, the Urbane Praxis network, comprising over 50 pilot

projects, has existed since 2020-2021. Berlin Urban practice is common good oriented. Urban practice is self-organized. Urban practice shapes the city from below. The Urban Practice Network Office networks, supports and advises Berlin initiatives and projects that develop self-organized cultural communities and open spaces and achieve cultural and urban transformations of abandoned spaces for the common good. Many spaces share their origin in an artistic claim and initiative, growing into complex forms of self-organization and public-civic or scientific-artistic-civic cooperation.

In Amsterdam, the public administration is networking spaces regenerated through policies for allocating abandoned spaces at controlled prices, such as community hubs and ateliers, to creatives, artists, and cultural associations capable of restoring public value (accessibility, inclusion, innovation, etc.). Today, the Amsterdam public administration, through its Bureau Broedplaatsen, aims to stimulate new regeneration programs connected to sociocultural programs. Martijn Braamhaar, director of Bureau Broedplaatsen Amsterdam, explains that Bureau Broedplaatsen was founded in 1999 by the City of Amsterdam, which decided to establish a service to support cultural projects involving the temporary reuse of abandoned spaces. The service provided a €41 million fund to create approximately 2,000 jobs for artists, artisans, collectives, and cultural entrepreneurs. An updated online map shows municipally owned properties and areas (as well as some agreements for the reuse of privately owned areas) to be assigned with contracts for periods of 2-5 years, with the possibility of renewal for temporary reuse or, better yet, as creativity incubators. In 2014, 61 buildings were reactivated; today, in 2022, there are over 70.

The dialogue with Paris and the pioneering policies since 2010 for the reactivation of abandoned spaces as tiers lieux has led to a national policy and planning approach that focuses on consolidating actions and funding for these places as Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces. In France, there are approximately 3,500 third places/tiers lieux, a remarkable increase from the 1,800 identified in 2018. These spaces address diverse issues, including ecological transition, reuse, social inclusion, and the relocalization of production. They are distinguished by their collective governance and their ability to foster synergies among various stakeholders: residents, businesses, local authorities,

and associations. According to Plateau Urbain, third places are intermediate spaces where multiple uses coexist to meet the needs of a given territory. They embody a form of innovation centered on cooperation and experimentation, allowing the development of projects that serve the public interest while seeking viable economic models. But what, then, is the public value of these spaces in different contexts? Let's return to a theoretical framework to examine some models.

## 11.5 Publicness, urban commons, civic uses

Can we consider Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces an evolution or a new category of the long Italian tradition of civic uses? We know that civic uses are collective rights of enjoyment over immovable property, often land, belonging to a community. These rights are imprescriptible and tied to specific territories. Their management can be entrusted to local authorities or associations and are protected to ensure the common use of such assets.

Common goods are not a commodity that can be transformed into possessions. They are a political and cultural practice that belongs to the horizon of coexistence (Mattei, 2010).

Even Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces, whether publicly or privately owned, have the purpose of collective enjoyment and management of a property. These spaces also broaden understandings of shared resources in line with urban commons theory, which emphasizes the collective management and stewardship of urban assets. In doing so, Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces set new goals for civic-use policies in Italy, such as advancing inclusive governance, supporting community-driven management of public resources, and fostering participatory practices that strengthen local engagement and social cohesion.

Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces challenge the 5-star model – a framework for evaluating the quality of public spaces – and reframe the dimensions of publicness as defined by Varna & Tiesdell (2010). The five meta-dimensions of ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, and animation, which assess factors like accessibility, inclusiveness, and sociability, are challenged by hybrid spaces.

The hybridization of space first and foremost calls physical configuration into question. The coexistence of dedicated spaces (such as laboratories or offices) and at least one large multifunctional space hosting a schedule of activities throughout the day, requires a different governance approach that allows public access while also preserving intimacy. A balance is struck between allowing everyone to enter and participate, both passively and actively, and ensuring that accessibility, based on gender (e.g., Arab women taking Italian classes), age (activities for children aged 0-3, 3-6, 6-11, adolescents, etc.), and cost, is always clear and non-exclusionary. Publicness is once again challenged in the dimensions of control, civility, and animation by the interaction between flows of different populations in hybrid spaces.

What type of interaction occurs, where and when, what effects does it produce? What kind of mutual influence occurs in these places? In some environments, the same type of need, passion, and activity leads to interaction between individuals to share a space, which also leads to the sharing of equipment and tools useful for projects. But other interactions between flows of populations will be both expected and unexpected, leading to sharing and collaboration, or they will be spaces for learning a publicness linked to the co-presence and overlapping of activities, respecting different needs or conquering space for groups of belonging. Then there are also the interactions of impact, of conflict in the use of space. A training ground, a poll for publicness, for learning to be together, both for managers and for regular or occasional users.

As we will also see from the workshop and Working Table *Sociocultural hybrid spaces and neighborhood services* (led in Milan in 2022 at Stecca3 sociocultural space), these spaces call for new forms of collaborative agreements for shared management<sup>3</sup> or a 2.0 version of the *Regulation On Collaboration Between Citizens And Administrations For The Care, Regeneration And Shared Management Of Common Goods*, for the restitution of activities and services to a diverse audience of stakeholders, often citizens of neighboring neighborhoods. Therefore, a publicness of proximity, a care for neighbors that also leaves room for experimentation by new populations.

*Public-use devices for Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces*

**Note 3.**  
The Working Table “Socio-cultural hybrid spaces and neighborhood services” was led by Antonella Bruzzese, professor at DASTU Politecnico di Milano.





the genius loci of each area. Participants discover meeting spaces, sites of conflict, available public services, and self-organized activities offered by hybrid spaces. Local protagonists and other community members share their experiences, giving voice to the diverse narratives within the neighborhoods.

Another tool for comparing temporary uses, practices and activation devices of public space is the *Kiosk of Reciprocity*<sup>4</sup> in Milan (Figure 3) and the *Kiosk of Solidarity* in Berlin. For over a century, kiosks have been devices, weak and widespread architectures that attract different populations and activate spaces for public use of aggregation and conviviality. The *Kiosk of Reciprocity* for the network of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces in Milan was created to activate spaces of conviviality, promote knowledge on critical issues and urban emergencies, support a collaborative economy of local communities.

How is an independent sociocultural space sustainable today? What self-organized services are offered to a neighborhood? What kind of proximity economy? The *Kiosk of Reciprocity* is a solidarity

**Note 4.**

*Kiosk of Reciprocity* It is a project by Temporiuso, Collective Works (NL), and Constructlab (D) created for the 2024 Fuorisalone in Milan.



**Figure 3.**  
Kiosk of Reciprocity by  
Temporiuso, Collective-  
Works and Construct\_lab  
Photo by author.

economy device, food and drinks (beers) contribute to supporting socio-cultural activities. The kiosk is a cart, a modular cargo bike that can move around the city, in different neighborhoods to support the economy of other hybrid spaces and conviviality in public space. Involving citizens and institutions, promoting managers of hybrid spaces, experimenting and activating new forms of publicness, convivial ground, aggregation and collective imagination, giving voice and space to new generations of placemakers, reflecting with experts on new forms of proximity economy, these are some of the goals of the Kiosk of Reciprocity Milano tour.

### *Networking and visibility tools*

More recently, a co-design process with the Municipality of Milan was started in November 2024 and will last until 2026, a partnership between the Municipality and some Third Sector Entities selected through a Notice.

Following a process of analysis and listening to the needs of the subjects adhering to the Network, three areas of intervention have been identified: the first are solutions to facilitate communication and collaboration between the spaces adhering to the network; the second are Systems to measure the social impact generated by individual spaces and by the network as a whole; the third are promotional activities towards the public, citizens and local organizations. A B2C platform is being created for the network of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces in Milan. The publicness of this device may lie in its ability to encourage participation and new forms of grassroots mobilization. The creation of a shared website for the network has also stimulated a new reflection on shared values:

- accessible, and affordable sociocultural hybrid spaces for diverse audiences and populations;
- spaces for cultural exchange and social interaction;
- places to experiment with collaborative public services;
- neighborhood and proximity spaces, offering a program of sociocultural activities to neighborhoods and regions;
- digital innovation to foster the exchange of knowledge and expertise between spaces and their audiences.

The B2C platform has also enabled the development of a shared



glossary, including keywords for self-organized services, courses, and events offered to diverse audiences. Perhaps one of the first experiments in co-design of a collaborative service for public use?

## 11.6 What publicness for...?

To support and protect the public dimension of Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces, we recommend several actionable steps. First, formal partnerships between hybrid spaces and local government bodies can ensure sustained support and legitimacy, anchoring these initiatives within the broader urban framework. Second, the creation of inter-space networks – such as regular forums for managers and community members – will facilitate knowledge-sharing and collaborative problem-solving across different projects. Third, adopting hybrid economic models, like integrating local activities with municipal resources (such as discounted courses, tokens for the use of coworking spaces and workshops, public tenders municipal, national, international, small catering and retail businesses, and sociocultural events), can enhance financial sustainability while safeguarding accessibility for all. Looking ahead, several possible scenarios and challenges emerge for these spaces. For instance, increased digital integration could foster new forms of community engagement and participation, allowing hybrid spaces to reach more residents through online platforms and virtual events. Conversely, economic pressures might encourage some spaces to adopt more commercial models, which could risk diluting their public mission and inclusivity. Addressing these trajectories with clear principles – such as always prioritizing accessibility, inclusivity, and community-driven programming – will help maintain the core values that make Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces vital assets for public life.

Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces are reshaping possibilities for publicness, which refers here to the degree of accessibility and participation these spaces offer to a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Here, it is important to highlight four possible future trajectories and scenarios for publicness: Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces hosting public activities. For example, a community center that offers both self-or-

ganized services provided by associations, such as bicycle workshops and social carpentry, but also public services such as youth information centers or municipal career guidance desks. Public spaces and services, born as monofunctional spaces that become hybridized, and accommodate a multifunctional program, new audiences and stakeholders. Consider a public library that integrates coworking zones, makerspaces, and cultural events alongside its traditional functions, engaging citizens with varied interests. Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces designed as collaborative public services in new areas of transformation. For instance, a new community center in a new neighborhood or area masterplan, which offers local animation activities, but also provides space for new realities to propose unexpected activities. Independent Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces that provide self-organized services and exchange reciprocity with citizens. Activities that can complement or even challenge traditional public services. Two opposing examples are summer schools for children supplementing public after-school programs, and experimental nature theater and forest kindergarten programs (uncertified and bordering on artistic practice). Creative resources outside of conventional municipal programs. These Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces play a crucial role in supporting urban life, the publicness is by promoting inclusivity, nurturing creativity, and adapting to the evolving needs of city residents.

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# 12. Collaborative Spaces in Piemonte, Liguria and Valle d'Aosta and the effects of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation's "SPACE" call for proposals

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## ABSTRACT

In Italy, initiatives for the collaborative reuse of dismissed or abandoned physical spaces or buildings for cultural and social innovative projects are increasingly numerous. These initiatives are particularly noteworthy for their contribution to the revitalization of local communities and territories. The evaluation presented here, outlining its principal findings, delves into spaces supported by the *SPACE* call for proposals from Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo (FCSP) across Piemonte, Liguria, and Valle d'Aosta between 2021 and 2024. The primary objective was to understand how the three-year *SPACE* measure had worked and what effects it had generated on these collaborative spaces. Through *SPACE*, FCSP not only provided support during the challenging period of the pandemic, but also fostered a structured, three-year program aimed at strengthening management models and the competencies of space managers. This was achieved through financial contributions, training activities, tutoring, and peer-to-peer exchanges.

## 12.1 Introduction

In Italy, initiatives for the collaborative reuse of dismissed or abandoned physical spaces or buildings for cultural and social innovative projects are increasingly numerous. As many academic literatures about culture-based urban regeneration highlight, these initiatives are particularly noteworthy for their contribution to the revitalization of local communities and territories. Many academic contributions in fact refer to the reuse of public and private heritage for cultural and social innovative projects as practices that trigger broader processes of urban regeneration.

The Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo (FCSP) has played a significant role in fostering and enhancing collaborative initiatives across the territories of Piemonte, Liguria, and Valle d'Aosta. Through its *SPACE – SPazi di PARTEcipazione al CEntro* call for proposals, the foundation has provided support to over 100 distinct spaces. For future resource allocation for further measures within this sector, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo initiated a comprehensive evaluation process. The primary aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the supported spaces and to assess the impact of the financial contributions and tutoring provided.

The evaluative research therefore investigated the sector of collaborative spaces in Piemonte, Liguria, and Valle d'Aosta. It considered the entire set of spaces supported by the three-year *SPACE* measure to understand whether managing bodies had effectively utilized the financial resources and accompanying support to strengthen and consolidate their internal management and project development, as well as their engagement with the local territory and communities. The evaluation also sought to deepen knowledge and comprehension of this sector, particularly its capacity to offer services within the territories and to foster the active participation of citizens and communities.

The initial analysis of this set of spaces was conducted through a quantitative analysis of data acquired from the FCSP (the application roll of entities for the 2020-2023 triennium and the 2023 survey-questionnaire). Subsequently, an in-depth analysis was designed, primarily involving semi-structured interviews with a representative probabilis-

tic sample of 30 spaces. These interviews focused on relevant issues identified from the quantitative analysis and discussions with FCSP and its strategic stakeholders.

The following outlines the main findings and some policy recommendations valuable for formulating future development and support trajectories for the sector.

## 12.2 *SPACE*: specificity and added value of a policy

The evaluation of the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo's triennial *SPACE* initiative highlights a highly effective programmatic and pragmatic intervention model. This model facilitated a rapid and adequate response to the emerging and evolving needs of collaborative spaces. Furthermore, it fostered the consolidation of a collaborative network that developed and expanded throughout the measure's three-year implementation and continues to operate actively.

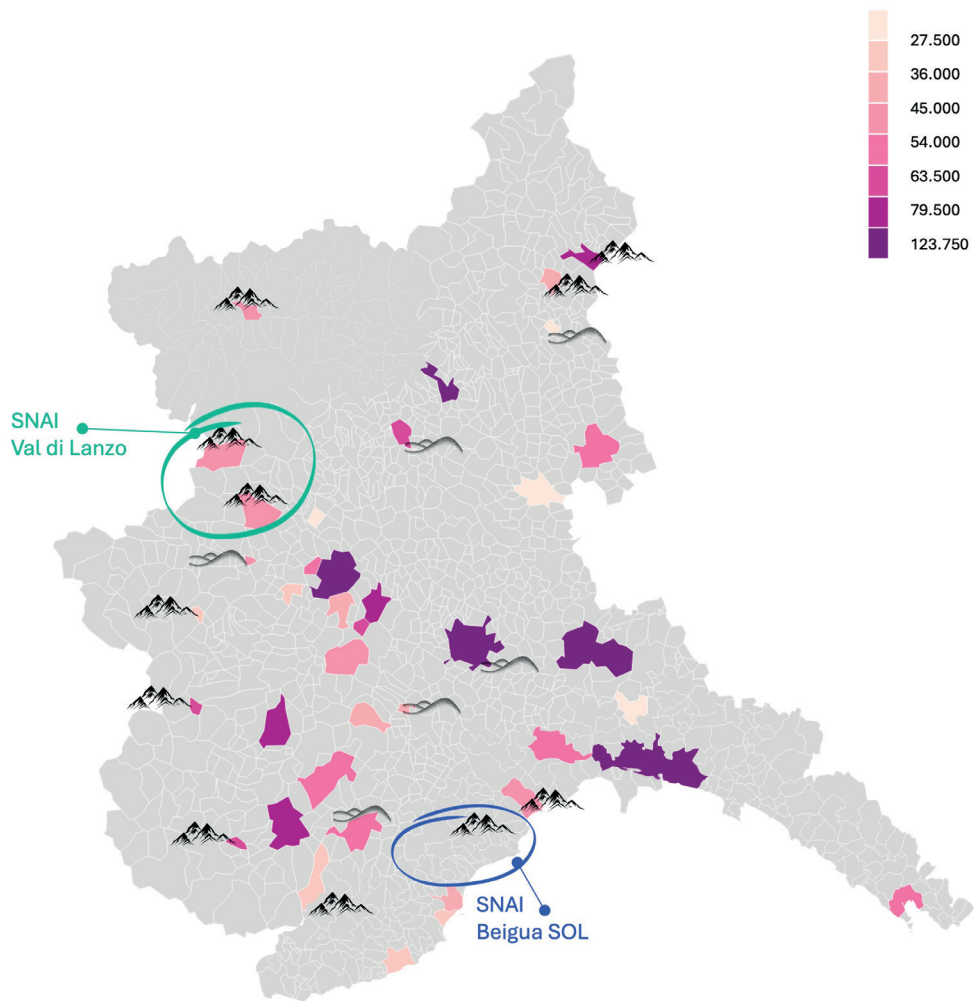
The effectiveness of the initiative is rooted in its inception: the processes of active and continuous engagement with the Foundation's strategic partners – Labsus, Che Fare, Arci Torino, and the Network of Turin Neighbourhood Houses. Their involvement in the co-programming process and subsequent support actions for the initiative represents an effective and innovative aspect, thanks to their considerable expertise on specific issues related to the life of collaborative spaces.

The *SPACE* initiative garnered widespread approval from the collaborative spaces, attributed to its innovative approach, flexibility, and consistent support. These elements collectively established the program as a key reference for strengthening local spaces. The collected testimonies consistently highlight the transformative value of the measure, with descriptions such as a *Copernican revolution* (*Mastro-nauta*), every space's dream and the call for applications that didn't exist (*Bocciofila Vanchiglietta*), and a launchpad (*Il Puerto*).

Unlike other forms of support, which are often circumscribed and bound by rigid procedures, *SPACE* distinguished itself by the centrality it accorded to spaces as autonomous projects, independ-

ent of managing bodies. The three-year funding period, combined with streamlined administrative procedures and the possibility of reallocating contributions annually, allowed spaces to freely adapt resources based on needs and changes. This not only ensured greater effectiveness in spending the contribution but also stimulated strategic reflection within organizations and fostered projects better able to respond to the specific needs of the spaces. The measure was characterized by its ability to welcome and include spaces usually excluded from traditional calls due to their function, nature, or size. It

Figure 1.  
Geographical distribution of allocated financial contributions  
Source: FCSP, results of the SPACE 2021, 2022, 2023 call for proposals.





played a key role in conferring legitimacy and recognition to the spaces involved, consolidating their identity and credibility. Being selected for this initiative was perceived as a seal of trust that strengthened visibility and relationships with local institutions, contributing to improved dialogue with local stakeholders.

Through *SPACE*, many spaces were able to reflect on their work with greater awareness, valuing their achievements and rediscovering their key role within the territories. This has led them to specify their mission to better respond to local needs and strengthen their role as territorial garrisons, as places capable of intercepting the needs and dynamics of local communities, consolidating their function not only as centers of aggregation, but also as key players in promoting the social and cultural development of the territory. In spaces with multiple partner entities in management, *SPACE* has helped strengthen the co-management model, facilitating collaboration among the entities involved and encouraging a sharing of resources and goals. In addition, the measure has initiated a process of professionalization of human resources that has led some organizations to more structured, qualified and stable management, and in some cases has enabled them to move beyond purely voluntary modes. The measure is also notable for incorporating a structured accompanying action, through the Community of Practice, which has fostered exchange and shared growth among spaces, not only addressing issues crucial to their sustainability over time, but also strengthening the sense of community and creating an environment of confrontation in which spaces have been able to share ideas, challenges and solutions, and build networks and collaborations with each other in the territories.

The few critical issues that emerged were mainly related to technical aspects and procedures such as, for example, the timelines for submitting applications, which were perceived as too tight in some cases, or the premium approach to the self-financing capacity of spaces, without adequately taking into account cases in which governance also participated by public entities excludes the possibility of self-financing by, for example, carrying out commercial and market activities. However, in certain cases, participation in *SPACE* has incentivized public entities to take charge in covering the costs of, for example, maintenance or renovation of spaces.

## 12.3 What changes has *SPACE* generated in the managing bodies?

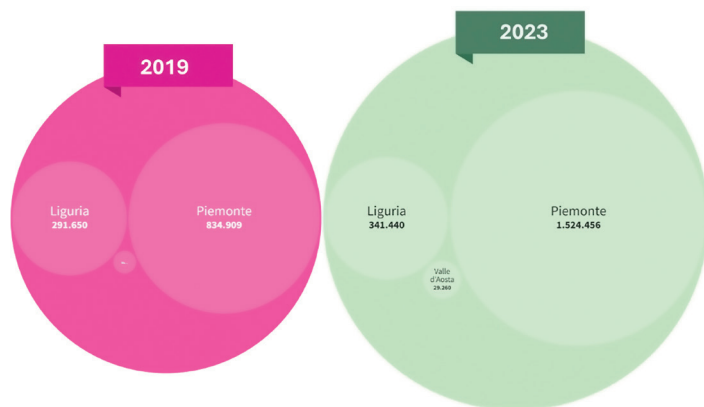
*SPACE* has generated significant changes in the managing entities, pushing them toward reorganization and rationalization of management aspects, fostered by the three-year perspective of the program. This time horizon has stimulated reflection on mid-term development of spaces and the design of new growth opportunities. The accompaniment provided by the Active Participation Mission, through a Community of Practice and the comparison between spaces, acted as an enabling factor for the organizations' consolidation, opening new phases of reflection internally and among co-managers.

This support has affected the awareness of spaces, strengthening their identity, focusing on skills and resource needs, and prompting actions to stabilize human resources, induction of new professionals and internal training. Most spaces have undertaken reorganizations of tasks, roles, decision-making processes and internal governance, improved coordination and clarifying operational delegations. This has fostered:

- implementation of structured ways for participation;
- greater sharing between senior figures and teams;
- transformations in internal culture, governance and leadership;
- revision, sometimes radical, of the decision-making chain.

Initially more traditional spaces, often linked to social cooperatives, particularly benefited from these stimuli, finding in *SPACE* an accelerator to rethink post-Covid sustainability and enhance their identity as an enabling and aggregating place. This has led to more open governance, development of new skills, and a transformation of internal organizational models, with positive impacts on economic sustainability and responsiveness to social needs. However, economic sustainability remains a critical issue, which is also linked to the quality of work offered. The discrepancy between the high skills required and the precariousness/inadequacy of salaries represents a fragility for projects. Many spaces have used *SPACE*'s resources to stabilize staff or hire new professionals, recognizing the value of spe-

Figure 2.  
Annual visitor numbers:  
2019-2023 comparison  
Source: *SPACE* 2023  
monitoring survey.



cific skills and professionalizing resources through in-house training or the inclusion of new figures (e.g., coordination manager, community manager, social planner, experts in communication, marketing, economic management and human resources). In particular, the figure of the social bartender emerges, combining business and social skills. Management improvements and team stability have fostered the structuring of volunteer activities and the activation of projects such as work-school alternation and community service. The three-year perspective allowed for overcoming urgencies and initiating reflections on co-management and the relationship between managing bodies, leading in some cases to collective planning and more efficient co-management models. Organizational strengthening has contributed to better recognition and positioning in the territory.

## 12.4 What transformations in physical spaces?

*SPACE* has had a significant impact on improving the physical and functional conditions of spaces, accessibility, and the indoor/outdoor relationship, with investments in renovations, fit outs, and equipment. Many spaces have also extended to the outdoors, upgrading green areas and public spaces, and in some cases promoting outdoor cultural initiatives or entering *Patti di collaborazione* (Collaboration Agreement) with the Administration and others to manage public

areas. The improvement of the functionality of spaces has generated positive effects on the relationship with communities, leading to an increase in the offer of activities and services in different areas: aggregative, cultural, social inclusion, proximity welfare, environment, work, sports and wellness. There has been a sharp increase in free-use spaces, such as co-working and study rooms. The spaces are characterized by a strong contamination between different spheres, particularly between the social and cultural dimensions, and act as connectors of energies and triggers for further planning.

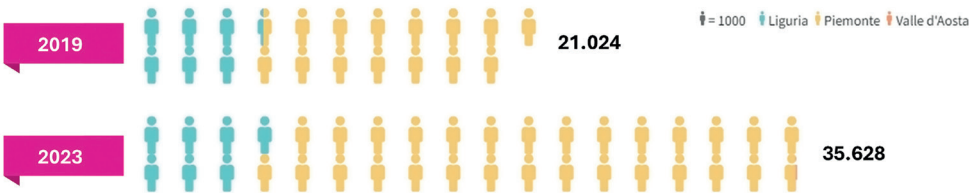
## 12. 5 How has the role of spaces in territories and for communities changed?

Many spaces have consolidated their role as community reference points, also strengthening their credibility with institutions and public administration.

This has fostered new collaborations, networks and alliances, consolidating their role as territorial garrisons and enabling relational platforms, capable of activating social capital and facilitating the active participation of citizens. *SPACE* has contributed to the recognition of spaces as social garrisons that complement public welfare provision. In some cases, hybridized public services have been developed and a new model of welfare that starts with spaces and integrates with civic participation and traditional services has been tested.

The relationship of trust between communities, spaces and institutions has been strengthened, with the initiation of integrated and shared projects and the use of shared administration tools for the management of outdoor public spaces. Spaces are confirmed as

Figure 3.  
Number of people actively involved in the spaces: 2019-2023 comparison  
Source: *SPACE* 2023 monitoring survey.



a trigger of urban and territorial regeneration processes, contributing to positive changes and responding more effectively to the needs of the population, acting as a hinge between territory and Public Administration. There has been a growth in usage and active participation in activities, with an average increase of 67 percent in annual attendance from 2019 to 2023 and an increase in people actively involved. The measure has stimulated reflection on the role of active participants and how they are involved. There is a wide variety of approaches used to encourage participation, ranging from the informal to the more structured.

However, some issues emerge related to the non-unique definition of active participant, the difficulty of encouraging participation in marginal settings, the long-term sustainability of participation, and the difficulty of monitoring.

The measure has strengthened the capacity to listen to and monitor the needs of communities, fostering the introduction of more structured tools for data collection (questionnaires, focus groups, social media, digital tools, direct dialogue) and the possibility of having common monitoring tools to make data more homogeneous and comparable.

## 12.6 Key quantitative findings

Firstly, it should be noted that some of the data collected by the FCSP are inconsistent and not entirely coherent and comparable across the different spaces.

This appears to be due mainly to the initial lack of internal monitoring tools within the spaces, the limited culture of data collection and difficulties in interpreting and understanding terminology, particularly regarding the participation of active subjects. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the work carried out by the FCSP in the Community of Practice during the three-year *SPACE* programme has stimulated critical reflection on certain key concepts, such as active participation, and has led to greater awareness in all the spaces interviewed of the strategic importance of equipping themselves with monitoring tools. The data processed by the evaluators can nevertheless provide

some indications on the effects of *SPACE*, and a series of analyses are presented below.

## 12.7 What spaces need today: directions for future support measures

The research conducted shows that Piedmont, Liguria and Valle d'Aosta offer a rich panorama of experiences which, in many cases, go

Figure 4.  
The ten issues of *SPACE*.

### ❶ 31 new spaces identified

*SPACE* managed to involve 31 spaces that had never received funding from Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, successfully activating **new energy**.

### ❷ €1,675,000 to small urban centres

One third of *SPACE*'s resources went to spaces outside large urban centres, including 11 in mountain areas (3 of which in Aree Interne), demonstrating an **explicit focus on the most fragile and decentralised areas**.

### ❸ +66.9% annual attendance

The spaces have become increasingly popular, attractive and meaningful places for communities: in 2023, there were almost 1.9 million visitors, compared to 1.1 million in 2019.

### ❹ +70% of active people

**Active participation is growing**: the number of people actively involved in activities (volunteers, members, tutors, entertainers, etc.) rose from 21,024 to 35,628.

### ❺ +104% total revenue

The total revenue of the spaces rose from €10.2 million to €20.8 million in four years: a **quantum leap in economic sustainability** and self-financing capacity.

### ❻ +40% of people under 35 involved as key players

Despite regional differences, the spaces have focused heavily on **young people**, including in leadership and co-management roles.

### ❼ 78 out of 91 spaces used *SPACE* to redevelop places

1.2 million euros were invested to **refunctionalise the spaces**: a concrete investment in the physical and symbolic quality of neighbourhood spaces.

### ❽ +53% employment (FTE)

Participation spaces **are establishing themselves as qualified workplaces**, especially for young people and professionals in the social and cultural sectors: the number of people employed in the spaces rose from 528.75 FTE in 2019 to 812 FTE in 2023.

### ❾ 91%: spaces with Wi-Fi

In just four years, **Wi-Fi availability** for users has increased from 62% to 91%, a simple but strategic infrastructure for making spaces truly open and inclusive.

### ❿ 80 spaces report at least one active partnership

Spaces are opening up, communicating and building **alliances**: the number of spaces that have activated networks or collaborations has grown from 232 in 2019 to 588 in 2023.

beyond the experimental phase and play a recognisable civic, social, cultural and cohesive role in the territories. Due to their strongly place-based nature and focus on the social dimension, these initiatives play a key role in urban and territorial transformation processes, clearly demonstrating their regenerative impact on the territories.

It is therefore crucial to support the launch of new initiatives and consolidate existing experiences, promoting dialogue with public policies. To address the challenges facing these spaces and to foster their growth, future support measures will need to address several key aspects. These insights point towards a holistic approach that integrates sustainable management practices, human resource professionalisation, institutional legitimacy, and contextual adaptability as foundational pillars for future interventions. Several key policy recommendations are outlined below.

The research revealed the complexity and heterogeneity of cultural and civic spaces, which are multifunctional laboratories where culture, participation and urban regeneration intertwine. This hybrid nature, while a strength, poses challenges to traditional categorisation. It is essential to develop policies that recognise and value this diversity, avoiding rigid classifications that do not consider the plurality of roles and missions. Policies should also support culture as a tool for active participation and promote multifunctional models that integrate different operational dimensions. The effectiveness of future support policies depends on their ability to adapt to the specificities of each context. Support needs to be tailored to different factors:

- Stage of development: Measures must distinguish between start-up projects, which require more direct support, and established projects, which require support aimed at strengthening management and organisation.
- Territorial contexts: The challenges faced by spaces vary considerably between urban contexts, where social cohesion functions prevail, and marginal and mountain areas, where the mission is more closely linked to local development. Policies must adapt support to territorial contexts, paying particular attention to the difficulties arising from geographical isolation.

It is also crucial to ensure continuity of human resources, promoting stability and adequate contractual arrangements for staff. Policies

must also promote training courses to strengthen the skills of managers and encourage more effective management.

The public sector plays a strategic role, particularly considering that many spaces are developed in disused public assets. However, dialogue is not always straightforward due to institutional rigidity and a lack of a culture of shared administration. It is necessary to promote recognition of the role of spaces and their public utility, facilitating constructive dialogue and co-design of services. Encouraging shared monitoring and evaluation between spaces and public administrations can help to recognise and enhance the impact of the activities carried out. The *Community of Practice* has proven to be a valuable opportunity for the exchange of experiences and training. However, some critical issues have also been highlighted, such as the difficulty of participation for small entities and the limited possibility of in-depth discussion on specific topics. Future policies should give continuity to this path, creating more targeted working groups and also involving the public administration. Furthermore, although monitoring has been a burden for less structured organisations, it has been recognised as a useful tool for internal awareness and dialogue with institutions. It is essential to develop shared monitoring tools and provide specific training, making data collection more accessible and intuitive. This approach not only standardises impact assessment but also strengthens the legitimacy of spaces in their role as agents of change.

## Authorship attribution

The evaluative research on the Participatory Spaces supported by the *SPACE* call was conducted by the working group comprised of: Tecla Livi (coordination), Anna Misiani, Monica Postiglione, and Chiara Sumiraschi.

## Acknowledgement

We want to thank the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo for initiating the evaluation process for the *SPACE* call, for collaborating



with the working group on the research objectives, for the ongoing discussions, and for the valuable insights received. These results will help the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo's efforts to support cultural and civic spaces become even more informed and effective, fostering new active citizenship. Special thanks go to Simone Martino, Sandra Aloia, and Paola Sabbione. We also thank all the FCSP strategic partners who were interviewed and all the space representatives who made themselves available for interviews, dedicating their time and passion to sharing their projects and challenges.

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# 13. Activating Proximity: rethinking local services and commerce as hybrids of urban resilience

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the *Servizi e Commercio On Demand (Services and Commerce On Demand)* program developed by Fondazione Housing Sociale in Italy as a replicable approach to activating local economies and social infrastructure in urban contexts. Drawing from case studies in Milan, the paper examines how hybrid spaces for neighbourhood services can support community building, foster proximity-based entrepreneurship, and enhance the social value of public-private partnerships. Through an integrated methodology – ranging from territorial engagement to business support and urban prototyping – the program positions local commerce not only as an economic function, but as a catalyst for urban regeneration, social inclusion, and place-based innovation.

## 13.1 Introduction: Hybrid spaces, services, and commerce as social infrastructures

In contemporary urban transformations, quality of life can no longer be understood solely in residential terms. It is through the daily presence of rooted services and activities that a neighbourhood fosters a sense of belonging, safety, and vitality. From this perspective, Fondazione Housing Sociale (FHS)<sup>1</sup> has long recognized the strategic role of local commerce and services as central elements of a new urbanity, grounded in proximity and cohesion.

Living extends beyond housing: it is shaped by shared spaces, accessibility, and the richness of social ties. Courtyards, galleries, avenues, and squares become tools of proximity, fostering daily encounters that build trust and a sense of place and belonging. At the heart of this dynamic, the ground floor plays a pivotal role, acting as a threshold between domestic intimacy and collective life: services and commerce activate hybrid spaces that blur the boundaries between private and public, function and interaction, economy and community. They host activities capable of generating both material and symbolic exchanges, fostering new urban centralities based on local networks. Local commerce is not only an economic infrastructure but also a social one: it provides services, ensures territorial presence, and meets emerging needs.

A significant case is the neighbourhood of Figino in Milan. During the development of the *Borgo Sostenibile* project in 2014, dialogue with the local committee revealed, on the one hand, a lack of services and, on the other, a strong connection between the sense of community and proximity-based economies. This is when FHS took the roots of *Servizi e Commercio On Demand* (*Services and Commerce On Demand*), a project to foster encounters between residents and local operators, activate relationships, and enhance existing resources.

Local commerce is a valuable asset: shopkeepers support vulnerable residents, address minor needs, and contribute to urban safety, just to mention some of them. At the same time, residents can become active participants by starting new businesses or support-

**Note 1.**  
Fondazione Housing Sociale (FHS) is a non-profit foundation set up in 2004 by Fondazione Cariplo, with the main mission to experiment with innovative solutions to structure, finance, realize and manage social and collaborative housing interventions. Today, FHS is active as a promoter of the social housing sector in Italy and as a technical and social advisor to the funds that invest in social housing in the country, providing assistance in the fields of urban planning, architecture, finance, community engagement and placemaking.

ing existing ones. FHS sustains these processes with entrepreneurial assistance, sustainability assessments, and network-building strategies.

The creation of socio-cultural hybrid centralities requires planned action: the presence of services is not left solely to the market but is supported by territorial alliances capable of integrating social, environmental, and economic sustainability. These spaces become intersections of local economies, socially impactful services, and community practices, generating collective value. A focus on proximity enhances quality of life, reduces dependence on mobility, and strengthens place identity. Rethinking commerce and services also implies reimagining public space and encouraging collective uses. The experience of FHS demonstrates how caring for hybrid spaces and strengthening local networks are essential tools for making the city today. It is not only about regenerating places, but about building relationships and shared opportunities.

## **13.2 Services and Commerce On-Demand: the approach of Fondazione Housing Sociale**

The *Services and Commerce On Demand* program was launched in 2015 with the aim of promoting a new model of economic and social activation within social housing contexts. It leverages hybrid, accessible, and community-oriented proximity activities.

Fieldwork in various neighbourhoods has shown that the mere availability of commercial spaces – even if well designed – is not sufficient to ensure the establishment of useful and sustainable services. For this reason, FHS has developed a multidisciplinary set of operational and methodological tools designed to support those wishing to launch entrepreneurial or service-based activities in these neighbourhoods. This is a flexible and innovative model, centred on the enhancement of local resources – first and foremost, the tenants of social housing projects themselves.

The program includes several actions: mapping community needs,

supporting the design and implementation of new activities, granting subsidized access to spaces, testing temporary innovative uses, and coordinating among local stakeholders. Central to the program is the *Competence Centre*, which provides tailored consulting, mentoring, and support, both during the start-up phase and throughout the life cycle of the initiatives.

The guiding principle is co-design: no activity is imposed from above but rather emerges through interactions among residents, associations, social enterprises, public institutions, and new entrepreneurs. The on demand approach allows for the alignment of offerings with the actual needs of the territory, by valuing existing resources and encouraging grassroots activation. Through continuous work, FHS facilitates the construction of collaborative networks, promotes the formation of social capital, and supports the hybridization of economic and social functions.

The effectiveness of this approach is reflected in the diversity of outcomes: neighbourhood shops becoming relational reference points; shared spaces hosting educational, cultural, and care services; entrepreneurial activities rooted in the local context and contributing to its sustainability. In this sense, commerce and services are not merely functional elements but catalysts of new forms of urbanity and participation.

The program represents an innovative laboratory for the construction of inclusive local centralities that integrate living, work, and relationships. It is a replicable model that demonstrates how, even in urban peripheries, it is possible to generate public value through integrated policies and collaborative processes.

FHS's work aligns with initiatives like Plateau Urbain (Paris, France), Stadsmakersfonds (Utrecht, The Netherlands), or La Scuola dei Quartieri (Milan, Italy), as it facilitates the match between underused spaces and community-rooted projects, supporting hybrid models that blend services, commerce, and social value to foster inclusive and resilient urban ecosystems. Unlike other initiatives more focused on temporary activation, FHS places greater emphasis on generating long-term social impact by helping activities take root and grow within their local context.

## 13.3 Hybrid Ecologies of Proximity in Social Housing Projects in Milan

**Note 2.**  
Distributed mostly in affordable housing settlements of the Fondo Immobiliare Lombardia 1, managed by REDO Sgr Società benefit, and Fondo Ca' Granda, managed by Investire Sgr, built between 2014 and 2020. In particular: 13 spaces activated in Borgo Sostenibile, 11 spaces activated in Cenni di Cambiamento, 8 spaces activated in 5SQUARE, 6 spaces activated in Urbana New Living, 6 spaces activated in Merezzate, 6 spaces activated in Bramante, 2 spaces activated in Cosenz.

To date, over fifty commercial and service spaces have been activated through the *Services and Commerce on Demand* program promoted by Fondazione Housing Sociale across seven different social housing contexts in Milan<sup>2</sup>. This has resulted in a composite urban ecosystem, where the distribution of spaces reflects a diversity of functions: human services, commercial activities, educational and cultural spaces, artisanal workshops. At the urban planning level, these interventions aim to balance multiple functions; at the operational level, they include a wide range of activities – from caregiving to food services, from sports to cultural offerings, from tailoring to creative workshops. The strong presence of hybrid activities is particularly noteworthy: spaces where production, consumption, social interaction, and participation coexist and mutually reinforce one another.

Within each individual development, overlapping similar activities is deliberately avoided to foster a strategic distribution of offerings and the emergence of genuine urban hubs. This functional mix is also ensured through a careful selection of operators, who come from the private sector, the non-profit realm, and social enterprises. The coexistence of different languages and management models makes it possible to engage diverse audiences and, crucially, to activate a wide range of resources that can be redistributed within the local context. This is particularly important for the sustainability of socio-cultural initiatives, which often rely on hybrid economies, reinforced by regular events, workshops, and community laboratories.

The selection process for these activities is based on qualitative criteria aimed at fostering the local embeddedness and generative capacity of the operators. These criteria include: a willingness to become a community point of reference, the ability to build synergies with other local stakeholders, and the presence of a diverse and sustainable offering over time. The ultimate objective is not just the economic efficiency, but the creation of new urban centralities – accessible, relational, and community-oriented. Hybridization is not merely a design choice, but a pragmatic response to ongoing trans-

formations. On one hand, the shrinking of public resources compels socio-educational and cultural services to experiment with alternative economic models, often incorporating commercial components.

On the other hand, many entrepreneurial activities are enriching their offerings with cultural, educational, and social services, thereby fostering user loyalty and enhancing their local impact. During the pandemic, the most resilient initiatives proved to be those capable of offering a hybrid mix of goods, services, and relationships.

More broadly, small-scale initiatives are increasingly moving beyond traditional dichotomies: commerce integrates relational and social dimensions, while the third sector embraces productive and commercial functions. New forms of urban mutualism are emerging, wherein even unusual activities find space through the creative reuse of equipment, furnishings, and shared spaces.

The urban context is rapidly evolving: consumer habits are changing, online services are increasingly prevalent, flexibility and mobility are growing, and new professions and family configurations are emerging. Within this shifting landscape, services are becoming more personalized, while activities are increasingly hybridized. The focus is shifting toward models capable of combining economic sustainability with social impact and cultural value.

An additional potential is activated where production and consumption are intertwined within the same space. Hybrid spaces are no longer only places of consumption or socialization; they function as true cultural devices, capable of expressing a distinctive local strength and fostering communities of meaning. These contexts often give rise to processes of social innovation: networks between operators emerge, new services are tested, and emerging needs are identified. Design approaches open up to informal practices of co-design and feedback collection, fostering closer relationships between customers and managers, users and providers. In some cases, collaborations with schools, universities, or local training institutions are also experimented with, generating new and shared understandings of the urban context.

Ultimately, the strength of the *Services and Commerce on Demand* model lies precisely in its capacity to generate – through a deliberately flexible design – hybrid, resilient, and generative urban



ecologies, able to respond dynamically to the challenges of contemporary proximity. A compelling example of this can be found in the case of *mare culturale urbano* space in Cenni di Cambiamento, Milan. Operating at the intersection of culture, social life, and community engagement, *mare* functions as both a cultural venue and an informal meeting point for a diverse public. It is a hybrid cultural space that blends artistic programming with everyday social use, where people are drawn either by specific events or simply by the knowledge that something is always happening there. Open to all age groups, it has a deeply relational and context-sensitive approach to programming, ensuring inclusivity and minimal disruption through measures like silent outdoor cinema and free access to performances.

### **13.4 Towards Neighbourhood Hubs: an integrated method to foster Proximity and Social Enterprise**

Fondazione Housing Sociale has developed an intervention method aimed at sustaining the emergence and consolidation of economic, social, and cultural activities over time within social housing contexts. This method aligns coherently with the process of community building, operating simultaneously on multiple levels: supporting the settlement phase, promoting local networks, and facilitating both economic and social sustainability.

A first area of action concerns territorial engagement. The emergence of new activities is encouraged through participatory workshops, informal events (such as urban games, guided tours, and co-created neighborhood festivals), and storytelling initiatives to give visibility to emerging realities. Often co-designed with local organizations, these actions play a key role in activating the social fabric: they generate trust, make new ventures visible, and build a sense of belonging and proximity.

In parallel, digital neighbourhood communication is carefully curated through integrated tools spanning institutional channels, social media, newsletters, and a neighbourhood app. The aim is to

foster direct connections between activities and residents, promote an integrated and dynamic service offer, and enhance the perceived value and reputation of local services.

The activity selection process represents a strategic moment. It is not merely a matter of allocating spaces, but of composing a complementary and synergistic mix of functions – avoiding overlaps while promoting hybridization across sectors. In this phase, FHS supports candidates in defining a social project and collaboratively drafting a social business model canvas, which serves as both a tool to assess the potential local impact of the initiative and a strategic guide for the manager's future development.

Support may also extend to the design of physical and communication spaces: layout and furnishings, visibility and accessibility, promotional materials, and targeted communication strategies. Tailored or collective capacity-building programs – often in workshop format – are proposed to enhance the entrepreneurial, relational, and organizational skills of selected actors.

Once the managers are identified, the method includes a phase of acceleration and launch, aimed at positioning the activities as new urban hubs. This involves supporting them in building synergies with other local entities, seizing local opportunities, and developing socio-cultural initiatives that facilitate their integration into the everyday life of the neighbourhood. Over time, efforts are made to activate project-based and commercial partnerships, including the mobilization of financial, professional, and relational resources. Public events and initiatives serve as tools to generate new alliances and to position the activities as active agents in urban transformation.

This experience has led to the definition of a local coordination platform, conceived as both community activator and connector. This platform – either as a physical hub or a network of territorial services – coordinates spaces, activities, and events, fostering connections among a wide range of actors: entrepreneurs, residents, public bodies, associations, and informal networks. It performs a dual function: as a proximity accelerator, it supports the entrepreneurial development of locally rooted initiatives committed to quality employment; as a placemaking engine, it contributes to shaping a shared neighbourhood identity based on local energies and narratives.

The resulting activities are manifold: artistic direction of events, fundraising, public relations, promotion and communication, training, hybrid concept design, integrated service delivery, management of business turnover, and coordination of volunteer resources.

This complex ecosystem finds in proximity its social and economic infrastructure – and in the community its main driver of urban regeneration.

### 13.5 Designing Proximity: an Urban Hackathon to rethink Neighbourhood Hubs

In 2018, Fondazione Housing Sociale launched an important initiative: the *Hackathon of Neighbourhood Services*, a co-design event held at Cariplo Factory in Milan, in collaboration with Fondazione Cariplo – Lacittàintorno, InvestiRE SGR, and the Municipality of Milan. The goal was to collectively rethink proximity-based services by introducing innovative formats to counteract the structural crisis affecting small businesses and local services.

The erosion of the proximity fabric directly affects the quality of public space and urban life. Local businesses play a role that goes far beyond their economic function: they act as social and cultural anchors, generate everyday interactions, enable informal surveillance, and help shape local identities. In this context, the Hackathon offered an opportunity to explore what new formats might fulfil these roles today and contribute to building new centralities in peripheral neighbourhoods.

The initiative aligned with Milan's broader urban regeneration policies, including municipal calls such as *Metter su bottega*, *Sguardi d'altrove*, and later *La scuola dei quartieri* and *Su la cler*, aimed at fostering the emergence of innovative entrepreneurial initiatives in marginal areas. During the Hackathon, participants were divided into six thematic groups, each tasked with exploring a potentially replicable and sustainable service format. Each group brought together a diverse mix of entrepreneurs, designers, researchers, local changemakers, and institutional representatives, united by a common interest in social and urban innovation.

The six formats explored were:

- Neighbourhood Coworking: small-scale shared workspaces rooted in the neighbourhood, designed to foster collaboration and networking among local professionals.
- Neighbourhood Fablab: small-scale workshops for both traditional and digital craftsmanship, open to professionals and residents alike – a space for making, exhibiting, and exchanging skills.
- Colcosian Market: a hybrid between a market and a public square, where people can shop, eat, and socialize. A sustainable and attractive alternative to supermarkets, designed to enliven peripheral areas.
- Neighbourhood Concierge: a multi-service reference point offering information, practical support, and a reassuring presence, contributing to the shared care of the neighbourhood.
- Teen's Room: dedicated spaces for adolescents and youth – often overlooked in urban policies – where they can explore autonomy, creativity, responsibility, and sociability in a safe and welcoming environment.
- Neighbourhood Food Centre: multifunctional spaces focused on food as a tool for community building, education, and inclusion – capable of attracting diverse audiences and fostering intergenerational and intercultural connections.

Each group developed a preliminary project concept that could be adapted and replicated in different urban contexts. The aim was not to produce ready-made solutions, but to activate co-design processes capable of generating shared visions, blending diverse expertise, and sparking new collaborations. The event produced not only concrete ideas but also a strong willingness to continue the work. This approach reflects a logic of participatory urban prototyping, in which the Foundation acts as an enabler of innovation, connecting diverse actors around shared challenges.

The Hackathon thus emerges not only as a one-off event, but as a method: a tool to collaboratively design local services, with attention to scalability and replicability, in pursuit of a more inclusive, dynamic, and relational city.

## 13.6 Beyond Housing: a driver for Regeneration and Social Enterprise

The experience of the *Servizi e Commercio On Demand* (*Services and Commerce On Demand*) project has demonstrated its relevance well beyond the boundaries of social housing. It has proven to be a valuable tool in broader urban regeneration initiatives, the transformation of intermodal hubs, and the revitalization of historic centers. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to engage a wide range of actors—not only established operators, but also third-sector organizations, associations, cooperatives, and nonprofits seeking operational spaces or wishing to provide services open to the broader community. Particularly promising is the involvement of actors already embedded in local neighbourhoods, who are highly motivated to develop network-based projects with tangible social impact. Considering the context of Milan, out of 50 activated spaces, 10 are managed by local residents, and many services are selected based on the existing presence of cooperatives already operating in those neighborhoods.

Resident-entrepreneurs also play a crucial role: they live and work in the same place, investing both their social capital and personal credibility. For them, the proximity between home and workspace represents a concrete opportunity to balance life and work, as well as to pursue professional growth. Social enterprises and innovative startups also represent a key target group, capable of combining civic impact with economic sustainability.

This experience has helped identify and structure new replicable formats that position collaborative living and urban regeneration as interconnected processes. In this vision, commerce is not only an economic activity, but also a social device – one that activates relational dynamics, reinforces place identity, and promotes new forms of active citizenship. A light yet essential infrastructure for imagining a more inclusive, cooperative, and resilient city. Within this framework, hybrid activities that blend local services and neighbourhood-based commerce emerge as strategic social infrastructures – capable of triggering virtuous cycles of urban innovation and cultural, social, and economic development for the benefit of the entire territory.

# Aknowledgement

As with any complex project, the quality of the reflections presented here is the result of shared thinking and collective work developed over time. I would like to express my gratitude to all those I have met along the way, and in particular to both current and former colleagues at the Foundation who have been most directly involved in the theme of services and commerce.

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PART 3

# Cultural and Participatory synergies in reclaiming Public Spaces



# 14. Reimagining Public Assets: Cultural Practices as Strategies of Space, Care, and Design

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of cultural practices, when integrated into participatory design methodologies and bolstered by institutional collaboration, in reconceptualizing public spaces as commons. It posits that cultural practices, rather than serving merely as symbolic enhancements, function as infrastructural forces that facilitate civic engagement, activate underutilized urban resources, and promote ecosystemic relationships. By engaging with recent theoretical advancements in design and political theory, this study positions care as both a civic and spatial practice and design as a medium for co-production. The Italian context is particularly conducive to this exploration, notably through innovative public-civic partnerships that enable the temporary repurposing of public heritage assets. Through a reflection on the *Museum of the Cities of the World* in Palermo, developed within the national research-action project OSMOSI, this paper explores how hybrid cultural spaces can reframe the public sphere as a shared infrastructure for civic engagement and cultural imagination.

## 14.1 Introduction

Public spaces have always meant more than just physical places in a city, historically functioning as a platform for civic interaction, political expression, and the construction of collective meaning. From the ancient agora to today's city squares, public spaces have always played a vital role in shaping social life. They host everyday encounters and unexpected events, helping people build relationships and a sense of belonging. places where relationships grow and where a sense of belonging quietly takes root. But in recent years, something has changed. The democratic role of public space has been slowly eroded. More and more, urban planning treats it as something to be controlled or optimized and managed for efficiency, safety, or economic return. This approach often results in exclusionary design strategies that limit access and reduce the potential for diverse social interactions, particularly for those without economic or political power (Low & Smith, 2006; Sennett, 2018).

In response to this trend, cultural practices have emerged as powerful tools to reclaim the public dimension of urban space and to reconfigure it as a common. These interventions are not simply decorative or episodic additions to the built environment; rather, they constitute symbolic, relational, and spatially generative acts. Community performances, storytelling workshops, participatory installations, urban walks, and ephemeral architecture activate space through shared experiences and embodied expressions. By anchoring these practices in lived experience, they remind us that cities are lived places, shaped by memory, experience, and imagination (Carpenter & Horvat, 2022; Doucet, 2021).

Henri Lefebvre's concept of the «right to the city» (1968) provides a theoretical foundation for understanding these processes. His formulation extends beyond mere access to urban resources, proposing instead a radical redefinition of spatial production as a democratic endeavour. Harvey (2012) elaborates on the idea by asserting that the right to the city involves a communal effort to reclaim urban life, thereby confronting the prevailing systems of capital accumulation and technocratic governance. Within this framework, cultural practices operate as mean of resistance, situated knowledge, and civic imagi-

nation. They make space through coexistence and the articulation of alternative urban narratives.

What's important is that these initiatives usually don't follow a plan imposed from above. They grow from relationships, from listening, from caring. They reflect a grassroots logic based on collaboration, iteration, and care. Participatory cultural practices unfold through attentive listening, relational engagement, and responsiveness to local stories and needs. This approach redefines space not as a fixed container but as a dynamic and negotiated process. As academics like Fraser (1990) and Mouffe (2000) suggest, democracy doesn't mean avoiding conflict, it means dealing with it constructively. And public space can be a powerful arena for exactly that kind of engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a revealing lens, exposing structural inequalities and underscoring the importance of public space as a site of care and social support. In those months of social fragmentation, cultural and participatory practices, from small-scale artistic gestures to broader community-led activations, emerged as crucial forms of civic imagination and support. These experiences not only addressed immediate needs but also offered prototypes of a more relational, adaptive, and inclusive use of shared spaces (Honey-Rosés *et al.*, 2020).

In this context, Design, especially when focused on social innovation, has a key role here. As the field has shifted from object-making to systems-thinking and relational processes (Björgvinsson *et al.*, 2012; Manzini, 2015), it has become a tool for imagining and testing different futures. Co-design methods, speculative tools, and community-based strategies create opportunities for people to come together and make sense of their environment in new ways. Nonetheless, the transformative power of cultural practices is inherently tied to their integration. Isolated, short-lived events might capture attention or provide aesthetic pleasure, but they lack the depth and continuity necessary for enduring change. In contrast, cultural commoning is rooted in long-term relationships and adaptive processes, requiring temporal depth, contextual knowledge, and a readiness to engage with complexity and conflict. These attributes are often missing from standardized top-down cultural programming or place-making policies that prioritize visibility over substance. The commons

framework offers a way to articulate this alternative model. Instead of viewing public space as a resource to be consumed or regulated, the commons approach highlights collective governance, shared responsibility, and ongoing care (Bollier & Helfrich, 2012).

Commoning involves activities that sustain and rejuvenate community life, such as negotiation, maintenance, social engagement, and careful management. Cultural interventions enhance this system by revitalizing shared symbols, facilitating interactions, and strengthening relational structures. In this scenario, Massimo De Angelis (2017) discusses the concept of 'social cooperation beyond the market' as a form of value creation that emphasizes reciprocity, care, and mutual acknowledgment. Cultural practices, therefore, do more than just oppose neoliberal urbanism; they offer alternatives. They establish emotional economies and symbolic frameworks that reimagine space as a shared, lived, and nurtured commons. These practices serve as a reminder that cities are not merely physical structures but are collective relations continuously reshaped through daily actions and common goals.

## 14.2 Urban Care as a Cultural Practice

In recent years, the idea of care has gained renewed attention across fields like design, political theory and urban studies. Once thought of mainly as a private matter, something tied to the domestic sphere or understood as a personal virtue, care is now increasingly recognized as a political and spatial practice. It plays a role in shaping how societies distribute attention, responsibility, and resources. Tronto (1993; 2013) defines care as a series of interconnected activities: recognizing needs, taking responsibility, responding competently, and ensuring responsiveness. These are not merely individual acts of kindness; they are embedded in institutional arrangements and material infrastructures that shape our capacity to live together. Reframing care in this way, as a collective, civic undertaking, challenges many of the assumptions behind contemporary urban development and design.

Too often, the dominant paradigms in planning and design empha-

size speed, efficiency, and measurable outcomes, marginalising the slower, process-oriented, and relational dimensions that define caring practices. As Mattern (2021) argues, cities rely not only on technological systems and formal institutions but also on 'infrastructures of care' such as libraries, community centers, parks, informal support networks, and cultural initiatives that sustain the social and emotional life of communities. These are often overlooked or underfunded, while they play a crucial role in sustaining the emotional and social fabric of urban life. This perspective aligns with a growing body of research emphasising the strategic role of culture in activating new imaginaries for urban development, particularly in underutilised or marginal areas. Pier Luigi Sacco has argued that innovation, particularly when rooted in culture, is key to triggering regenerative processes with macro-level impacts that go well beyond the direct outputs of the cultural and creative sectors. When cultural participation is oriented toward social innovation, it becomes a powerful driver of urban change. The reactivation of disused heritage through cultural practice, for instance, can be the first step in transforming entire neighborhoods. These often-overlooked spaces hold the potential to reverse cycles of decline, if communities are given the opportunity to engage, imagine, and shape them. In doing so, people deepen their connection to place, weaving cultural expression into everyday life and future visions. From this vantage point, such places need to be re-read with care, allowing them to re-enter the urban narrative through intentional, context-sensitive strategies (La Scala, 2017).

Design, particularly when practiced through participatory or co-design approaches, can make a meaningful contribution to this kind of infrastructure. Moving beyond object-making, contemporary design operates as a form of mediation, scaffolding conversations, facilitating encounters, and helping to imagine shared futures. Thus, it becomes a tool for enabling collective agency, situated decision-making, and long-term stewardship. In this light, designers become less like problem-solvers and more like facilitators helping communities surface needs, articulate values, and collectively shape their spaces.

The potential of design to foster care-based urban transformation becomes especially visible in places where public space is fragmented, contested, or simply forgotten. Thus, design practices such as

prototyping, speculative mapping, and participatory scenario building provide ways to reclaim neglected areas, to make needs visible, and to co-create interventions with communities. Rather than offering pre-defined solutions, these tools support adaptive and iterative processes that take into account local capacities and limitations.

Culture is deeply intertwined with this approach. Cultural practices often work as reparative gestures, addressing the wounds of social fragmentation and historical erasure. They offer symbolic and emotional means of recognising one another, anchoring communities to place, and sparking the collective imagination. As Satta (2023) suggests, these practices are not just about representing identity, they create space for dialogue. In a world increasingly marked by what Han (2021) calls a 'crisis of attention', where hyper-productivity and self-exploitation erode relationships, cultural and design practices centered on care introduce different values: presence over acceleration, empathy over competition, continuity over disruption. They nurture environments of hospitality, recognition, and shared responsibility, core elements of democratic life.

Care, however, cannot rest solely on grassroots initiatives; it also requires institutional involvement. Providing infrastructures of care depends on long-term commitments, public investment, and supportive regulatory frameworks. When institutions recognise these practices – through access to space, funding, training, or aligned policies – they help embed care into the everyday governance of cities. In this way, care becomes not just a practice, but a principle of urban policy and planning.

Within this broader perspective, design emerges as a practice of civic care: attentive to lived experience, grounded in social relations, and open to transformation. It resists the abstraction of top-down approaches and instead anchors itself in proximity and mutual learning. Urban regeneration, from this point of view, is not a linear path toward growth but an ongoing process of repair and shared authorship (Mattern, 2021; Imrie & Kullmann, 2017). Care-oriented design and cultural practices are therefore not only reactive responses in moments of crisis; they also act as prefigurative practices that suggest new ways of inhabiting the city. By building relational infrastructures that sustain connection, dialogue, and participation, they shift the understanding



of the city – from a mere physical setting to a shared life that must be cultivated and continually reimagined in common.

This transformative potential becomes even more tangible in emerging hybrid cultural spaces, which lie at the crossroads of design, participation, and public policy. The following reflections emerge from both theoretical inquiry and field-based observation, developed through active participation in design processes and cultural activation in Palermo. These experiences have provided insights into the everyday challenges and potentials of hybrid spaces as infrastructures of care.

### **14.3 Hybrid Cultural Spaces as Laboratories of Urban Commons: a case-study in Palermo**

The Italian context provides fertile ground for the emergence of hybrid cultural spaces, particularly due to the abundance of state-owned properties that remain vacant or underutilised. Hybrid cultural spaces are characterised by the intersection of functions, actors, and temporalities, operating at the boundary between formal institutions and informal practices, between permanence and experimentation. They foster new modes of spatial production by enabling cultural, social, and civic uses to coexist and interact within repurposed environments.

Estimates suggest that nearly 10% of the country's public real estate assets are disused, many of which are centrally located and of significant historical or symbolic value. While traditionally managed through bureaucratic or market-driven procedures, recent years have seen a shift toward more flexible and experimental models of temporary reuse. Among the key institutional actors fostering this transformation is the 'Agenzia del Demanio', Italy's State Property Agency, which has launched initiatives that enable public buildings to be temporarily repurposed for cultural, and social projects. This new institutional openness has facilitated concrete forms of collaboration between public bodies and cultural actors, repositioning public

assets as shared platforms for collective regeneration and cultural experimentation (Agenzia del Demanio 2023).

A recent example of this dynamic is the *Museum of World Cities*, a pilot project within the national research-action program OSMOSI. Located in the historic center of Palermo, the museum has just been opened inside the former Convento dei Crociferi, a heritage site temporarily granted for five years to the cultural organization Farm Cultural Park by the Agenzia del Demanio.

The collaboration between these two actors, a national public agency and an independent cultural initiative rooted in civic engagement, demonstrates how cross-sector partnerships can activate underused public spaces and support experimental cultural infrastructures. This is not a museum in the traditional sense. The *Museum of World Cities* is envisioned as a hybrid cultural platform dedicated to exploring the futures of cities. Rather than centering its activity on collections or static exhibitions, it is structured as a space built through listening, co-creation, and open-ended processes. Its identity and programming have taken shape through participatory practices involving local residents, designers, researchers, and cultural mediators. The early phases of the project included mapping stakeholders, engaging the community to surface needs and aspirations, and identifying local cultural references. These activities led to a range of co-design workshops: from intergenerational storytelling and the-



Figure 1.  
Collecting insights during  
one of the co-design  
workshops. Photo of  
Alessio Consoli.

matic discussions to collaborative sessions imagining the museum's potential roles. Participants came from across the social spectrum – local inhabitants, university students, cultural professionals, experts, and city administrators – creating a genuinely diverse constellation of voices. These practices served as a laboratory for experimenting with participatory methodologies, fostering trust among stakeholders and exploring shared modes of cultural and spatial imagination, while simultaneously laying the foundations for a governance model capable of remaining open and adaptive to the evolving needs of the communities.

In particular, the *Museum of World Cities* aims to foster relational infrastructure. Through exhibitions, public events, co-design practices, and temporary installations, it opens up a space where different forms of knowledge, memory, and imagination can meet. Themes like the right to the city, migration, ecological transition, and cultural heritage are not just discussed, they are spatially explored and collectively processed. In this way, the museum becomes both a seedbed and an amplifier for cultural practices that center care and civic engagement. Design methodologies, particularly those rooted in co-design and social innovation – play a critical role in scaffolding these processes. They support inclusive forms of spatial narration and enable the museum to remain open, porous, and responsive to its urban context.

This case exemplifies how hybrid cultural spaces can function as community laboratories and how the synergy between public institutions and civic-cultural organizations can generate not only physical reuse of public heritage, but also new governance models based on trust, co-responsibility and shared authorship, and sustained by a participatory co-design methodology, made possible through a methodological co-design approach that fosters dialogue and adaptive governance.

## 14.4 Towards a Culture-Led Vision of Common Futures

This article has explored how cultural practices, when embedded in participatory design methodologies and supported by institutional

collaboration, can reframe public space as a dynamic common. Far from being symbolic add-ons, these practices function as infrastructural forces: they activate relational ecologies, foster civic engagement, and reclaim underused public assets as spaces of shared imagination and co-creation (Crobe 2023; Manzini, 2015).

The case of the *Museum of the Cities of the World* in Palermo illustrates how temporary reuse, cultural activation, and design-based co-production could intersect to create inclusive and adaptive cultural infrastructures. The collaboration between Farm Cultural Park and the Italian State Property Agency demonstrates how public institutions, when open to new forms of flexibility and shared governance, can act as enablers of civic innovation. These experiments point to the emergence of new public-civic alliances that challenge conventional modes of value production, institutional engagement and urban regeneration.

Despite these efforts, many initiatives are still sustained by uncertain funding, informal labor, and short-lived agreements, which impede their continuity and long-term effectiveness. They frequently rely on the dedication of a small group of individuals as *local-heroes*, which raises concerns about their sustainability and dependence on institutions. These issues point to larger governance challenges: How can temporary uses be transformed into enduring stewardship models? What policies can guarantee long-term access to communal spaces? How can institutions be encouraged to recognize and support approaches to regeneration that are centered on care and culture? One potential solution is to develop legal and policy instruments, such as co-governance frameworks and public funding initiatives, that institutionalize the principles of participation, care, and cultural co-production. Equally important is the integration of these practices into formal urban planning as essential components of a sustainable and inclusive urban vision.

This approach is part of wider international currents in cultural placemaking. For instance, in London, the *Meanwhile Space* initiative shows how the temporary refunctioning of vacant buildings can bring communities together, encourage local enterprise, and widen the range of cultural and social activities available. Experiences like this point to a common thread: hybrid cultural spaces are not only symbol-



**Figure 2.**  
Opening of the Museum  
of World Cities. Photo of  
Alessio Consoli.

ic arenas but also practical tools for reimagining urban life. And when such short-term uses are given strategic support, they can evolve into lasting forms of social and spatial value.

In conclusion, cultural practices offer more than symbolic enrichment; they provide concrete ways to care for shared spaces, negotiate urban futures, and cultivate democratic life. When embedded in co-design process and supported by public institutions, they generate new urban grammars grounded in reciprocity, proximity, collective authorship. Beyond the Palermo case, a set of general principles can be drawn that may guide similar projects in other contexts. Temporary concessions of public spaces, when accompanied by institutional openness, offer opportunities to test new forms of co-governance and cultural activation. Participatory design, sustained through dialogue with a wide range of community voices, helps ensure that spaces reflect multiple identities and needs. Equally important are frameworks of shared planning, in which institutions, cultural actors, and citizens shape events and uses together, fostering both belong-

ing and long-term commitment. When supported by policy tools that recognise culture as an infrastructure of care, these strategies can enable temporary arrangements to evolve into durable civic resources. Unlocking this potential requires not only innovative methods but also a renewed vision of the city, as an ecosystem of relationships where culture is treated as a public good to be sustained, protected, reimagined.

## Acknowledgement

This research has been conducted within the ongoing framework of the *OSMOSI – Observation and Study of Design and Development Models for Hybrid Spaces, places of urban experimentation and social inclusion through creative and cultural activities* PRIN project funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU.

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# 15. Co-designing Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces: methods and transformative practices

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## ABSTRACT

Culture-based urban regeneration can be interpreted as a vector of transformation capable of generating value not only in terms of physical redevelopment of spaces, but also in terms of social cohesion and sustainable development. This contribution highlights how Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces (SCHS) can be co-designed as enablers of new forms of publicness, inclusion, territorial transformation, and community resilience. Situated at the intersection of institutional policies and grassroots initiatives, these spaces serve as experimental platforms where social innovation, cultural production, and civic engagement converge. Within this framework, the OSMOSI research project investigates SCHS as proximity-based urban devices and infrastructures for territorial regeneration. This contribution provides an overview of the participatory strategies underpinning the project, situating them within a broader theoretical and operational context. Through the case of *Open Casello*, it highlights how participatory strategies, interdisciplinary academic frameworks, and SCHS can activate co-designed services, collaborative governance, and plural community-driven transformations.

## 15.1 Introduction

Culture-based urban regeneration, as a strategy for re-functionalisation, is currently a developing phenomena marked by growing dispersion and institutionalisation. The proliferation of various experiences across Italy underscores that this process is progressively assuming the attributes of a systematic social occurrence. Cityscapes that facilitate social interactions and intricate human experiences shape the social spatialisation of the environment (Shields, 1991). This spatialisation critically enhances the city's potential to develop new kinds of engagement.

Consequently, the density and proximity of urban residents facilitate a mutual interchange of values and behaviours among the various social elements distinctly observable in urban areas. The growing intersection between the cultural and social dimensions contributes to redefining the traditional boundaries of both spheres, giving rise to *hybrid practices* (Ostanel, 2023) that, through the connection between spaces, culture and citizenship, converge towards common goals of urban regeneration in a generative and sustainable development perspective (García *et al.*, 2015). As Poot (*et al.*, 2015) point out, many of these environments, today de-functionalised, can be reconfigured as active nodes in the contemporary urban network. In this scenario, the geography of culture is enriched with new configurations, capable of fostering the strengthening of communities and experimenting with innovation on multiple levels: social, cultural, management and welfare (Trapanese & Mariotti, 2022).

In this context, culture-based urban regeneration can be interpreted as a vector of transformation (Satta, 2023) capable of generating value not only in terms of physical redevelopment of spaces, but also in terms of social cohesion and sustainable development (Krasilnikova & Klimov, 2020). Inserted in this framework is the figure of the Hybrid Spaces. In detail, Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces (SCHS) represent points of intersection between evolving social dynamics and cultural practices, configuring themselves as urban cultural institutions that not only respond to the needs of local communities, but are also shaped by urban regeneration processes and ethical and political transformations of culture (Lo Stato dei Luoghi *et al.*,

2024). Studies indicate that SCHS, which integrate physical, social, and digital components, might enhance youth involvement and foster a sense of belonging in urban settings. These hybrid habitats have the potential to transform recreational activities and social settings for youngest, foster cultural continuity and civic participation among marginalised groups, hence enhancing resilience and community cohesion (Liebenberg *et al.*, 2019). To proficiently construct these hybrid environments, it is essential to comprehend the interaction among social dynamics, physical locations, and digital technologies (Paay *et al.*, 2007). By including these components, co-created Hybrid Spaces can offer significant opportunity for youth to engage with their communities, cultivating a sense of belonging and involvement in urban settlements.

A primary characteristic of these SCHS is precisely their plurality. These *hábitats* are defined by its integration of multiple functions, thus attracting a heterogeneous public and facilitating interactions between individuals who, in other contexts, would be unlikely to meet (BASE, 2023). In recent decades, the design of these plural spaces has become an important *modus operandi* in the contemporary cities (Avermaete *et al.*, 2006).

Drawing on this perspective, Moulaert *et al.* (2005) reconstructed alternative models of local development from neighbourhood projects that interpret social innovation in a plural perspective, such as integrated neighbourhood actions, voluntary associations, worker cooperatives and housing associations.

Furthermore, Tricarico (*et al.*, 2022) emphasise the centrality of the territorial dimension of social innovation as a lever to transform spatial and social relations in response to collective needs. It is precisely from these premises that the OSMOSI research is developed, whose objective is to explore the role of SCHS as urban regeneration devices and social infrastructures of territorial proximity.

This contribution aims to offer an overall framework of the project from the participative strategy approach, placing it within a broader theoretical and operational framework, and questioning its transformative potential on an urban, social and cultural scale.

## 15.2 From Participation to Transformation: SCHS as catalysts for collaborative practices

«Cities have been assuming the form of multifaceted spaces of collaboration and creativity where citizens operate in proximity or remotely to improve the urban quality of life» (Volpi & Opromolla, 2017). As Granata (2021) argues, the role of the *placemaker* is becoming increasingly important in the redefinition of plural urban spaces according to a horizontal, inclusive and participatory model; an approach that contrasts with the traditional model, characterised by vertical governance and urban regulation that has limited the protagonism of local communities. As already stated, a central aspect of social innovation processes applied to urban regeneration is the reactivation and experimentation of SCHS, strategic places for experimenting collaborative practices and building territorial networks. Therefore, urban regeneration cannot be understood solely as a technical intervention, but should be recognised as a complex social process. Manzini (2015) characterises design for social innovation as a collection of techniques that can initiate, facilitate, and guide transformation towards more sustainable urban paradigms. Thus, territorial social innovation relies on the capacity to forge various coalitions and partnerships, integrating external resources and amplifying local particularities. Design thinking and design methods are used in successful ways to guide collaborative processes (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010) and it is possible to imagine a more dedicated application of these principles and instruments to support the continual emergence of hybrid spaces of interaction within the city. In this sense, every occasion of connection and social exchange among different stakeholders may be considered as a trigger for a process of urban development enhancing the life of the city dwellers. Design could give shape and consistence to these different occasions by using the SCHS as catalysts for the creation of sustainable urban environments. To fulfil this objective there are not fixed solutions, but a multitude of approaches to frame and test, in respect of the adaptive nature of the whole plural hybrid system of «connectedness» (Price, 2013; Siemens, 2006).

Urban Living Labs, Community Hubs, Policy Labs, City Service Hubs, Public Innovation Places, as open innovation spaces and context-driven environments, are some of the useful models able to integrate different levels of government and practices. These hybrid environments can become bridges between urban institutional mechanisms and micro-scale actions, aiming to be drivers of social and spatial innovation. They use circular, incremental and adaptive processes, shifting from projects to processes (Ostanel, 2017) where Design for social innovation through participatory strategies becomes one of the drivers of change. SCHS are characterised by a predominantly cultural nature oriented towards interpreting the contemporary through artistic, social, educational and participatory practices. They open up to a plurality of audiences, stimulate hybridisation between disciplines and subjects, and promote dialogue between artists and communities. Co-creation is not only an operational mode, but becomes a lever for social and civic innovation. In this sense, these spaces activate processes of inclusion, territorial cohesion and democratic participation, representing one of the most significant places to imagine and build a new culture of proximity (Massari, 2019).

### **15.2.1 The case of Open Casello**

The OSMOSI research-action project avails itself of the support of two Italian reference realities in the field of SCHS: BASE Milano in Milan (Lombardy), an experiment in the contamination of art, business, technology and social innovation, located in the former Ansaldo complex and a reference point for social innovation and public-private collaboration; and Farm Cultural Park in Favara (Sicily), an independent initiative that has transformed the city's historic centre into a pole of urban and cultural regeneration, promoting active participation and sustainable development. In continuity with the experiences developed by these SCHS, two pilot projects were activated as local spin-offs: Open Casello in Milan and the Museo delle Città del Mondo in Palermo. Both represent experimental contexts in which to test innovative models of activation and management of hybrid spaces, in dialogue with local communities and public institutions. Focusing on the case of Open Casello, inaugurated in 2024, it is a public space in a former tollhouse in the centre of Milan, which acts as a space of

opportunity and connection, enhancing city networks and promoting youth activation, as a laboratory for experimenting urban strategies. The project is promoted by the Municipality of Milan with Department for Youth Policies, with the support of BASE Milano, Codici and Avanzi, realities and youth groups associations already involved in Milan's social transformation. It is a space of opportunity for youth communities, a space of policy in the field of youth politics and above all a space to be co-inhabited by young facilitators and activators of change in the city. Classified as an action research project due to its interdisciplinary and participatory nature, as it aims to develop practical knowledge while pursuing valuable human goals (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The aim is to integrate action and reflection, theory and practice, through a collaborative and iterative process that replaces the traditional relationship between researcher and research object with a more participatory dynamic (Murray *et al.*, 2010). To be more specific, the purpose of this contribution is to bring attention to the participatory and interdisciplinary aspects of the OSMOSI project, with a specific focus on the *Open Casello* pilot project. One of the central phases of the project process is highlighted – applied and adapted in the different contexts of intervention – which consists of the systematisation of six co-designed sessions with an interdisciplinary char-



Figure 1.  
Open Casello.  
Photo courtesy of  
Comune di Milano.

acter, realised in synergy with the local context and with the active involvement of a plurality of «situated-stakeholders» (Fassi & Vergani, 2022). These co-designed activities focus on the analysis and shared design of spaces and services, promoting synergy between plural actors, including citizens, local authorities, and organisations in the proximity territory.

The participatory approach makes it possible to collect different contributions, useful for the definition of innovative experimentations and the replicability/adaptability of the model in other contexts. The involvement of plural stakeholders is crucial to build an operational framework that responds to territorial specificities, favouring the sustainability and effectiveness of project actions. In this sense, co-production hybridisation processes has increasingly been recognised as a process that promotes citizen empowerment and direct involvement in the design and delivery of public services (Brudney & England, 1983; Ostrom, 1996; Kleinhans, 2017; Jungsberg *et al.*, 2020). Rather than focusing solely on service efficiency, participatory strategies in SCHS aim to place users and communities at the centre of decision-making (Bovaird, 2007), fostering a redistribution of power among stakeholders through inherently also political processes (Mitlin, 2008). In this light, Open Casello may be understood as a plural and agonistic infrastructure (Mäntysalo *et al.*, 2011), enabling inclusive and contested forms of participation. It opens up deliberative spaces where diverse identities, values, and power relations can be negotiated on equal terms (Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2011; Albrechts, 2013; Balducci, 2008; Forester, 2009). In this direction, OSMOSI project proposes innovative solutions for the regeneration and enhancement of SCHS. Through a participatory and experimental approaches, the project not only develops operational tools and replicable strategies, but also addresses the need to integrate culture, environment and community in an urban regeneration process. Regenerating these plural environments means not only combating urban decay, but also activating social interaction and cultural exchange, reinforcing the idea that «culture heals» (Satta, 2023). Integrating environmental, social and economic dimensions in the design of SCHS therefore means pursuing shared goals: protecting and transforming cityscapes quality and strengthening the sense of community. Six multidisciplinary co-designed

activities were carried out at the Open Casello spaces, including many stakeholders and an interdisciplinary co-construction of the resources and tools utilised by the departments comprising the OSMOSI research team:

*Workshop 01: Community*

The *Community*<sup>1</sup> workshop aimed to explore the context surrounding Open Casello through active listening and the systematization of stakeholders' needs. Using a participatory approach, participants identified key opportunities and risks emerging from the relationship between the infrastructure and the local environment. The workshop also involved mapping proximity relations – geographical and social – between Open Casello and its territory, with the goal of co-defining short- and long-term development scenarios rooted in sustainability and shared values. Participants used boundary objects, such as brainstorming cards, to individually and collectively surface needs (e.g., spaces for intergenerational dialogue, inclusion of marginalized youth, cultural expression), opportunities (e.g., positioning the space as a local hub, fostering participatory programming), and risks (e.g., self-referential dynamics, dependency on political support, exclusion of unstructured youth). The *Mappa della Prossimità* (Proximity Map) activity visualised relationships among local actors and institutions across *iperlocal*

**Note 1.**  
**Departments involved:**  
**Department of**  
**Architecture – University**  
**of Palermo; Polimi DESIS**  
**Lab at Design Department**  
**– Politecnico di Milano.**



**Figure 2.**  
Workshop activities at Open Casello. Photos by author.



*scale* (5 minutes by walk from Open Casello), *territorial scale* ( $\geq 30$  minutes) and hybrid (space) dimensions; revealing a dense network of universities, cultural centers, and civic organizations. The session concluded with the creation of scenarios, imagining the future of *Open Casello* through 10 distinct narrative visions featuring evocative metaphors such as the *Urban Jungle*, *Free-Style Space*, and *White Cube of Possibilities*.

#### *Workshop 02: Spaces and Services*

**Note 2.**  
Department involved:  
Polimi DESIS Lab at  
Design Department –  
Politecnico di Milano.

The *Spaces and Services* workshop<sup>2</sup> focused on defining activities and services to be integrated both within the Open Casello pilot projects physical space and across the broader territorial network. Building on the scenarios developed during the *Community* workshop, participants created a structured offering map board, distinguishing between primary offerings (e.g., library of things, youth support desks, co-curated cultural programming) and secondary offerings (e.g., exhibitions, urban exploratory walks, neighborhood feasts). Proposals ranged from tangible services (e.g., creative workshops using AI-generated images, support desks for adulting) to innovative social mechanisms (e.g., participatory governance models, community concierge services). The spatial configuration (interior and outdoor spaces) session linked these ideas to practical spatial needs such as flexible furnishings, stage areas, signage systems, and green spaces, while also mapping temporal cycles of use and functional zones. The result is a clear and shared representation of Open Casello's potential as a space capable of serving diverse publics, through a layered service ecosystem distributed across time and space, aligned with community values.

#### *Workshop 03: Space Performances*

**Note 3.**  
Department involved:  
Polimi DESIS Lab at  
Design Department;  
Material Balance  
Research Lab at  
Department of  
Architecture, Built  
Environment and  
Construction Engineering  
– Politecnico di Milano.

The *Space Performances* workshop<sup>3</sup> focused on defining key parameters for assessing indoor spatial comfort from thermal, visual, and acoustic perspectives. Participants collaboratively developed moodboards to explore desired atmospheres and identify design qualities aligned with the project's values. The session also involved the selection of appropriate materials and technologies to support flexible, sustainable furnishing solutions. Configurations were

discussed in relation to how spaces can adapt to diverse activities and user needs, ensuring comfort while preserving the spatial identity of Open Casello. The result is a foundational framework for performance-driven spatial design, combining environmental well-being with functional versatility.

#### *Workshop 04: Ecosystem*

The *Ecosystem* workshop<sup>4</sup> focused on validating and refining the Community Map in relation to the integrated system of services, spaces, and products co-designed throughout the project. Participants worked on structuring the network of stakeholders—both current and potential—mapping their roles, degrees of involvement, and collaborative capacity in relation to future scenarios.

The session also explored the concept of a scalable and replicable model to activate or strengthen territorial relational networks, aiming to generate long-term cultural and social impact. This model seeks to position Open Casello as a strategic infrastructure within a broader ecosystem of local innovation and community-led development.

#### *Workshop 05: Management Strategy*

The *Management Strategy* workshop<sup>5</sup> focused on validating the social business model canvas, with particular attention to the different value propositions emerging from the project. Participants analysed the strategic dimensions necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability and governance of Open Casello. A key output was the identification of roles and competencies required within the future management board, outlining a framework for distributed responsibility and effective leadership.

This foundation supports the development of a governance model aligned with the project's participatory and community-driven vision.

#### *Workshop 06: Impact*

The *Impact* workshop<sup>6</sup> focused on defining a monitoring and evaluation framework starting from the two pilot projects, aimed at identifying key indicators related to social and economic impact. Participants collaboratively explored and shared a multidimensional co-understanding of impact for Open Casello, reflecting on cultural,

**Note 4.**  
**Department involved:**  
**Polimi DESIS Lab at**  
**Department of Design –**  
**Politecnico di Milano.**

**Note 5.**  
**Department involved:**  
**Department of**  
**Management Engineering**  
**– Politecnico di Milano.**

**Note 6.**  
**Departments involved:**  
**Polimi DESIS Lab**  
**at Department of**  
**Design; Department of**  
**Management Engineering**  
**– Politecnico di Milano.**



**Figure 3.**  
Workshop "management  
strategy" at Open  
Casello. Photo by author.

social, relational, and institutional-administrative dimensions. The session also involved the identification of key concepts and keywords to define impact in this specific context, laying the groundwork for the creation of an hybrid *Open Casello Manifesto*. This manifesto articulates the values and long-term vision of *Open Casello* as an infrastructure for community transformation. By the end of the project (late 2025), a dissemination phase will be launched to share outcomes and initiate a hybrid experimental modeling process. This phase aims to support a systemic rethinking of urban and territorial dynamics, recognizing the evolving role of Public Administrations in processes of change.

## 15.3 Plural Shared Futures

The research aims to produce concrete and transferable results capable of guiding urban policies and supporting institutions and local actors in regeneration processes. Participation continues to represent one of the most critical dimensions of contemporary design, closely connected to themes such as sustainability, spatial justice, urban regeneration, and the responsible consumption of land. These challenges require a critical revision of how society is imagined and how its spatial implications are configured. The most effective experi-

ences of reactivating underused public spaces often rely on collaboration with local actors who are capable of interpreting the needs and potential of the area (Lanzoni, 2015). These initiatives emerge as local practices and experimental processes initiated by private citizens through bottom-up approaches. In such processes, Manzini (2015) identifies a more complex dynamic, where «initiatives taken directly by the people involved (*bottom-up interaction*) are always supported by exchanges of information with similar organizations (*peer-to-peer interaction*) and by different forms of intervention from institutions, civic organizations, or companies (*top-down interaction*)».

The outcomes of the OSMOSI research materialise into concrete and transferable tools and frameworks, designed to support local institutions and territorial stakeholders in implementing effective urban regeneration strategies towards experimentation of SCHS.

These highlight:

- The research defines a framework that can be used by Public Administrations and other stakeholders to develop strategies aimed at identifying innovative solutions. This framework takes the form of guidelines, manuals, or toolkits – tools specifically designed to ensure the replicability and scalability of the process. Each of these outputs, although differing in format, includes enabling strategies and solutions to create the necessary conditions for reproducing similar projects in different contexts. The framework is made available to local institutions and stakeholders engaged in territorial initiatives, with particular attention given to methodological reflection and research design. This allows for the modeling of procedures and ensures their replicability in other contexts and service areas.
- The role of Public Administration is defined within this broader process of social, spatial, and service transformation. These urban experiments interact with institutions, influencing and reshaping them, while contributing to the creation of new forms of governance. Institutional value is generated through social enterprises, supporting the principle of subsidiarity at different institutional levels, shaping territorial policies, establishing public-private partnerships, and aligning with shared

visions and objectives (Zamagni *et al.*, 2015). The forms of institutional support required for the project are explored, ranging from the involvement of local associations to the establishment of public-private partnerships and administrative support – elements that are fundamental to ensure the durability of the intervention. Crucially, Open Casello serves as a connective hub, bridging social, cultural, and institutional networks. It functions as a relational infrastructure that links individuals, social groups, and institutions; from the immediate local area to the broader extra-urban contexts (Fassi & Borin, 2024). By activating and making visible latent relationships, Open Casello weaves together youth initiatives, cultural operators, schools, universities, institutions, and active citizens. This connective capacity makes the space fertile and generative, producing ripple effects throughout the territory. Looking forward, Open Casello embodies an adaptive and replicable model based on dynamic relationships and hybrid governance. Its strength lies not in standardized offerings but in its ability to activate expansive ecosystems through agile and inclusive practices that continuously respond to social, cultural, and urban transformations. As an experimental SCHS, in terms of civiness, sociality and cultural, can be adapted to different contexts, offering a flexible framework for sustainable community development.

To conclude, the OSMOSI project, exemplified by Open Casello, demonstrates how participatory, interdisciplinary, and SCHS can drive urban regeneration by fostering active community engagement, co-designed services, and collaborative governance. Open Casello functions not only as a youth-oriented cultural hub but also as a relational infrastructure connecting diverse local actors and institutions, enabling innovative models of activation and sustainability. Through iterative workshops and the co-creation of adaptable frameworks, the project offers replicable strategies that support institutions and communities in transforming public spaces into inclusive, vibrant ecosystems. As Open Casello evolves as an adaptive model for sustainable urban regeneration, how can such experimental spaces balance their local specificity and plural co-created identities within SCHS, while

ensuring scalability and long-term impact across both urban and extra-urban contexts?

## Aknowledgement

Special thanks go to all those who contributed to and actively participated in the PRIN project *OSMOSI – Observation and Study of Design and Development Models for Hybrid Spaces, places of urban experimentation and social inclusion through creative and cultural activities*, funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU; and its related co-design activities: Martina Balestrieri, Marco Biferale, Domiziana Caliri, Maya Libera Castellini, Natalia De Martin, Riccardo Danese, Sara Giorgia D'Alessi, Matilda D'Urzo, Andrea Falcini, Giulia Ficarazzo, Anna Gargantini, Alessia Grazzini, Greta Guerrini, Chiara Maria Lugli, Cecilia Mezzano, Irene Pantani, Eleonora Rossi, Valentina Ronzo, Cecilia Sgubbi, Luana Stramaglia, Angelo Mattia Tinella, Giulia Cugnasca, Giulia Tosoni, Concetta Terrazzano, and Stella Civardi. A heartfelt thank you also goes to all the students from the MSc in Product Service System Design at the Politecnico di Milano – School of Design, and to everyone who took part in the co-design activities related to this research, including those not individually mentioned here. Gratitude is also extended to the teams from Open Casello, the Municipality of Milan (Comune di Milano), BASE Milano, Codici, and Avanzi, whose collaboration and ongoing commitment to social innovation and cultural regeneration significantly enriched the research.

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# 16. Multiplicity of Hybrid Spaces

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how design can enable the emergence of a multiplicity of hybrid spaces through the case of *La Scuola dei Quartieri (The School of Neighbourhoods)* in Milan, which supported over 50 citizen-driven projects across the city, fostering social innovation in underserved neighbourhoods. Rather than occupying fixed locations, the School fostered both direct engagement with existing hybrid spaces and the indirect emergence of new ones through the support of citizen-led initiatives. Framed by the concepts of hybrid and third spaces and relational proximity, authors explore how design can contribute to building adaptive, distributed, and meaningful environments. These environments sustain situated, micro-scale interventions embedded in local contexts, nurture civic engagement, and foster a more sustainable and inclusive urban fabric.

## 16.1 Background knowledge: Hybrid Spaces, Third Spaces and Proximity

This paper discusses a social innovation project and the way in which it enhanced the emergence of a multiplicity of (hybrid) spaces in the city of Milan. Named *The School of Neighbourhoods (La Scuola dei Quartieri)*, this programme was promoted by the Municipality of Milan and designed by a consortium of partners including the Polimi DESIS lab, the authors' research group. Launched in 2018, *The School of Neighbourhoods (La Scuola dei Quartieri)* aimed at promoting and supporting social innovation in some of the city's more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The initiative was conceived as a platform for learning, experimentation, and the incubation of citizen-driven ideas. More precisely, its objective was to empower individuals to develop creative and practical solutions tailored to local needs, ultimately enhancing quality of life. Designed to be easily accessible, the programme sought out ideas that not only aligned with the city's broader strategic vision but also demonstrated potential to generate public value. These ideas included new cultural projects and venues, food-related services, inclusive care networks, and sustainable, community-based production models. In the first five years of the programme (2018–2023), 56 projects were launched that brought new life to various neighbourhoods in Milan. From the very beginning, the issue of space emerged as a central concern: some projects required a space, others already had one, and some found it along the way. In certain cases, the space was shared among different projects or used only temporarily. Others were hosted by existing spaces that had already played a significant role in Milan's urban regeneration processes in recent years. Hence, *The School of Neighbourhoods* generated a multiplicity of spaces that are currently hosting and combining different functions, activities and experiences, i.e. actually working as hybrid spaces that integrate cultural, social and economic dimensions (Krasilnikova & Klimov, 2020).

This multiplicity of spaces can be viewed as a multi-layered, dynamic and adaptive phenomenon that intersects three different con-

ceptual notions: hybrid spaces, third spaces and proximity, especially the «relational proximity» defined by Manzini (2021). The concept of hybrid spaces is grounded in postmodern spatial theory and digital urbanism (Ellin, 2006; Zanni, 2012; Krasilnikova & Klimov, 2020) and it refers to the intertwining of physical and digital environments, creating spaces that are neither entirely material nor wholly virtual; in this sense hybrid space is seen as a continuum, where spatial experience is augmented by mobile technologies, data flows, and participatory networks. Such idea of hybrid space emphasizes a multiplicity of presences within interconnected fragmented geographies, both physically and digitally: it is a sort of layered environment, that can be navigated and co-created by its users. A similar conception of hybrid space is coming from the area of communication theories developed by de Souza e Silva (*et al.*, 2025): rather than simply representing a fusion of physical and digital dimensions, hybrid spaces, she contended, are constituted through dynamic and evolving networked relationships that intertwine mobile technologies, patterns of mobility, and forms of communication. Building on de Souza e Silva's foundational definition (2006), hybrid space emerges from the convergence of different elements, i.e. mobility, sociability and connectivity, giving rise to a new spatial paradigm where the distinctions between digital and physical environments are effectively dissolved. All the elements are connected and influence each other in the construction of a new spatial logic without any hierarchy. In her work, de Souza e Silva, was influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) definition of nomadic space: conceiving hybrid space as a nomadic space involves shifting the analytical focus from individual elements (such as connectivity, mobility, and sociability) to the dynamic relationships between them. In this perspective, meaning is not inherent in the discrete components but emerges through the network of connections they form: the emphasis should be placed on the interdependent and networked relationships among the components of hybrid space, examining how they mutually influence one another rather than isolating each element. Hence, according to both spatial and communication theories, hybrid space is, by nature, a complex and multi-dimensional construct shaped by the interaction of diverse, coexisting layers.

The notion of hybrid space can be in a sense related to that of

third space, as they are both spaces-in-between, characterized by the combination of different elements, having often an experimental dimension. The concept of third spaces conceived by Muller (2012) is particularly meaningful for the purposes of discussion: it emerged within the Human Computer Interaction area, and it is defined as a fertile environment in which participants can combine diverse knowledge into new insights and plans for action. In his work, Muller builds on Bhabha's postcolonial theory (2004) and later applications about third space, defined as in-between or liminal space where cultures meet and hybrid identities emerge. Again, the hybrid character, the meeting of differences, the combination of tangible and intangible aspects are shared features of all these ideas of boundary and flexible spaces. Muller (2012) argues that this space can be shaped by a range of experiences, including the questioning of assumptions, reciprocal learning, the generation of new ideas through ongoing negotiation and co-creation, and dialogic engagement across differences. It is an idea of spaces that encourage collaboration and active involvement of diverse actors with different levels of interaction in a space of proximity. Here, the definition of proximity developed by Boschma (2005) in the field of social geography appears as particularly meaningful: this definition goes beyond the mere geographical dimension, because the impact of proximity on interactive learning and innovation cannot be assessed in isolation, rather it should encompass multiple dimensions such as cognitive, organisational, social, and institutional dimensions.

Expanding on Boschma's (2005) foundational work, Manzini (2021) introduces a distinct notion of «relational proximity». He contends that proximity should not be understood solely in functional terms – i.e., in relation to the what, or the specific functions occurring within a context – but also through its relational dimension, which pertains to the how these functions are enacted, shaped by the quality of human interactions. In this view, the relational dimension of proximity is crucial for its capacity to foster social connections. A given proximity system can either enable or constrain opportunities for people to engage, collaborate, co-construct shared identities, and ultimately, form communities. This relational potential is precisely what links the concept of proximity to a fertile hybrid space in which social innovations

might emerge: Manzini (2021) emphasises how social innovators not only aim for outcomes of practical utility, but also place significant value on the quality of interpersonal relationships, the time invested, the nature of collaborative work, and the situatedness of these practices.

Many of the social innovations supported within *The School of Neighbourhoods* gave rise to a multiplicity of spaces that integrate physical, social, and symbolic dimensions, simultaneously addressing practical needs and enabling new forms of civic engagement. Hence, by examining these spaces through the conceptual lenses of hybrid spaces, third spaces, and the various forms of proximity, this paper attempts to understand how a school that, by definition, was conceived without a fixed physical space, meaningfully engage with the spatial dimension of the city.

## 16.2 Case study: *The School of the Neighbourhoods*

In 2018, the Municipality of Milan launched a programme aimed at promoting and supporting social innovation within some of the city's more disadvantaged areas. The initiative *The School of Neighbourhoods* (2018–2023, co-funded by the European Union through the European Social Fund as part of the Metropolitan Cities Operational Programme 2014–2020), aimed to experiment with citizen-driven ideas. As a deliberate choice, the programme did not provide physical spaces to these initiatives; instead, it offered enabling resources – skills, networks, and seed funding – that empowered the projects to activate, reclaim, or reimagine existing spaces within their neighbourhoods. In doing so, the School supported a diverse geography of initiatives, each deeply embedded in its local context yet united by a shared ambition to redefine the relationship between communities, local services and the spaces they inhabit. Through this indirect yet strategic approach, the School contributed to the emergence of a constellation of spaces, ranging from informal and ephemeral interventions to more structured and enduring configurations, thus fostering a diffuse, situated, and community-driven regeneration of the urban fabric. As part of the implementing consortium, the Polimi DESIS

Lab, played an important role, contributing both its design expertise and methodological support. In particular, the Polimi DESIS Lab applied design thinking and service design principles to enhance the technical and strategic capabilities of the participants. Moreover, co-design methodologies were introduced to strengthen the social capital of the aspiring innovators (Selloni *et al.*, 2024). This dual approach helped participants deepen their engagement with the intended beneficiaries of their ideas and forge stronger connections with local organisations and stakeholders.

Over the programme's five-year span, *The School of Neighbourhoods* engaged more than 2,500 individuals and 370 local organisations, institutions, and businesses. It attracted 250 idea submissions, 68 of which were selected for participation. Ultimately, 56 of these evolved into fully operational social ventures now actively embedded in the urban fabric of Milan's neighbourhoods. Each of the four programme cycles was structured around three core phases:

1. Scouting: the programme began with an open call for ideas, targeting informal groups of citizens. A citywide schedule of public events – workshops, seminars, and interviews – was organised to uncover local needs and opportunities, identify emerging social innovators, and assist them in refining and submitting their proposals.
2. Training: this phase consisted of a 10-week, 100-hour intensive training curriculum, aimed at developing participants' skills and transforming early-stage concepts into viable solutions. The training covered key topics such as value proposition design, user experience and journey mapping, business modelling, legal structuring, and first-year action planning.
3. Prototyping: in the final phase, selected groups received ongoing mentorship and financial support – up to €30,000 in co-funding – to develop and test their solutions in real-world conditions. The emphasis was on iterative development and community involvement, encouraging collective experimentation and the co-production of services and activities.

Since its inception, this model for identifying and nurturing grassroots social innovation has been replicated in other Italian cities, including *The School of Neighbourhoods* in Bologna and *The Neighbourhoods*



of *Innovation* in Naples, yet there are various issues that still need an answer and that are under investigation within a second round of ideas currently on going for the next three years (2024-2027). In what ways can the School become generative of relationships, practices, and places building upon grassroots urban experimentation? Is it possible to activate processes of urban regeneration through light, temporary, yet situated and widespread interventions? What forms of proximity are fostered through the projects supported by the School, and which actors are involved in their activation? What role does design play in enabling these hybrid spaces to evolve, respond to emerging community needs, and sustain their impact over time? The following discussion is a first step towards an understanding of such issues, starting with focus on the variety and multiplicity of (urban) spaces involved.

## 16.3 Discussion: a multiplicity of spaces

The School of Neighbourhoods operates in relation to urban space through both direct and indirect means:

- direct action refers to the temporary or recurring initiatives carried out by the School itself within the neighbourhoods;
- indirect action refers to the initiatives generated by the projects supported by the School, which independently activated various types of relationships with the neighbourhood.

These two modes represent complementary strategies of urban engagement: while one temporarily activates space to foster engagement, capacity-building, proximity, and trust, the other empowers community-led reconfigurations of space as vehicles for medium to long term transformation.

### 16.3.1 Direct action in the neighbourhoods

By direct action, we refer to all temporary or recurring initiatives that the School itself activates within neighbourhoods, engaging with places in the city that can already be considered hybrid spaces, i.e. spaces that integrate cultural, social, and civic functions and often serve as platforms for community interaction. These direct actions

are not intended to create permanent infrastructures, but rather to establish a presence and cultivate relationships within the everyday life of the neighbourhoods. It is more about creating an interconnection among the spaces, building a perspective that brings them all together and activates them through a series of complementary initiatives. They encompass a variety of activities such as 100+ public events aimed at raising awareness of the programme, community workshops designed to present the School's goals and methodologies, exploratory walks to map local networks and spatial resources, and light training modules that equip residents with the basic skills necessary to apply to the School's call for ideas.

Through these actions, the School embeds itself within the socio-spatial fabric of the city, acting as a temporary but meaningful catalyst for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and trust-building. Such initiatives often take place in spaces that are already relevant to local communities, mainly offices and cultural centres members of the *Hybrid space network* of the Milano Municipality, or in more unconventional spaces, such as public libraries, food markets, etc. with potential for hybrid reactivation. The choice of where and how to intervene is strategic: it is based on the recognition of existing forms of community engagement and aims to foster a sense of familiarity and openness. In this way, the School not only connects with already active actors (from entrepreneurial initiatives to local associations to informal groups) but also creates entry points for those who are not usually involved in participatory or design processes. Ultimately, the School's direct spatial interventions are not about occupying space but about activating and enriching the relationships that make space meaningful and capable of supporting social innovation from the ground up, establishing conditions for mutual exchange and shared benefits. In doing so, it aligns with contemporary conceptions of hybrid or third spaces as outlined in the introduction: spaces where tangible and intangible elements intersect, and where boundaries between formal and informal, institutional and grassroots, are intentionally blurred. As Müller (2012) suggests, such spaces are not defined by physical attributes alone, but by the quality of the interactions they enable: reciprocal learning, ongoing negotiation, and dialogic engagement across differences. The School's actions reflect

precisely this orientation: by entering existing community spaces or reimagining unconventional ones, the School fosters encounters that challenge assumptions, spark new ideas, and cultivate collaborative agency. Such spatial strategy becomes a means to prototype and sustain local forms of civic infrastructure that are flexible, inclusive, and embedded in the everyday life of Milan's neighbourhoods.

### **16.3.2 Indirect action in the neighbourhoods**

By indirect action, we refer to all the spatial connections, (re)generations, and uses that have emerged through the projects supported by the School. Looking at the experiences of the projects supported by *The School of Neighbourhoods*, it becomes particularly relevant to highlight a selection of initiatives that resonate with the conceptual frameworks introduced earlier, especially in relation to the ideas of hybrid and third spaces, and the different forms of proximity and collaboration they encourage. These initiatives can be grouped into several categories based on their connection to space and its reactivation.

#### *Temporary and Itinerant Use of Public Space*

The first category includes projects that make use of public space in its many forms, operating in a temporary but recurring and often itinerant manner. These initiatives inhabit parks, playgrounds, and urban commons with lightweight, adaptive formats that foster continuity without demanding permanence. An emblematic example is the *Corvetto Street Basket Academy*, a mobile and inclusive street basketball school designed for the youth, who might not otherwise access organised sports activities. Operating in the local playgrounds, the project reimagines these everyday infrastructures as places of connection, opportunity, and identity for the neighbourhood. The yellow van of the Academy becomes a recognisable presence, turning each visited court into an open-air gym. Another example is Book Forest, a nature-themed mobile bookstore that brings cultural and creative events to public green areas, especially in Parco Nord Milano. Hosted on a cargo bike, Book Forest blends environmental awareness with cultural engagement, transforming the park into a hybrid space where literature, art, and ecology intersect. Through workshops and curated programming, it invites both children and adults to rediscover nature

as a setting for learning and imagination. It contributes to a broader itinerant cultural offering and to nurture wonder, creativity, and a sense of community among the youngest residents. The temporary and itinerant use of public spaces in this context is characterised by the design and use of physical touchpoints: the yellow van of the *Corvetto Street Basket Academy* and the cargo bike of the *Book Forest* initiative have, in a sense, become 'icons' of the neighbourhood. These mobile elements contribute to enhancing and requalifying the urban space, imbuing it with new meanings and possibilities for its inhabitants.

### *Hosting and being hosted*

A second category includes those initiatives that have been able to activate long-term collaborations with existing organisations and hybrid spaces. These projects did not operate in isolation; rather, they were recognised and supported by already established actors who saw in them a valuable contribution to the neighbourhood's development. One emblematic case is *Voci di Periferia*, a cultural project initiated by a group of very young artists from the outskirts of Milan. Their initial idea was simple but powerful: to create a stage for their voices, a space where they could express themselves through live music, especially hip-hop. Lacking such a place in their neighbourhood, they created it themselves, finding in Mare Culturale Urbano not only a physical space but also a long-term partner capable of offering continuity, support, and structure. Hosted within Mare's facilities, *Voci di Periferia* evolved from a hip-hop jam session into a recording studio, a radio, and a program of workshops on the music industry, attempting to help young artists transform passion into potential profession. This matching was facilitated also because Mare was already part of the mentioned official *Network of Hybrid Spaces of the City of Milan*: welcoming new initiatives into its spaces was intentionally part of Mare's broader inclusive strategy, shared with the municipality.

Another case is *ConservaMI*, a neighbourhood-based on *attrezzeria sociale* (social toolery), a community tool-sharing and repair hub that promotes circular economy, manual skills, and collective empowerment. *ConservaMI* did not begin with a space of its own. Instead, it was welcomed and hosted by a network of housing cooperatives,

which recognised its value and opened up underused spaces to host repair activities, workshops, and community gatherings. Through this collaboration, *ConservaMI* transformed these residual spaces into vibrant commons. It became a place where people can fix everyday objects with the help of volunteers, learn practical and character-building skills, and contribute to a culture of self-reliance and sustainability.

### *Securing a dedicated space*

A third category encompasses those initiatives that have succeeded in securing a physical space through which to deliver their offer, and in doing so, have increased continuity, visibility, and public recognition. These spaces have not only hosted activities but also reactivated streets and places within the neighbourhoods, becoming reference points for local networks and amplifiers of connections. LATO D is a space dedicated to fostering cultural conversations around sexuality and emotional literacy. Founded in 2021 as a cultural association, it fulfilled its long-held ambition of becoming a bookstore, thus expanding its function as both a cultural space and a social infrastructure. LATO D is now a place of encounter, empowerment, and reflection open to the neighbourhood. Another example is *LABorà*, a project that goes far beyond its outward appearance as a packaging-free grocery store. *LABorà* operates as a hybrid and inclusive space: at once a green hub, a co-working space, and a platform for social aggregation, it embodies the union of laboratory and *agora* and functions also as a labour inclusion project, offering training and internship opportunities to disadvantaged individuals. In this sense, it proposes a new way of doing groceries and living in the neighbourhood, as an everyday anchor of conviviality and care. *Demo3* is a project of spatial regeneration, where three initiatives from the School, one year after the completion of the programme, joined together to transform a formerly unused 160 sqm municipal venue into a vibrant community space. It hosts a social co-working space and supports projects focused on sustainability and social inclusion, such as *Molce Atelier* (therapeutic tailoring for women survivors of violence), *ED-Work* (education support), and *AbFare* (upcycling and sustainable living) and *Insulanet* (innovative property management service). *Demo3* is particularly relevant for the

entire project of the School, because it became itself an exemplary hybrid space: it is an actual multifunctional hub in which a set of tangible and intangible resources are shared by different actors, becoming an original and compelling prototype of a collaborative platform for local initiatives. It is an example entirely generated within the School, where four different projects successfully organized themselves within a single space: they recognized their shared needs and interests, they were able to find a common solution, and subsequently established norms for coexistence and collaboration.

### *Amplifying and reconfiguring existing spaces*

A final category includes those initiatives that already had access to a physical space before entering the School, but which, through their participation in the programme, were able to reframe the identity, function, and relational dynamics of that space. In these cases, projects enhanced their openness to new publics, activated interdisciplinary collaborations, and expanded their capacity to generate cross-sectoral synergies. One such example is *Liutai Lab*, which evolved a traditional luthier's workshop into a space of artisanal excellence, cultural exchange, and experimentation. The Lab now offers a fully equipped workspace for recently graduated luthiers, providing training modules on entrepreneurship, helping young artisans navigate the complexities of launching and sustaining a professional practice. Such evolution of *Liutai Lab* represents a kind of paradigmatic trajectory of hybrid spaces: from an initially closed place, it gradually transformed into a space that opens up to the community and the neighbourhood, sharing its expert knowledge and also becoming a venue that hosts music-related events. Another notable case is *Porta Moneta*, an association that emerged from a group of neighbours brought together by the shared intention to activate the potential of life within a social housing context. The setting offers a range of communal spaces, including a shared living room, kitchen, courtyard with a playground, and a vegetable garden, which the group sought to reimagine and put to use collectively. Since 2019, community activities have fostered new connections, idea exchange, and the identification of shared needs among residents. With the support of the School, *Porta Moneta* strengthened its organisational structure and extend-

ed its reach beyond the original condominium, becoming a catalyst for 60+ community-led experimentation and neighbourhood-scale activation. Also, here it is possible to observe a paradigmatic trajectory: some social housing complexes struggle to open themselves to the neighbourhood, and in several instances, residents form closed communities pursue their own interests. In this case, however, the value of consciously engaging with the neighbourhood was recognized and established as an initial strategic objective, with the aim of amplifying and optimizing the various initiatives carried out by the residents' association. For Porta Moneta, the support of the School was instrumental in cultivating a shared sense of purpose and in shaping a conscious strategy to engage a wider population, thus positioning the initiative as a point of reference for the entire neighbourhood, exactly as the name *Porta Moneta* suggests, since the Italian word porta (door) precisely indicates a gateway into the neighbourhood.

## 16.4 Conclusion: a shared vision of Hybrid and Interdependent Spaces

One of the main lessons learnt is the following: rather than occupying a predefined location, *The School of Neighbourhoods* acts as an enabler of situated experiments, supporting citizens in imagining and testing new possible social innovations. Through light and distributed interventions, temporary festivals, pop-up events, shared workshops, it is an example of how urban regeneration can begin at a micro-scale, embedded in the specific social and cultural contexts of each neighbourhood. As stated, these actions foster multiple forms of proximity: physical closeness through localised presence, social proximity through networks of trust and cooperation, and relational proximity through care-based interactions and mutual learning.

The role of the School has been to operate in a direct way when building upon already existing spaces and activities, while it conducted an indirect action when new spaces and related connections emerged through the projects supported by the School. Hence, on one side there is a creative use of what is already present, looking at the available spaces with the lens of the projects, on the other the

emergence of new spaces is supported, fostering a shared and hybrid use. Such multiplicity of spaces allows the different groups of social innovators to share several enabling strategies:

- it supports mutual learning among groups of innovators through peer-to-peer exchange;
- it promotes the sharing of both tangible and intangible resources;
- it underscores the potential for joint offerings and collaborative programming among different innovator groups;
- it expands access to a broader range of user groups;
- it makes the various initiatives more visible, accessible, and concrete for the wider community;
- it facilitates the emergence of a common legitimacy, setting collectively the conditions necessary to grow;
- it helps in building a sense of belonging and trust in areas often perceived as marginalised.

But perhaps most importantly, the application of these enabling strategies help in reinforcing a shared vision, one rooted in care, openness, and neighbourhood-scale innovation. The role of design in shaping this vision has been significant. By employing a design thinking approach alongside co-design methodologies and service design strategies and tools, participants were empowered to conduct a series of interventions which, over time, contributed to the development of a collectively envisioned future for each specific neighbourhood. It has been a slow but continuous activity of sense making (Zurlo, 2015), currently ongoing, that is building a fertile dynamic among the different spaces, characterised by a sort of collective interdependence and a growing array of creative interactions. From this perspective, each space has increasingly less meaning on its own, because its identity is defined and strengthened through its connection with others. Each space is inherently hybrid, as it brings together different functions and characteristics: what is particularly interesting to observe, however, is the collective hybridity that emerges among all the spaces, a juxtaposition and differentiation of functions within a broader neighbourhood perspective. At times, it has been guided by the school's activities (and intentionally by design); at other times, it has emerged spontaneously and naturally, though not without conflict. Conflict is an inherent and necessary feature of such processes: it cannot be



eliminated. Making a parallel with Mouffe's (2013) theorisation of agonism, this multiplicity of interdependent spaces can be understood (and designed) as a broader agonistic environment, where each space maintains its distinct identity and legitimacy. Rather than being antagonists (enemies who seek to negate one another) these spaces should operate as adversaries, engaging in a dynamic of tension and negotiation within a shared neighbourhood vision. As previously highlighted, the formation of a shared vision and the cultivation of a constructive agonistic environment have been, on the one hand, supported and designed by the School's interventions, and on the other, have emerged spontaneously, often without deliberate awareness. To sustain this multiplicity of spaces, more intentional and targeted efforts are required, both at the policy and design levels, as these spaces should not be regarded as mere backdrops, but as meaningful environments that foster civic engagement and contribute to the development of a more sustainable and inclusive urban fabric.

## Acknowledgement

This work builds upon the cases developed in the project *The School of Neighbourhoods (La Scuola dei Quartieri)* initiated by the Municipality of Milan and co-funded by the European Union - European Social Fund, as part of the Metropolitan Cities Operational Program 2014-2020.

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# 17. Imagining Belonging: Design, Policies, and Talent Attractiveness in the Inner Areas of Emilia-Romagna

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how service design can enhance public policies for talent attraction and retention in Emilia-Romagna, with a focus on inner and mountain areas. While the region demonstrates strong innovation capacity, inequalities persist between urban centers and peripheral territories. Starting from the Regional Law 2/2023 and the Talents HUBs promoted by ART-ER, the paper highlights the need for more inclusive, integrated and systemic approaches. Through design methods – such as deep listening, service prototyping, and collaborative governance – new models of proximity-based innovation can be developed to reconnect people, policies and places. The goal is to support territorial regeneration processes that are equitable, participatory, and capable of responding to the aspirations of highly educated youth.

## 17.1 Introduction

Emilia-Romagna ranks among the most advanced European regions in terms of economic innovation, sustainability, and social cohesion. Alongside its consolidated productive sectors, emerging fields such as Cultural and Creative Industries and the data-driven ecosystem are gaining prominence, supported by public policies attentive to well-being, inclusion, and territorial development (ART-ER, 2024; ART-ER, 2025). However, this excellence coexists with significant territorial inequalities. The inner areas, defined as municipalities located more than 20 minutes from essential services, account for nearly 40% of the region's municipalities and host approximately 12% of the population. These territories are often characterised by low population density, demographic fragility (average age: 47.4 years), limited access to essential services, and ongoing depopulation trends (ART-ER, 2024; ART-ER, 2025; ISTAT, 2022).

In such decentralised contexts, the issue of talent attraction and retention takes on strategic importance. Over the years, the Region has activated a wide range of tools to counter territorial depletion and support qualified employment: from Regional Law 2/2023 on talent valorisation (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2023), to the plan for highlevel skills, to the STAMI - strategies for mountain and inner areas (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2021), and the multi-fund calls for entrepreneurship, innovation, and tourism (GAL Emilia-Romagna, 2023). Territorial hubs are playing an increasingly central role – hybrid spaces where services, education, entrepreneurship, active citizenship, and social innovation intersect. In Emilia-Romagna, the number of urban and proximity hubs is growing, along with community hubs connected to local networks and civic experimentation (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2023). Within this framework, the HUB Talenti promoted by ART-ER represent an effort to connect highly educated youth with the regional ecosystem of research, business, and public policies, following the guidelines of Regional Law No. 2/2023. This is the first law in Italy aimed at promoting the attraction, valorisation, and retention of talents, passed by the Emilia-Romagna Region. While the law does not explicitly mention inner areas, it indirectly addresses their needs through support measures, incentives, and collaborations among businesses,

local authorities, and universities. These policies are complemented by more specific and territorial instruments, such as the Strategie per le Aree Montane e Interne (STAMI), the LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) projects promoted by the Gruppi di Azione Locale (GALs) using European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) funds, and the calls for entrepreneurial development in mountain areas (European Commission, 2024; Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2024) – all expressions of a multi-fund and multi-actor approach aimed at bridging the gap between central and peripheral areas. Nevertheless, the relationship between these tools and the most fragile territories remains uneven. This is the starting point of the present contribution, which aims to explore how service design – understood as a systemic, participatory, and relational approach (Manzini, 2015) – can help make tools for talent attraction and valorisation more effective, accessible, and territorially grounded. The goal is to reflect on a potential model of transformative policy capable of connecting individual needs with territorial visions, placing people, contexts, and their untapped potential at the centre.

## 17.2 Retention and Vulnerability

As previously mentioned, Emilia-Romagna stands out for its activation of innovative policies supporting territorial attractiveness. However, these actions unfold within a national context marked by critical dynamics. For years, Italy has been experiencing negative demographic trends – such as declining birth rates and population shrinkage – and structural weaknesses in education and skills development. These include the limited diffusion of STEM competences, low levels of digital skills among the adult population, and a persistent gap between educational outcomes and labor market needs, as highlighted by national and European reports (ISTAT, 2023; ISTAT, 2024; European Commission, 2024). These factors contribute to a scenario in which highly educated young people, although trained with public resources, do not find sufficiently attractive opportunities to remain in the country.

The result is a significant migratory outflow, which impacts even more strongly the inner areas of the country – already fragile from

economic, infrastructural, and social standpoints. Emilia-Romagna, despite recording a positive overall migratory balance of +36.1 thousand residents in 2024 (driven by both national and international inflows), shows concerning patterns. Between 2015 and 2024, the region experienced a net loss of 45.9 thousand Italian citizens to foreign countries. Young people aged 18–39 accounted for 66.2% of the total migratory gain in 2024, yet also represented the largest share of departures. The balance for highly educated individuals is particularly critical: in 2024, 3,417 Italian graduates emigrated abroad, resulting in a negative net balance of –2,474 with foreign countries, only partially compensated by positive exchanges with other Italian regions (ART-ER, 2025). The reasons behind this youth exodus are manifold: more competitive salaries abroad, more stable career paths, greater opportunities for growth, and better recognition of skills. Motivations are not limited to economic aspects but also include existential, identity-based, and aspirational dimensions (Doumas & Avery, 2024). The push to emigrate is also linked to the difficulty of envisioning a viable future within one's territory of origin, especially in peripheral areas, where opportunities for qualified employment are limited, services are less accessible, and the sense of isolation is often more acute (Kloep *et al.*, 2003). At the same time, there are also many reasons why young people might choose to stay or return. The bond with their territory, proximity to loved ones, quality of life, natural environment, and the possibility of contributing personally to change represent strong motivational factors (Crescenzi, Holman & Orrù, 2016). It is precisely on this dual register, between the desire to leave and the aspiration to remain, that public policies must focus. Creating favourable conditions for permanence does not merely mean generating jobs, but also building attractive, liveable, and generative ecosystems capable of valuing talents, identifying emerging needs, and fostering trust in the future of local territories.

## 17.3 Current Activities of the HUB Talenti

Within the framework of Regional Law 2/2023, a central role has been entrusted to ART-ER, the regional consortium company of Emilia-Ro-

magna responsible for innovation, skills development, and territorial growth (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2023). Among its key initiatives is the management of the HUB Talenti: physical and relational spaces located in the main regional Technopoles (Bologna, Ferrara, Parma, Piacenza, Reggio Emilia, Rimini, Cesena, Ravenna, Forlì, Modena), established to connect highly educated young people with the region's productive, institutional, and research ecosystems (ART-ER, 2024).

The HUB Talenti can be understood as hybrid spaces, as described by Jiménez and Zheng (2021), where physical and digital infrastructures intersect to create environments that enable collaboration, learning, and innovation across sectors through a combination of material resources, social networks, and shared values. They operate primarily as physical venues, located within the regional Technopoles, offering co-working areas, meeting rooms, and event spaces, but are also connected to a digital platform that extends networking and training opportunities beyond geographical constraints. This hybrid nature enables them to function simultaneously as proximity hubs – fostering face-to-face interactions, trust-building, and local community engagement – and as nodes in a broader regional network that facilitates knowledge exchange and professional opportunities regardless of location. Compared to other rural coworking or decentralised innovation hubs in Europe, the HUB Talenti stand out for their institutional anchoring within regional policy frameworks and their explicit mission to integrate talent attraction and retention with territorial development strategies.

The HUB Talenti act as intermediary nodes within the innovation ecosystem, but also as enabling places for constructing individual and collective professional pathways. They function as interfaces between universities, businesses, public administrations, employment services, and the third sector, serving as connective devices between the personal trajectories of talents and the strategic priorities of the regional Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2021). The S3 is the European strategic framework adopted by the Region to guide investments in research, innovation, and human capital towards key thematic ecosystems – ranging from health to sustainability, from digitalisation to cultural and creative industries – fostering advanced skills and reinforcing the competitiveness of local productive systems, particularly in the context of ecological and digital transitions.

The approach adopted by the HUB is oriented, experiential, and relational: they offer workshops, thematic events, matchmaking opportunities, and personalised guidance and mentoring pathways. The staff plays a crucial role in facilitating connections, organising events, communicating opportunities, and animating local networks. These are, in every respect, hybrid and dynamic spaces, akin to the concept of territorial hubs described in international literature as multifunctional, flexible places that activate services and relationships (Euricse, 2024).

However, some structural issues persist. Coordination between the HUBs and local stakeholders is not always smooth: differences in vision among institutional actors and fragmented partnerships can hinder the consolidation of shared strategies. Additionally, HUBs are heavily concentrated in urban areas, with weaker connections to inner and mountainous regions, where highly educated young people often remain isolated, less engaged, and rarely involved in innovation processes.

From this perspective, it is crucial to explore how to reinforce the territorial and inclusive dimension of the HUB Talenti, so that they do not merely function as operational nodes for matching, but evolve into genuine civic centres for social and professional activation – spaces capable of reflecting local specificities, promoting intersectionality, and serving as catalysts for transformative processes. Reimagining these spaces as hybrid proximity hubs also entails fostering convergence between technical and humanistic knowledge, between digital infrastructures and relational networks, and between systemic innovation and local demands (Manzini, 2015). It is precisely within this space of project-based hybridisation that the potential emerges to imagine a new role for the HUB Talenti in the regeneration of fragile territories.

A significant example in this direction is the Appennino Hack project, a territorial innovation lab that engaged young people, local authorities, and businesses in the municipalities of the Emilia Apennines. The initiative experimented with co-design practices to valorise local vocations and stimulate youth entrepreneurship in inner areas, reinforcing the link between talent, territory, and social innovation.

Similarly, the various regional tools activated in support of inner areas – including the STAMI Strategies, LEADER interventions promoted by the Local Action Groups (GALs), and multi-fund calls for entrepreneurship and mountain tourism – also require reinforcement of their systemic



and integrated dimension (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2024). To fully unlock the transformative potential of these initiatives, it is essential to overcome the fragmentation arising from the multitude of projects and actors involved by identifying common actions, shared objectives, and operational synergies. Only through greater strategic coherence will it be possible to amplify the overall impact of interventions and generate lasting results in the most fragile territories.

## 17.4 What Design Can Do

Within a context as intricate and multilayered as talent attraction and retention, design can serve as a strategic lever for reimagining public policies – not merely as an operational tool, but as a relational, systemic, and transformative approach. Conceived as a practice that connects people, institutions, and imaginaries, design has the capacity to uncover latent needs, explore alternative scenarios, and develop interventions more closely aligned with the lived experiences of individuals (Manzini, 2015). A first area of intervention concerns deep listening. Beyond aggregate statistics, it is essential to capture the individual trajectories, expectations, and emotional experiences of those who choose to leave and those who decide to stay. Qualitative methodologies – such as narrative interviews, journey mapping, ethnographic diaries, and co-design workshops with highly educated youth – can generate situated knowledge that enriches existing tools, such as the ARTER Talent Observatory (ART-ER, 2024). This type of qualitative listening provides a robust foundation for better informing public policies and place-based services in a more empathetic and effective way (Koskinen *et al.*, 2011).

A second key area involves the navigability of the system. The regional ecosystem of services – including youth information centres (Informagiovani), university placement offices, HUB Talenti, and public employment centres – is rich but fragmented. These services are often dispersed across disparate channels, not always easily accessible, and rarely designed with younger generations in mind. Service design can intervene at the level of physical and digital touchpoints, making services more visible, coherent, integrated, and engaging. Rethinking information flows, access logic, and communication languages can significantly

enhance user engagement and strengthen individuals' capacity for professional orientation (Stickdorn *et al.*, 2018).

A third domain is institutional coordination. Design can act as a catalyst between public and private stakeholders, fostering shared visions, mapping existing relationships, and identifying misalignments between policies and service delivery. Visual tools such as stakeholder maps, service blueprints, and decision-making canvases can support strategic alignment processes and enhance cooperation among local administrations, universities, intermediary bodies, and territories.

Equally crucial is the imaginative dimension of design. Today's young people are not simply seeking economic opportunities; they also want meaning, agency, and long-term perspectives. They tend to reject career paths that fail to align with their values or offer personal fulfilment. In this context, design can contribute to shaping new professional and territorial imaginaries through local experimentation, speculative design practices, participatory campaigns, and collective narratives that link identity with the future (Tonkinwise, 2015). This shift entails moving from incentive-based to meaning-based policies.

This design-centred approach proves especially relevant in inner and mountainous areas, where structural and infrastructural constraints often limit access to training and employment opportunities. In these fragile territories, design can act as a facilitator of reconnections – helping local communities better understand their assets, activate dormant resources, and co-create adaptive, modular, and sustainable service models. Through co-design practices, systematised listening, and participatory visualisation, it becomes possible to generate lightweight yet enabling infrastructures (Mulgan, 2014) capable of restoring a sense of possibility and fostering new forms of rootedness and attractiveness. In this sense, design is not merely a support for the implementation of public policies – it becomes a form of territorial care, capable of restoring centrality and dignity even to the most marginal places.

A concrete example of how these methods can be applied in practice is the Appennino Hack initiative, a territorial innovation lab held in several municipalities of the Emilia Apennines in 2023. The project brought together young residents, local authorities, and businesses to co-design solutions that valorised local vocations and addressed community needs. Activities combined deep listening sessions – including narrative

interviews and storytelling workshops – with rapid prototyping of service ideas, such as tourism itineraries, cultural events, and digital platforms to connect producers and consumers. The process not only generated tangible project concepts but also strengthened local networks, enhanced participants' sense of belonging, and demonstrated how design methods can act as catalysts for youth entrepreneurship in inner areas.

## 17.5 Conclusion and future steps

The analysis of regional policies and tools implemented to attract and retain talent in Emilia-Romagna reveals a system that is articulated and ambitious, yet still fragmented and predominantly concentrated in urban hubs. To make the ecosystem for the valorisation of high-level competencies more effective and inclusive, a qualitative leap is needed – one that integrates analysis, design, and experimentation, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable and decentralised territories.

A first step would be to launch an extensive qualitative research initiative, involving at least 50 narrative interviews with highly educated young individuals – employed, unemployed, or in transition – living in both urban centres and inner areas. This in-depth narrative exploration would help to map aspirations, systemic barriers, and untapped potential, providing essential insights to inform future policies and services (Koskinen *et al.*, 2011; Manzini, 2015).

In parallel, it would be beneficial to conduct a comparative analysis of international policies, examining the Emilia-Romagna model alongside consolidated approaches in countries such as Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands. These contexts – where talent attraction strategies are integrated with local development policies – can offer valuable lessons for identifying transferable best practices and adaptable frameworks suited to regional specificities.

Another strategic action could be the creation of a shared territorial vision board: a structured visual framework that makes explicit the common objectives, priorities, and resources of all stakeholders involved in talent attraction and retention. This tool would serve as a reference map where regional institutions, ART-ER, local authorities, universities, businesses, Local Action Groups (GALs), and youth organisations can

see how their initiatives interconnect and where potential synergies lie. By visually representing the relationships between actors, the ongoing projects, and the long-term goals, the vision board helps identify overlaps, gaps, and opportunities for collaboration. The process of building it should be participatory – for example, through collaborative policy design workshops – so that the content is co-created, ownership is shared, and the board becomes a living document. Once in place, it can guide decision-making, align investments, and support a continuous process of transformative governance, ensuring that policies and actions remain coherent and responsive to territorial needs over time.

To support this shared vision, an inter-institutional co-design process should be activated to develop new models of talent support based on principles of territorial equity, sustainability, and participation. This process could draw on public service design and facilitation methodologies, which are increasingly being adopted in administrative contexts.

Finally, it is crucial to launch a participatory communication campaign that moves beyond institutional language to resonate with the communication styles and environments familiar to younger generations – such as festivals, informal spaces, social media, and decentralised events. A refreshed narrative of the talent ecosystem can help dismantle informational barriers, inspire new vocations, and reinforce young people's sense of belonging to their territories (Tonkinwise, 2015).

The challenge of brain drain and territorial inequalities cannot be addressed through a single policy measure. However, design – when embedded within a systemic approach – can help weave the pieces together, build bridges between policies and lived experiences, and shape new models that are both people-centred and territorially grounded. It is precisely in this intermediate space – between public governance and individual aspirations – that a new kind of talent policy may emerge: one that is authentic, equitable, and generative.

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# 18. The performative device in urban regeneration: the playful and ritual gesture in Chiaravalle

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## ABSTRACT

Recent cultural-based urban regeneration projects are based on the active involvement of citizens in projects aimed at re-appropriating portions of public space. Citizens' participation is at the core of a question concerning their effective and vigilant involvement: a distinction is made between bottom-up urban regeneration processes, born spontaneously from below, and top-down ones, imposed from above. In the theatrological field, the performative device acts as a facilitator of bottom-up processes, which are realised through playful and ritual gestures. Such gestures are placed in a *minima* dimension that reveals its potential for the endemic diffusion of practices and projects involving active citizen participation. The analysis of the case of Terzo Paesaggio, a hybrid space and garrison of good practices of urban regeneration with a cultural and performative basis, which resides and operates in Milan's Chiaravalle neighbourhood, proves significant.

## 18.1 Bottom-up cultural regeneration through the lens of the performative device

Public policies have always considered the urban context in its complexity as a physical and social environment, seeking in particular to foster social ties between citizens: culture becomes a lever to foster the social objective and, specifically, the theatrical sphere responds strongly to this need, promoting performative practices of social and community theatre (cf. Bernardi, 2004; Rossi Ghiglione, 2013; Pontremoli, 2015; Innocenti Malini, 2021) to create cohesion within underrepresented communities of citizens. In regeneration practices, urban space is thought of as a connective tissue to be healed in order to foster social relations between those who live within the affected area and all external individuals who have contact with the environment. Inhabitants are called upon to actively participate in the renewal – material and social – of their neighbourhood, with the aim of becoming part of a manifest community, which conquers its own space and role, in opposition to the logic of marginalisation and disintegration prevailing in the contemporary city. However, today it is possible to note that in the parcelling out of these processes of caring for space and the inhabitant body (cf. Fiaschini, 2023) we can identify the risk of the spread of pre-established projects that are imposed from above and then take root: this is what distinguishes bottom-up regeneration processes from top-down ones. The latter are imposed from above by institutions that offer citizens pre-packaged projects that often do not take into account their real needs and aspirations. On the contrary, bottom-up processes are triggered from below by subjects rooted in the territory of reference who, knowing the urgencies of individuals, favour projects that will have a spontaneous development, born of the support offered to citizens. However, in some cases, the institution accompanies these subjects who pose as facilitators and aggregators of resources and informal movements born spontaneously from below, playing the role of decision-maker and orientator of predefined practices involving highly specialised professionalism, neutralising the protagonism of citizens in the making of the city. The interdisciplinary fluidity on which these processes are based, instead of configuring



itself as a lens through which to intercept and foster the polyphony of disciplinary fields, risks flattening the variegated experiences through which culturally-based urban regeneration practices are carried out. Instead, by enhancing this difference, it is possible to identify and foster the diffusion of effective conditions for the budding and growth of fluid and informal movements, fuelled by a logic of mutual exchange of resources and non-specialised knowledge, which become expressive vehicles of citizens' urgencies and horizons of expectation (cf. Calvaresi *et al.*, 2021). According to teatrological and Performance Studies<sup>1</sup>, performance is understood as an extension of the concept of action; the performative device aims to read the manifestations of action as performance. It encourages interaction, thus changing the traditional status of the audience. Schechner (1984) refers to the broad spectrum of performative action with reference to the meanings it can take on, which include ritual, play, the social and also the artistic dimension. From the fluidity of the broad spectrum, inaugurated by the performative device, emerges the political value of performance, which is declined both as an expression of the need for relationship and manifestation of individuals against the prevailing urban isolation of our era (cf. De Marinis, 2020; Deriu, 2022) and as a design and generative attitude of intervention in the public sphere in its most vulnerable and marginal components (cf. Fiaschini, 2022). The political dimension makes it possible to identify the transformative element inherent to performance: through the transformative action the performative device sets itself in opposition to the disciplining artistic canons, thus establishing a new degree of participation of people, placing the individual in an active dimension with respect to the political and aesthetic logics that are finalised and programmed. On a specifically theatrical level, one of the main declinations that performance takes on in urban regeneration contexts is the dramaturgy of celebration. In the dramaturgy of the feast, in fact, two performative paradigms are manifested and enacted that can be considered at the basis of the activation of a new type of active participation: the ludic and the ritual (cf. Bernardi, 2004; Bernardi, 2012; Dalla Palma, 2001a; Dalla Palma, 2001b; Fiaschini, 2024). The transformative action, proper to the playful and ritual gesture, possesses a subversive value that is expressed through the deconstructing of reality followed by its unex-

**Note 1.**  
Regarding the concept of performance and its broad spectrum of human actions and behaviour, essential references are the theory of performance elaborated by Richard Schechner, critically reinterpreted in the Italian context especially by Fabrizio Deriu, and, from the point of view of Aesthetics, the proposals of Erika Fischer-Lichte.

pected and authentic recomposition (cf. Benjamin, 1929/2010). In the individual, placed before this unexpected unveiling of the subversive potential of action, a feeling of amazement arises that makes him involved and alert: capable of a new critical awareness of reality. Just as in the field of art, performance breaks down the traditional statute of the passive spectator, it finds itself favouring processes of active participation of the citizen in the context of his living space, that is, the city.

## 18.2 The case of Terzo Paesaggio in Chiaravalle Milanese

Milan's connective tissue appears frayed at the edges of the city, particularly at its south-eastern edge, in the Chiaravalle district, where the urban context, with its industrial and disorganised mutations, merges with the anthropised rural context: a liminal place, with the dual identity of district of the metropolitan city, and hamlet of the Parco Sud. The wound caused by the 20th century human intervention on the landscape finds a healing principle in what Clément (cf. 2004/2005) defines as the *Third Landscape*: the set of places abandoned by man, located on the margins between urban and rural, which preserve a stratified multiplicity to be enhanced. The *Third Landscape* in Chiaravalle is divided into four different environments, corresponding to four historical periods that have had an impact on the territory, making it stratified and hybrid: the Benedictine abbey of the 13th century, a time when the monks reclaimed the marshy area; the agricultural area of the Parco Sud, with the Vettabbia park, the marcite, the irrigation ditches, the fields that are cultivated with a sustainable type of agriculture to protect the rural territory, mitigating the effects of urbanisation and improving the state of the landscape and the ecosystem, with benefits for the community; the new contemporary housing hybrids (between residential and popular), favoured by recent gentrification processes (cf. Fiaschini, 2023); the abandoned railway, which led from Rogoredo to Genoa, is the symbol of the industrialisation that affected the area between the 1950s and 1960s, separating the neighbourhood from the abbey. The railway line,

decommissioned in 2007, has become the possible point of suture of the fracture between periphery and centre, urban and rural, man and nature, which allows for the sewing up of the frayed fringes of the territory: «The present happens, a phenomenon occurs globally for which, on the level of functions, a space is reconverted, reused; on the level of relations, instead, to an existing space is added another, equally existing, giving life to another place» (Dalla Sega *et al.*, 2017, p. 49). The old railway is in fact one of the symbolic places of the neighbourhood that the association Terzo Paesaggio has transformed through culturally-based urban regeneration processes, involving citizens in temporary and creative re-appropriation actions of the disused tracks. Terzo Paesaggio, which has been residing and operating in the neighbourhood since 2013, is configured as a yard of practices in continuous metamorphosis (cf. Fiaschini, 2023): a non-specific and indeterminate space – little institutionalised – with an approach based on broad but precise parameters: necessary to intercept the multiplicity of the contemporary. In Chiaravalle, regeneration therefore means mending the frayed connective tissue that binds the inhabitant body with the liminal space in order to restore meaning to the *Third Landscape*, highlighting the wounds and distortions of time and history: the fractures and diversities are to be valorised, and not annulled, revitalising the ties between individuals, and between individuals and the territory. The case of Terzo Paesaggio appears emblematic as a good practice that intercepts the still little-debated issue of citizens' not always real and convinced participation in culturally-based urban regeneration practices. Marta Bertani and Andrea Perini are the founders of Terzo Paesaggio, which manages the regenerated hybrid space of the gymnasium of the former municipal school in the neighbourhood, in concession from the municipality of Milan, as a new cultural space, identifying itself in 2015 as *statu nascenti* hybrid space<sup>2</sup>. The association uses urban regeneration practices that refer to the paratheatrical context that reinterprets the playful-ritual paradigm of the archaic festival, declining it in an urban and territorial key: the performative device of play and ritual becomes the propeller of community processes of regeneration and care of public space, putting citizens at the centre. Artistic practices must therefore separate themselves from their self-referentiality (cf. Pern-

#### Note 2.

Terzo Paesaggio works with artists, curators, performers, creatives, architects and technicians, organising through different cultural languages, artistic residency projects, public meetings, workshops on performance practices and architecture, public and participatory art, explorations of marginal territory, practices of temporary reuse of underused spaces, actions on food culture and unconventional cultivation. Terzo Paesaggio is co-founder of Lo Stato dei Luoghi).

iola, 2015), to be understood from the perspective of public actions, in which the inhabitants recover an active function. The matrix identified by Terzo Paesaggio to foster the artistic and cultural agency of the inhabitant body is linked to the ludic and paratheatrical heritage (cf. Fiaschini, 2023): practices of urban regeneration, based on theatre and participatory arts, have been activated; the performative device becomes a mediator between community theatre processes and active citizenship, focusing on social relations and the environment in which they develop. Performance, declined in the forms of theatre and ritual dramaturgy of celebration, fosters relations between identity – individual and community – and the environment, understood as a meeting space between people, and between people and landscape. Performance, with its lability and permeability, finds in the liminal and marginal context of Chiaravalle fertile ground to express its potential in community processes of regeneration and care of public space, declined in the forms of active citizenship, cultural welfare<sup>3</sup> and ecological and landscape sustainability.

#### Note 3.

Cultural Welfare is based on the recognition, also sanctioned by the World Health Organisation, of the efficacy of certain specific cultural, artistic and creative activities in the care and wellbeing of individuals, obtaining benefits that can be read from a community perspective, through work on oneself. Performative practices, which are used in this perspective, differ according to the contexts in which they take place; they often consist of social theatre, participatory and public art interventions.

## 18.3 Playful-ritual actions in *Madre Project*

Among the numerous experiences of cultural activation of the civic community that Terzo Paesaggio carries out in the Chiaravalle area is the recent *Madre Project*. *Scuola del Pane e dei Luoghi*, which aims to train professional figures who are not highly specialised but have a fluid and permeable profile, capable of interpreting a multiplicity of techniques and knowledge. In fact, the performative paradigm comes into play in the local micro-projects linked to *Madre Project*, which, by placing bread production as a product of the earth at the centre, aim to transform places, build communities and design landscapes. Exemplary in this case is *Corale. Laboratorio del pane futuro*, a collective bread-making ritual realised in 2023 at Cascina Nosedo that saw the involvement of children. Through the playful-ritual paradigm, an underrepresented category regains centrality. Children, configured as a minority within a society heading towards endemic ageing, were called upon to become protagonists in the ritual dimension triggered by a culturally primary element such as bread<sup>4</sup>. *Corale* was also revived, the same year, in a

**Note 4.**

Bread, in addition to being a primary product from a socio-economic point of view, is also primary from a socio-cultural point of view: one need only think of the etymology of the word 'comrade', from the medieval Latin *cum panis*, the person with whom one shares in bread, hence the meal.

**Note 5.**

In the case of the bread-making ritual at the Piccolo Teatro, the meeting coincides with dawn, a symbolic moment in archaic societies, since the new day coincided with the 'new' bread.

version for adults, in collaboration with the Piccolo Teatro. In the square in front of the Teatro Strehler, a long table was set up on which, from the early hours of the day, participants gathered to knead bread. The performance can be broken down into three different moments to which as many fragments of actions correspond: the triggering of the ritual dimension through the gathering of the participants at a specific time<sup>5</sup> and their joining a long table that establishes the performative dimension of sharing and proximity with the other. The act of gathering people in the same place to perform the same action at the same time relies on the aggregative power of the ritual element included in the performance. Space is then given to an example of a gesture referable to play, and thus ascribable to the playful paradigm of performance, namely the mixing of the various ingredients: bread first appears broken down into flour, water and yeast, to be then, through playful action, creatively assembled. The action of creatively shaping the loaf, performed by the children according to their imagination, is also considered a playful gesture. Finally, the performance concludes with the setting aside of the bread that, before being baked, will go through a slow ritual leavening, which is understood as a reflexive action, inherent in archaic rites and attributable to the performative ritual paradigm: the repeated scansion of preordained gestures, in accordance with the slow and dilated times of nature, is the performative basis that unites the rites of agricultural societies with modern and contemporary festive dramaturgy (cf. Turner, 1982/1986). These fragments of playful-ritual actions are punctuated by the gestures of a master baker who guides the participants through the three moments of the performance. The actions designed as part of *Madre Project* are pervaded by a *minima* dimension: the actions that punctuate the performance are considered as fragments; the central element of bread is connected to a primary essentiality that today almost tends to become invisible, as it is increasingly taken for granted; the micro practices involve both a physiologically *small* social category and groups of reduced citizens living in circumscribed portions of the territory; these minute practices generate micro freedoms that give back to individuals spaces of reduced dimensions, derived from an increasingly massive exploitation of the city and its resources. The *minima* dimension thus understood loses part of its intrinsic limits to transform them into strengths: the scope of the small becomes a way to work in depth,

triggering a widespread diffusion of sister practices. In this sense, the playful-ritual paradigm thus arises as a possibility alternative, within performative-based urban regeneration processes, to projects imposed from above, which do not take into account a vigilant participation on the part of citizens.

## 18.4 Reflexive participation in the performative device of urban regeneration

On the basis of what has been critically addressed above, Terzo Paesaggio proves to be an exemplary case for verifying how the two performative paradigms, playful and ritual, can counteract the forced participation of citizens, based on the logic of the ever-new that drives the society of events to a *bulimia* of experiences. To avoid this drift, the playful-ritual paradigm of performance acts as a catalyst for vigilance and the critical spirit of individuals: the scansion of the three performative moments of *Corale* identifies three modes of intervention, inherent in the paradigm, that counter the risk of forced participation. The first is based on the minima dimension: in a stratified and composite context such as Chiaravalle, in order to foster direct and spontaneous co-creation it is necessary, in the wake of De Certeau (1990/2001), to stimulate the invention of the everyday through minute practices – i.e. latent ways of doing things among individuals – that generate micro-resistances that in turn give rise to interstitial micro-freedoms within the everyday. The second modality is based on the choral dimension that activates relationship and resistance to the existing political cultural system, freeing the creative potential of the individual, translating it into a collective choral dimension. The chorus is understood as an organism in which the particularities of the individual are united in a collective dimension, which includes all the participants and does not annul singularity, but enhances it as plurality within the collectivity (cf. Apollonio, 1956). The choral condition of the individual is configured as opposition to processes of unreal co-planning, which are classified as an imposition from above. The third modality considers performative action as a facilitator

of practices that spread awareness among individuals, intercepting their urgencies and aspirations, starting from micro-portions of the city. The performative device, through the permeability of its broad spectrum, makes available to all a space in which to contradict and transform the existing order, through the return to use of a playful-subversive attitude, which belongs to all. Performative action is again made available for use: no longer specialised knowledge reserved for specific categories, but free know-how. The unpredictability of this skill becomes the antidote to the instrumental and predetermined drifts foreseen and expected from above, configuring a dimension of indeterminate possibility open to the future. Just as in the rite of bread, the playful gesture transforms the exclusive technique of the baker into a pure capacity for action, part of the life experience of citizens. If countering the lack of recognition and urban separation becomes a widespread necessity, performance becomes the vehicle for this common need, acting as a tool to give individuals back the possibility and the ability to recover their active part in the city. These spaces of possibility from below can have the dimension of *controcampi* (cf. Fiaschini, 2022): free everyday micro-spaces in which to express and rediscover free creative acting, aimed at the re-appropriation of places and the mutual recognition of the care and needs of the other.

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PART 4

# Digital Tools for New Models of Participation



# 19. Metaverse and Co-design for Social Innovation: design reflections

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## ABSTRACT

The chapter analyses the use of the metaverse as an environment for co-design practices oriented towards social innovation, focusing on methodological, technical and participatory implications. Through reflections and the analysis of the OSMOSI experimental project, implemented on the Spatial.io platform where the activities involved heterogeneous actors in moments of exploration, dialogue and co-creation on two urban public spaces, the authors show how immersive environments can facilitate collaborative paths even in conditions of limited physical accessibility. Opportunities emerged related to avatar-mediated participation, traceability of project contents and experimentation with new forms of engagement. However, critical issues related to technological barriers, platform fragmentation and digital inequalities also emerge. The metaverse is thus configured as a complex design space that requires new skills and an active role of the designer as facilitator.

## 19.1 Introduction

The metaverse is emerging as a four-dimensional, multi-user, persistent, and navigable digital environment where users cooperate via virtual self-representations and co-inhabit purpose-designed spaces. It is an immersive 3D virtual world in which users interact as avatars, blending real and virtual experiences (Stephenson, 1992; Davis *et al.*, 2009; Hamurcu, 2022; Weinberger, 2022), engaging with digital artefacts and other users in real time (Weinberger, 2022; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2022).

In recent years, its application has expanded beyond entertainment and simulation to include participatory design, local governance, public services, and the socio-cultural valorisation of territories. The metaverse is thus a socio-technical system capable of transforming interaction and collaboration (Zhou *et al.*, 2024; Davis *et al.*, 2009). This raises new questions about how co-design processes may be translated or reimaged within immersive virtual environments. Rather than merely a technological medium, the metaverse constitutes a socio-technical space that reshapes collective interaction, negotiation, and representation (Davis, 2009; Rehm *et al.*, 2015; Zhou *et al.*, 2024).

This chapter reflects on the use of the metaverse as a co-design platform for social innovation from the exploration of emerging approaches, methods, practices and experimentation within the OSMOSI research-action project.

## 19.2 Scientific Background

Co-design has been established as collaborative approach to innovation within socio-technical contexts since the late 1970s. Its roots lie in Scandinavian participatory design, where workers were actively engaged in developing workplace technologies (Bødker *et al.*, 2000). Over time, this approach has evolved and adapted across sectors, extending into urban planning, public services, healthcare, education, and social innovation (Britton, 2017; Antonini, 2021). In design for social innovation, co-design is a well-established methodology for

actively involving citizens, users, and stakeholders in decision-making and creative processes (Manzini, 2015; Evans & Terrey, 2016; Deserti *et al.*, 2019). Co-design offers an open and relational approach to generating innovative solutions to complex social challenges (Britton, 2017). Its iterative process (understanding, ideating, prototyping, and testing) supports co-creation from conception to implementation (Deserti *et al.*, 2019), playing a pivotal role in building trust, acquiring knowledge, and addressing user needs over time (Evans & Terrey, 2016).

Incorporating the metaverse into design discourse coincides with the growing diffusion of immersive digital platforms, multi-user virtual environments, and extended reality interfaces. The metaverse constitutes a computational space that introduces entirely new operational conditions for participatory design. Within this context, traditional interaction methods, such as in-person workshops, focus groups, and physical co-creation, must be adapted, reinvented, or replaced. Several unique characteristics of these environments drive scholarly interest in co-design within the metaverse:

- eliminating spatial and temporal constraints enables collaboration among geographically dispersed participants (Kim, 2025)
- using avatars and spatial representations allows for new modes of expression unconstrained by the physical limitations of the body or built environment, thereby influencing user behaviour and interaction (Davis *et al.*, 2009);
- integrating digital tools opens complex and articulated opportunities for interaction and shared production.

A notable example of metaverse's use is the experience of the creators of *Grand Theft Hamlet* (2024), who staged Shakespeare's *Hamlet* within the video game *Grand Theft Auto Online* during the COVID-19 lockdown. This project illustrates how, under restrictive social conditions, virtual environments can become vital spaces for continuing professional and creative activities, protecting the right to expression, and fostering community-building. This capacity of the metaverse to offer resilient alternatives to physical participation is especially valuable for co-design initiatives focused on urban and public interest projects. Where physical, health-related, or logistical barriers hinder attendance, metaverse-based software and structured processes can provide targeted solutions. The follow table (Ta-

ble 1) outlines physical participation constraints in urban and public co-design processes, potential application areas, and the software platforms supporting such activities. In this context, metaverse ex-

**Table 1.**  
**Responses to Physical**  
**Participation in Urban**  
**and Public Co-Design.**

Condition Limiting Physical Participation	Co-design of Public Spaces	Co-design of Public Services	Co-design of Public Buildings
Health emergencies / Mobility restrictions (e.g. pandemics, lockdowns)	Ideation, shared layout visualization, flow simulation	User journey mapping, role-playing of service scenarios, virtual focus groups	3D visualization of projects, interior layout co-design, shared selection of finishes/ furnishings
	Suggested Software: Mozilla Hubs, Spatial.io, Coderblock, Minecraft (Education Edition)	Suggested Software: Roblox, Second Life, GTA Online (for specific scenarios), generic social VR platforms	Suggested Software: Mozilla Hubs, Spatial.io, SketchUp with VR viewers, The Wild
Great geographical distances / Prohibitive travel costs	Remote participatory workshops, virtual exploration of proposals	Co-creation of service concepts, usability testing via avatars, distributed feedback collection	Collaborative design reviews, immersive presentations to remote stakeholders
	Suggested Software: Spatial.io, VRChat (with custom worlds), Coderblock, Twinmotion (for immersive presentations)	Suggested Software: Microsoft Mesh, Engage VR, FrameVR	Suggested Software: Arkio, Gravity Sketch, Shapspark
Physical disabilities / Temporary or permanent mobility limitations	Participation in virtual site visits, facilitated accessibility	Expression of needs and preferences in controlled and accessible environments	Accessibility evaluation of projects, feedback on inclusive solutions
	Suggested Software: Desktop-accessible platforms (e.g. Mozilla Hubs), 360° virtual tours	Suggested Software: Customizable platforms with simplified interfaces, Second Life	Suggested Software: Platforms with simplified navigation and customizable avatars, The Wild (with accessibility focus)
Conflicting work/family commitments with fixed schedules (asynchrony)	Asynchronous contributions on 3D models, virtual idea boards	Thematic discussion forums in virtual environments, deferred feedback collection	Annotations on 3D models, asynchronous voting on design options
	Suggested Software: Conceptboard/Miro, Spatial.io (with persistent notes), Coderblock	Suggested Software: Persistent forum/messaging platforms (e.g. Discord integrated with VR worlds)	Suggested Software: Trimble Connect (with VR viewer), Bimsync Arena
Unsafe contexts / Physical inaccessibility to certain areas	Safe exploration and participatory mapping of digital twin areas	Simulation of critical scenarios for emergency or public safety services	Virtual inspection of unsafe or condemned buildings, remote planning of interventions
	Suggested Software: Google Earth VR, platforms supporting 3D scans/ photogrammetry imports	Suggested Software: Dedicated simulation platforms, Roblox (with advanced scripting)	Suggested Software: Matterport, platforms supporting point cloud models

periences are configured as true social laboratories, where technologies are not merely support tools, but constituent elements of the project experience. The functionalities of the technologies employed in the metaverse – communication, virtualisation, interaction and socialisation tools – are not merely supportive, but actively shape the collaborative environment. For example, participants create and modify objects in real time, enabling immediate feedback and new ways of conveying complex ideas (Owens *et al.*, 2011), a key aspect of co-design in immersive environments. A further element that emerges is methodological hybridity: co-design practices in the metaverse are often based on combinations of digital tools (video conferencing, online whiteboards, 3D models) and relational strategies (structured workshops, ethnographic sessions, role-playing). This convergence between tool and process requires a new design literacy, which concerns technical skills and the ability to build trust, inclusion and dialogue in non-physical environments.

## 19.3 Metaversal Approaches to Co-Design

A significant variety of approaches to co-design within the metaverse can be synthesised and organised around these principal dimensions:

### 19.3.1 Fields of Application

Within co-design for social innovation, metaverse's adoption involves the citizens and stakeholders' engagement in shared decision-making processes, the fostering of immersive experiences, and the promotion of collaboration and inclusion across diverse user groups. Several emerging application domains offer a dynamic snapshot of the field:

- Public space: metaverse-based participatory urban design experiments leverage platforms and digital tools to involve citizens in collaborative activities related to real urban scenarios (Ng *et al.*, 2024a; Ng *et al.*, 2024b).
- Public services: co-creation of services within the metaverse re-configures traditional service design elements by enabling contextual control, sensory perception via avatars, virtual resources, and real-time data-driven processes (Jeffery, 2023).

- cultural heritage: co-design within the metaverse can engage local communities in the virtual reconstruction and storytelling of place-based identities (Martins *et al.*, 2022).
- community building: customised virtual environments can support urban regeneration and community development (Abramov *et al.*, 2024).
- education and training: virtual reality-based co-design of product-service systems at the university level fosters collaboration between students, educators, and industry stakeholders (Mourtzis *et al.*, 2023).

### 19.3.2 Technologies and Platforms Employed

Virtual environments can support design actions and natural communication styles, potentially reducing time and costs in multidisciplinary group work (Mengoni, 2009).

Collaborative design within metaverse's settings involves various systems and technologies, such as:

- immersive virtual reality systems that integrate communication and collaboration tools during co-design sessions (Roupé *et al.*, 2020);
- digital tools for collaborative spatial design, which incorporate advanced visualisation systems and motion tracking to improve spatial communication among designers (Zaman *et al.*, 2015);
- custom-built virtual environments designed to address specific problems and provide personalised interaction spaces;
- supportive digital tools embedded within virtual environments to stimulate collaboration, socialisation, and 3D modelling.

This heterogeneity reflects an ecosystem without a dominant standard, but rather a multiplicity of approaches tailored to design hybrid contexts.

### 19.3.3 Stakeholder Engagement Modalities

A central component of participatory design is how stakeholders engage in decision-making and creative processes. In the metaverse, these modalities are significantly transformed: the virtual, asynchronous, and immersive nature of these environments reshapes the timeframes, spaces, and forms of interaction. The notion of partic-



ipation acquires new meanings: presence is mediated by avatars, interaction occurs through multimodal languages, and technical and cultural factors shape access.

Understanding how stakeholders are involved in metaversal co-design processes thus requires inquiry into which groups are engaged, how, with what tools, and under what relational and structural conditions. Engagement strategies become an integral part of the design process itself, directly impacting the process's inclusivity, outcomes, and legitimacy.

Mere presence in a virtual environment does not ensure meaningful participation since feedback mechanisms and cross-media translation tools are essential. Moreover, managing virtual identities and avatars can significantly affect participants' perception of their voice in the process. Stakeholders' engagement in the metaverse may involve a range of practices, including intergenerational participation (Ng *et al.*, 2024b), ethnographic approaches, Martins *et al.*, 2022), technology-mediated co-design (Kohler *et al.*, 2011; Dorta *et al.*, 2019), asynchronous planning (Fanzini *et al.*, 2015), structured facilitation by combining synchronous and asynchronous elements within a guided methodology.

#### **19.3.4 Design Frameworks**

The challenges posed by the use of the metaverse as a platform for co-design emphasise the importance of developing flexible structures that can be adapted to the specificities of the context, users and desired outcomes. Ng (*et al.*, 2024a) offer an articulated framework outlining a structured participatory process within virtual environments. Their process takes place in a virtual reality platform (Mozilla Hubs), integrating collaboration tools (Miro and Zoom), and comprises six stages: tour (participants exploration of the virtual space), discussion (guided sessions for collective exchange and reflection), evaluation (shared assessment of emerging ideas), definition (identification of design priorities), action (proposal of concrete actions), show and tell (public presentation of results).

This model supports transparent processes, fostering user participation and ensuring a structured documentation of design results. While this model (and others in general) offers valuable opportunities

to improve engagement and understanding of the space, it also faces challenges related to technology, inclusiveness and user competence, factors that need to be addressed to enable a more widespread and practical application in shared design processes.

## 19.4 Co-designing in the metaverse: OSMOSI project

As part of the OSMOSI action-research project, an experimental co-design activity was conducted within the metaverse – *OSMOSI Digital Area* – using the Spatial.io platform as an immersive environment to explore and discuss the possible use scenarios of two urban public spaces: Open Casello in Milan and the former Convent of Crociferi in Palermo. The activity involved users with heterogeneous backgrounds (activists, students, cultural operators, citizens) and was divided into a multi-phase design process, aimed at collecting perceptions, needs and visions through collaborative and exploratory methods.

The virtual environment was prepared by:

- the insertion of an accurate three-dimensional representations of the two spaces;
- the placement of learning elements for the use of the space (instructional video, information and directional signage);
- the positioning of portals capable of transporting users from the metaverse to the chosen collaborative tools (Miro).

The process began with an introductory phase of technical and conceptual onboarding, in which participants were guided in the use of the platform and the objectives of the path were presented. Subsequently, an exploratory phase followed: users, in the form of avatars, freely visited the two virtual environments. During this phase, information panels were positioned that served as catalysts for individual and collective reflection.

In the dialogic phase, participants took part in moments of comparison within the virtual space, where mediators stimulated users with reflections on accessibility, cultural functions and social use of the spaces. The discussions took place in real time, with voice support and

chat integrated into the digital platform. This was followed by a co-creation phase: participants used the portals to travel from the metaverse to the collaborative platforms where two-dimensional maps of the spaces awaited them. Using annotation tools, users then entered keywords and design proposals relating to the environments visited in the metaverse, thus creating spatial maps of possible future uses.

The process concluded with a subsequent restitution phase in which users were able to enter the space asynchronously to further reflect (and at their own pace) on the analysed spaces.

Overall, more than 350 visits have been recorded by the Spatial platform on the *OSMOSI Digital Area* (data retrieved on June 16th, 2025), during the first two live events 19 participants were actively engaged and they have shared their feedback, insights and proposals in more than 16 sticky notes on Miro's maps.

These activities highlighted how the metaverse can become an intermediate space between co-design and social activation, facilitating a form of participation that is graphically accessible and methodologically reproducible.

## 19.5 Advantages and potential criticalities

The integration of co-design practices within a meta-verse elicits a number of multifaceted reflections on an individual and collective level. One of the most significant effects is the increased involvement of participants: immersive virtual environments, combined with playful dynamics and symbolic representations, can stimulate more active and motivated participation (Dorta, 2019).

In addition to involvement, the generation of tangible project content becomes equally important. Participants should be encouraged to leave traces in virtual spaces, create cognitive maps and produce digital narratives. This productive dimension is not only symbolic: the co-created materials serve as decision support tools, as communication elements between stakeholders and as operational bases for the application of solutions in the real world. The value of these results lies in their dual nature: they are both the tangible result of the co-design process and a reinforcement of the participants' commitment. The co-presence

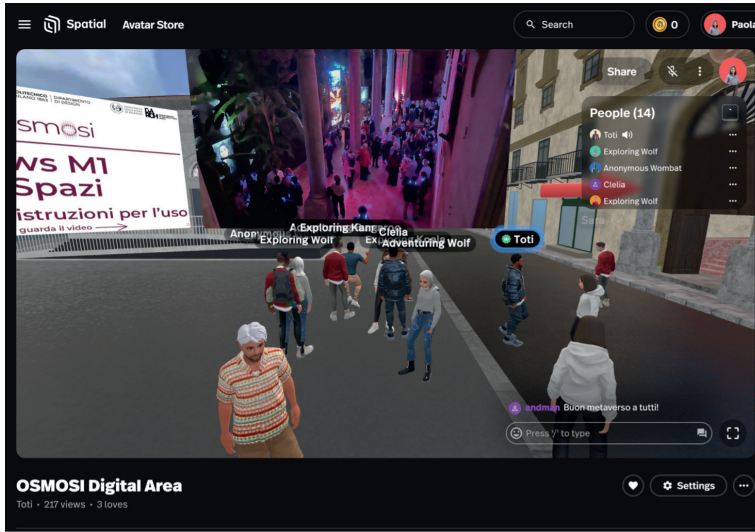


Figure 1.  
OSMOSI Digital Area.

in virtual spaces, combined with the sharing of spatial and narrative experiences, facilitates the development of collaborative relationships between heterogeneous actors. Moreover, there is the development of new competences of participants, including digital skills, communication skills, collaborative attitudes and creative tools (Romero, 2016).

However, several structural challenges affect the effectiveness, inclusiveness and sustainability of metaverse-based co-design projects (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2023). According to Gupta (*et al.*, 2024), these challenges can be grouped into three categories:

- technological (concerns related to privacy and access to infrastructure);
- organisational (issues related to integration, feasibility and standardisation);
- environmental (factors related to user behaviour, psychological responses and trust in metaverse systems).

Among these, technological barriers are particularly critical. Access to immersive platforms requires basic digital skills and compatible devices, resources that are not equally available among different social groups. The elderly, people with low digital literacy or those from marginalised backgrounds may find it difficult to navigate 3D environments or complex interfaces. This may exclude the very voices that participatory design aims to empower.

A further critical issue is the fragmentation of the metaverse ecosystem, with platforms adopting proprietary standards, non-uniform interfaces and incompatible formats. This fragmentation hinders content migration, limits the scalability of solutions and complicates integration between different environments within broader design processes. This results in a structural barrier, which reduces operational efficiency and undermines the long-term sustainability of co-design initiatives. Furthermore, it creates a dependency on technical experts, limiting replicability in resource-limited contexts.

## 19.6. Discussion and conclusion

The research group's reflections on experimenting with the metaverse as a space for co-design raise numerous methodological, technological, social and epistemological questions. Despite its touted potential for accessibility and openness, effective participation in the metaverse still heavily depends on material infrastructures and digital competencies. For future co-design in the metaverse, we recommend focusing on the role of the designer and design as a bridge between different dimensions and disciplines. In this context, the presence of designers as expert facilitators becomes essential to transform technological potential into genuinely shared design processes. Another emerging tension concerns the continuity of co-design processes: there is a risk that such initiatives remain confined to short-term experiments or pilot phases with limited resources, resulting in fragmented experiences, interrupted participation, and weak capitalisation of results over time. While adopting design frameworks can help structure and coordinate these processes, they do not resolve the issue of sustainability.

Creating stable design communities demands governance tools, accessible documentation, persistent environments, and moments for collective reflection and return. In this sense, metaverse-based design must move beyond the experimental phase and integrate with the actual life cycles of organisations and communities. Moreover, the form and function of interfaces play a decisive role in the success of participatory processes: the complexity of 3D environments, the

need for dedicated hardware, system compatibility, and the steep learning curves of specific platforms directly affect inclusivity and the effectiveness of participation. Therefore, the presence of a mediator is crucial to orient participants within the environment and to enable them to contribute meaningfully and understand the process. Finally, co-design in the metaverse cannot be considered a mere digital transposition of analogue methodologies. Virtual worlds introduce new ways of relating, addressing problems and generating solutions. Interaction through avatars in 3D environments with virtual interaction radically alters the nature of user participation. Design in the metaverse becomes performative, scenic, and spatially situated, as anchored in the virtual as in the real. This necessitates the development of participatory experience design that accounts for the cognitive, perceptual, and relational transformations induced by immersive environments. The exploration of the metaverse as a platform for co-design represents an emerging frontier in the field of design for social innovation. Its areas of application are expanding due to the metaverse's ability to enable unconventional interactions, make local narratives visible and support collaborative construction of solutions. Virtual platforms offer a variety of operational configurations responding to different needs, but all must converge towards a common goal: making co-design processes accessible, transparent and understandable. In this sense, design takes on a transformative function: it creates the conditions for interaction, shapes the rules of participation, makes actors visible and distributes tasks and responsibilities. The role of the designer thus expands, becoming a mediator between worlds and a director of complex design activities and the future of co-design in the metaverse will depend on the ability of designers to integrate creative thinking with technical skills.

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# 20. Sensory design in phygital environments: expanding participation through embodied experience

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how sensory design can expand participation in phygital environments by emphasizing embodied experience. As digital technologies reshape public and cultural spaces, sensory design bridges the gap between digital interfaces and multisensory engagement, countering the disembodiment often inherent in digital participation. A state-of-the-art literature review highlights its inclusive and empowering potential, supporting plural, accessible, and culturally responsive interactions. The paper explores how emerging solutions – such as XR and AI – can deepen rather than replace sensory perception, fostering engagement that is both technological and human-centered. Additionally, it reflects on the political and epistemological implications of sensory approaches in participatory design, especially in hybrid spaces. Actionable strategies are proposed to integrate sensory design into inclusive and sustainable design practices that value the senses as agents of meaning and belonging.

## 20.1 Introduction

The accelerated integration of digital technologies into public and cultural contexts has catalyzed the emergence of phygital environments – hybrid spaces that seamlessly integrate physical and digital elements. These environments offer expanded possibilities for multisensory engagement by augmenting human perception rather than replacing it (Milgram & Kishino, 1994; Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004; Zurlo *et al.*, 2018). While such spaces offer novel opportunities for participation and cultural expression, they also expose a critical tension: the increasing reliance on digital interfaces often leads to the disembodiment of design processes, thereby marginalizing sensory modes of engagement that are intrinsic to human spatial experience (Pallasmaa, 2005; Classen, 2012).

This disjunction becomes particularly problematic within participatory design practices, where inclusion, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity demand more than purely visual or cognitive interaction (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004; Pink *et al.*, 2018). While such environments offer novel opportunities for participation and cultural expression, they also expose a critical tension: the increasing reliance on digital interfaces often leads to the disembodiment of design processes, thereby marginalizing sensory modes of engagement that are intrinsic to human spatial experience (Pallasmaa, 2005; Classen, 2012). This disjunction becomes particularly problematic within participatory design practices, where inclusion, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity demand more than purely visual or cognitive interaction (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004; Pink *et al.*, 2018).

This article addresses this epistemological and practical gap by investigating how sensory design can serve as a mediating strategy to re-anchor embodied experience within phygital environments. The literature review – here framed as a state-of-the-art investigation – draws from interdisciplinary domains spanning sensory design, digital participatory tools, and hybrid spatial practices (Hornecker & Buur, 2006; Howes, 2014). The study is guided by the central research question: «How can sensory design contribute to expanding participation in participatory design practices within phygital environments?». Through theoretical synthesis, the paper seeks to

demonstrate how multisensory and embodied approaches can enrich participatory processes, democratize access, and foster urban experiences that are more inclusive and culturally responsive (Bardzell, 2010; Giaccardi, 2012; Auger, 2013).

By acknowledging the senses as active agents in the construction of meaning and belonging, sensory design emerges as a powerful tool for transforming participation in hybrid environments.

## 20.2 Literature Review

The confluence of sensory design and digital participatory tools constitutes a pivotal field of investigation, especially within the emergent domain of phygital environments. As urban and cultural spaces increasingly integrate digital technologies, scholars emphasize the urgent need to overcome the disconnection between users' embodied physical experiences and the mediated interactions facilitated by digital interfaces (Bazzanella *et al.*, 2014; Van Dijck & Poell, 2015). This state-of-the-art examines conceptual perspectives at this nexus, with particular attention to sensory design as a catalyst for inclusion, empowerment, and enriched modes of participation (Howes, 2014; Pink *et al.*, 2018). Central to this inquiry are the constructs of embodied experience (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004; Pallasmaa, 2005), multisensory interaction (Hornecker & Buur, 2006; Classen, 2012), and the socio-cultural implications of design processes (Bardzell, 2010; Giaccardi, 2012). Furthermore, the review interrogates the capacity of novel digital technologies – such as XR, AI, and immersive storytelling – to augment rather than supplant human sensory engagement (Auger, 2013). By integrating interdisciplinary perspectives, this synthesis elucidates how sensory design can fundamentally advance the development of urban environments that are more accessible, inclusive, and participatory in the digital era.

### 20.2.1 The Crisis of the Body in Participation Technologies

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies presents a fundamental challenge to participatory design: the growing disjunction between digital interfaces and embodied, multisensory experience. Virtual

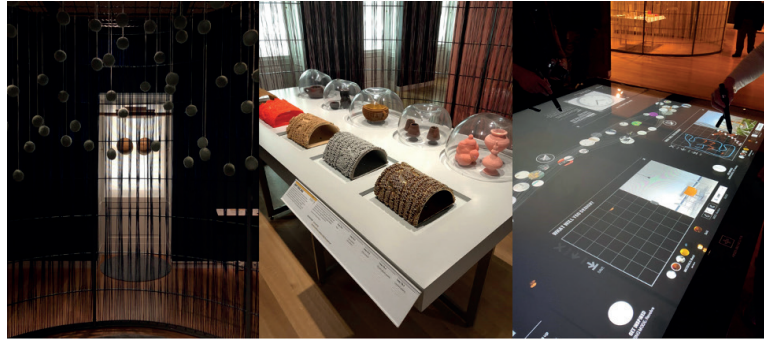
environments predominantly privilege visual engagement, often marginalizing other sensory modalities essential to human spatial interaction (Dourish, 2001; McCullough, 2004). This limitation can be framed through the concept of embodied interaction, wherein the body acts as an active agent within physical space – a notion rooted in phenomenological philosophy (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Dourish, 2001). The dominance of screen-based interfaces risks a crisis of the body, inducing disembodiment by sidelining tactile, auditory, and kinesthetic dimensions of experience. Scholars emphasize that perception transcends visual stimuli, advocating for holistic, multisensory approaches in spatial design (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004; Pallasmaa, 2005; Howes, 2005).

### **20.2.2 Sensory Design as a Tool for Inclusion and Empowerment**

Sensory design, which strategically engages the full spectrum of human senses – sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste – has become an essential approach for enhancing inclusivity and empowerment within participatory design. By transcending the visual bias prevalent in many digital interfaces, sensory design facilitates diverse modes of engagement, accommodating individuals with varying abilities and sensory preferences (Howes, 2005; Pink, 2009). A compelling example of sensory design within a phygital environment is the 2018 exhibition *The Senses: Design Beyond Vision* at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York (Lupton & Lipps, 2018). This exhibition (Figure 1) showcased design projects and interactive objects and installations that invited visitors to engage with multiple senses simultaneously – touch, hearing, smell, and sight – highlighting the richness of sensory experience beyond traditional visual design. Visitors could wander through immersive environments such as a *scented snowstorm*, play unusual instruments in a tactile orchestra and explore the sonic properties of glass.

Organized into nine thematic sections, *The Senses* demonstrated how opening up to multisensory dimensions allows designers to reach a broader diversity of users. Examples included tactile maps designed for sighted, low-vision, and blind users alike, audio devices translating sound into skin vibrations, and kitchen tools employing color and form to aid people living with dementia or visual impairments.

Figure 1.  
Multisensory  
interactions at The  
Senses: Design Beyond  
Vision exhibition (Cooper  
Hewitt, 2018), exploring  
touch, sound, and scent  
through integrated  
physical and digital  
experiences. Source:  
Authors (2018).



These innovations benefit all users by enhancing bodily awareness and evoking new emotional responses through sensory stimulation. The exhibition integrated physical and digital layers to create a fully accessible, inclusive experience. A custom smartphone app provided streaming text and audio content, allowing visitors to access interpretive material via reading, listening, or screen readers, while videos and images were accompanied by verbal descriptions. Additional features included dynamic guided tours conducted by trained educators, designed especially for visitors with sensory differences. This blending of tangible and digital sensory elements exemplifies the potential of sensory design to foster inclusion, agency, and enriched participation in cultural environments.

By transcending the visual bias prevalent in many digital interfaces, sensory design facilitates diverse modes of engagement, accommodating individuals with varying abilities and sensory preferences (Howes, 2005; Pink, 2009). For example, tactile and auditory cues enable people with visual impairments to navigate and interpret spaces more effectively, thus expanding accessibility beyond conventional sight-based interactions. This multisensory orientation challenges traditional paradigms, emphasizing embodiment and enriching spatial experience (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004; Pallasmaa, 2005). Moreover, sensory design fosters empowerment by actively incorporating participants' sensory experiences and cultural backgrounds into the design process, aligning with participatory principles that advocate for equitable representation and influence (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). In community-centered urban regeneration, this approach not only promotes inclusivity but also cultivates agency and ownership,

as individuals co-create environments that reflect their lived realities and sensory needs, thereby deepening their connection to place (Howes, 2005; Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Pink, 2009).

**20.2.3 Multisensory Interaction in Phygital Environments**

Phygital Environments are hybrid spaces in which physical presence intertwines with digitally mediated layers of interaction (Bazzanella *et al.*, 2014; Van Dijck & Poell, 2015). These environments can leverage immersive technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI), to create layered sensory experiences that transcend the limitations of purely physical or digital settings (Slater & Wilbur, 1997; Hanna & Parvaresh, 2024). Through real-time fusion of virtual and physical worlds, extended reality (XR) technologies enable richer, personalized interactions that stimulate multiple senses simultaneously (Milgram & Kishino, 1994; de Waal, 2014). For instance, AI-driven systems can dynamically adapt environmental stimuli – including lighting, sound, and scent – according to user behavior and context, fostering more engaging and socially interactive public spaces (Van Dijck & Poell, 2015; Hanna & Parvaresh, 2024).

These adaptive capabilities highlight how phygital spaces promote active participation and meaningful sensory experiences. To further elucidate these dynamics, Figure 2 presents AI-generated visualizations exemplifying multisensory engagement in phygital public environments. The left visualization depicts a park-based augmented reality scenario, wherein ambient auditory and olfactory stimuli are integrated to augment immersive user experience. The right visualization illustrates an urban plaza characterized by real-time adaptive

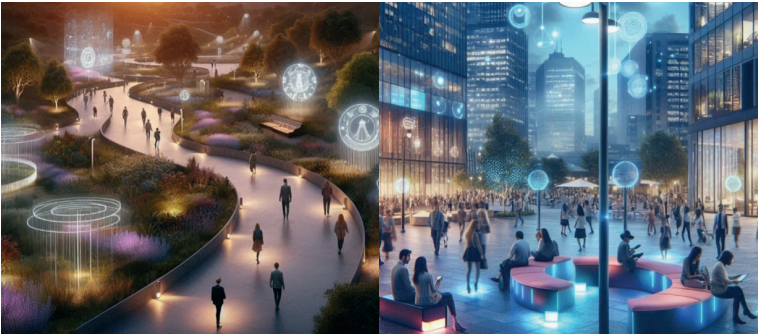


Figure 2.  
AI-generated  
visualizations of phygital  
public spaces. Left:  
AR-enhanced historical  
tour in a park. Right:  
AI-responsive plaza  
with dynamic ambient  
adaptation. Source:  
Authors (2025).

modulation of environmental variables through AI, highlighting the capacity of phygital design to create responsive, context-sensitive multisensory interactions. These representations underscore the potential of emerging technologies to mediate and enrich embodied spatial experiences, advancing the discourse on inclusive and interactive public space design.

**Table 1.**  
**Incorporation of**  
**Theoretical Concepts in**  
**Participatory Design &**  
**Phygital Environments.**

Author	Key Concept	Incorporation in Participatory Design & Phygital Environments
Ahmed	Affective economies	Activate emotions to foster collective engagement in hybrid environments.
Barad	Intra-action	Design interactions where subjects and spaces co-emerge.
Bennett	Vibrant matter	Use sensorially active materials to evoke affective responses.
Chen	Pluriversal epistemologies	Incorporate diverse knowledge systems to enrich participatory experiences.
Dewey	Aesthetic experience	Stimulate democratic engagement through sensory experience.
Haraway	Situated knowledges	Design from embodied, contextual perspectives.
Howes	Multisensory anthropology	Adapt sensory experiences to cultural diversity.
Ingold	Meshwork	Foster processual relations between people, materials, and space.
Malnar & Vodvarka	Sensory design	Engage participants through multisensory integration.
Merleau-Ponty	Embodied perception	Center design on lived bodily experience.
Pallasmaa	Haptic visuality	Emphasize touch and sound to enhance presence in hybrid spaces.
Pink	Sensory ethnography	Use sensory experiences to ground participation in lived realities.
Sennett	Sensory politics	Empower communities through sensory activation of hybrid public spaces.
Tuck & Yang	Decolonization	Involve marginalized groups in materially transformative participation.

Table 1 synthesizes key concepts from foundational scholars – such as Dewey (1934), Howes (2005) and Pallasmaa (2012) – demonstrating how multisensory engagement fosters inclusivity and empowerment

within participatory frameworks. Their work highlights the importance of integrating diverse sensory modalities across physical and digital spaces, enriching interaction and grounding participants' experiential connection to their environments (Bennett, 2010; Pink, 2015). This synthesis informs the development of more engaging, inclusive, and responsive participatory practices within phygital contexts.

## 20.3 Critical theories of data and AI

The integration of sensory design within digital participatory practices in phygital environments profoundly challenges and expands traditional paradigms of engagement with public and cultural spaces. Building on phenomenological foundations (Dewey, 1934; Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and postcolonial critiques (Chen, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012), sensory design moves beyond the dominance of visual and cognitive-rational modalities to embrace a multisensory, embodied form of participation that is deeply situated within cultural and affective contexts (Pallasmaa, 2012; Howes, 2005). This shift foregrounds perception as a relational, intra-active process wherein meaning and matter co-constitute one another (Barad, 2007; Ingold, 2011), destabilizing Cartesian dualisms and enabling more nuanced participatory experiences. Traditional participatory design, often limited to intellectual and visual engagement, risks reproducing exclusionary hierarchies and epistemic silences (Dewey, 1934; Ahmed, 2006). Sensory design challenges this by foregrounding the affective and corporeal dimensions of experience, fostering emotional investment and prolonged engagement through modalities such as touch, sound, and scent (Pink, 2015). This embodied participation generates not only cognitive but also visceral connections, allowing participants to inhabit and co-produce spaces with a heightened sense of ownership and agency (Bennett, 2010; Sennett, 2018).

Emerging digital technologies – augmented reality, virtual reality, artificial intelligence – amplify these possibilities by creating adaptive, multisensory environments that respond dynamically to individual and collective input (Pink, 2015; Howes, 2005). Far from supplanting the sensory, these technologies extend the sensory palette, enabling



personalized and inclusive engagements that accommodate diverse perceptual and cultural registers (Grosz, 2001). Yet, the deployment of sensory design in phygital contexts requires careful cultural calibration to avoid homogenizing sensory experiences and to respect situated epistemologies (Haraway, 1988; Simpson, 2014). Sensory preferences are culturally mediated, and what constitutes meaningful engagement varies across contexts, underscoring the imperative for empathetic, community-driven design processes that center marginalized voices and sensorial knowledges (Chen, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Moreover, sensory design operates as an ethical and political praxis that interrogates hegemonic sensory regimes, promotes epistemic justice, and enables the democratization of participatory spaces (Ahmed, 2006; Sennett, 2018). It amplifies the voices of those historically excluded from design discourse by offering multimodal channels of communication and co-creation, thus enriching both the process and outcomes of participatory design with pluralistic perspectives (Dewey, 1934; Bennett, 2010). Future trajectories for integrating sensory design into participatory urban regeneration demand experimental, speculative, and action-oriented methodologies. Research-action frameworks and sensory urban labs emerge as promising venues for iterative co-design that is adaptive, culturally sensitive, and anticipatory (Pink, 2015). These approaches facilitate critical explorations of how sensory technologies might shape future urban environments, supporting the emergence of more inclusive, responsive, and affectively rich public spaces. Such frameworks not only contribute to theoretical expansion but also foreground praxis, emphasizing the relationality of participants, environments, and technologies in co-constituting meaningful, democratic spaces. To strengthen the practical applicability of the proposed framework, the following actionable strategies synthesize the key interventions discussed throughout this section. These serve as guiding principles for implementing sensory participation in phygital environments, enhancing their clarity and usability in design practice: Key Actionable Strategies for Sensory Participation in Phygital Environments:

- integrate haptic feedback, auditory stimuli, and olfactory cues into digital and hybrid participatory platforms to deepen sensory engagement.

- Facilitate multisensory co-creation workshops that involve bodily interaction and emotional resonance through touch, sound, and scent alongside visual elements.
- Collaborate with local communities to identify and incorporate culturally resonant sensory practices and preferences, ensuring epistemic inclusion and contextual relevance.
- Design adaptive environments where materials and sensory components dynamically respond to users' movements, gestures, or emotional states.
- Employ augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) to simulate or amplify sensory experiences, expanding participation beyond physical constraints.
- Establish sensory research-action labs for iterative prototyping and real-world testing of multisensory interventions in co-designed urban spaces.
- Use speculative design approaches to explore alternative, inclusive sensory futures and provoke critical reflection on sensory regimes and social structures.
- Curate affective atmospheres through intentional sensory modulation (e.g., lighting, soundscapes, scent) to guide collective mood, interaction, and meaning-making processes.

## 20.4. Conclusion

The integration of sensory design into participatory digital practices within hybrid environments represents a critical shift in the understanding of spatial engagement. In contrast to approaches that have traditionally prioritized visual and discursive modes of interaction, sensory design introduces embodied, affective, and relational dimensions that broaden the spectrum of participation. Drawing on phenomenological and inclusive epistemologies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Haraway, 1988), this perspective reframes users not merely as observers or informants, but as active perceptual agents co-constituting space through multisensory experience. Digital tools – such as augmented and virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and immersive media – serve to amplify these embodied engagements. When applied

critically, they allow for the emergence of adaptive, inclusive, and emotionally resonant environments that reflect the lived experiences of diverse communities. However, the design of such interactions must acknowledge the sociocultural and political contexts in which sensory experiences are embedded. Sensory perception is shaped by histories, power structures, and embodied differences (Ahmed, 2006; Tuck & Yang, 2012), and its incorporation into participatory frameworks demands an ethics of attentiveness and care.

The epistemological and political implications of integrating sensory design into participatory practices in hybrid environments are far-reaching. At stake is not merely the expansion of sensory modalities, but a fundamental redistribution of who is recognized as a knower and whose ways of knowing are legitimized in design processes. Sensory participation challenges dominant cognitive and visual-centric epistemologies by foregrounding embodied, affective, and culturally situated knowledges – often held by marginalized groups historically excluded from design and planning discourse (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Foucault, 1970; Haraway, 1988; Ahmed, 2006). In phygital environments, where sensory experiences are increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures, questions of control emerge: who designs the algorithms that shape sensory engagement? Whose bodies and perceptual norms are encoded into immersive systems? Without critical attention, these technologies risk reproducing hegemonic sensory regimes that obscure pluralism and difference (Chen, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Therefore, sensory design must operate not only as an aesthetic or technical enhancement, but as an epistemic intervention – one that affirms diverse sensorial knowledges, redistributes authorship, and cultivates more just and inclusive forms of participation.

The implications for urban vitality are considerable. By fostering affective bonds, shared atmospheres, and deeper experiential ties to place, sensory design contributes to more inclusive, meaningful, and responsive processes of spatial co-creation. It strengthens community engagement, enhances collective memory, and supports practices of ecological awareness – core components of resilient and regenerative urban environments. To advance this field, further research must develop robust transdisciplinary methods for designing, analyzing,

and evaluating multisensory participation. Experimental and speculative approaches, including sensory action research and urban sensory labs, offer valuable opportunities for inquiry. Integrating perspectives from posthumanist and decolonial theory (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Chen, 2012), future investigations should explore how sensory design can function as both a methodological device and a political intervention. In doing so, participatory design will be better positioned to respond to the complexities of urban life, enabling the construction of hybrid environments that are technologically innovative, culturally grounded, and socially transformative.

To bridge theory and practice, the following Table 2 consolidates the main actionable strategies discussed throughout the article. These pathways offer designers and researchers concrete directions for implementing multisensory, inclusive, and context-sensitive participatory practices in phygital environments:

Pathway	Description	Relevance
Embodied Sensory Co-creation	Facilitate participatory workshops using multisensory stimuli to engage bodily and emotional awareness.	Enhances participant immersion, fostering deeper, sustained involvement and meaningful contributions.
Cultural Sensory Calibration	Incorporate local sensory practices and preferences through community collaboration.	Ensures cultural relevance and inclusion, avoiding sensory misinterpretation and promoting equity.
Material-Responsive Environments	Design adaptive spaces where materials and sensory elements dynamically interact with users.	Recognizes agency of materials, enabling environments that evolve responsively to participant input.
Digital Multisensory Augmentation	Employ AR, VR, and AI to simulate or amplify sensory experiences in participatory settings.	Expands accessibility and personalization, enriching engagement beyond physical constraints.
Speculative Sensory Futures	Use speculative design to explore alternative sensory scenarios and provoke critical reflection.	Opens innovation pathways by challenging assumptions and expanding design imagination.
Sensory Research-Action Labs	Create iterative, collaborative labs for real-world testing and refinement of sensory interventions.	Bridges theory and practice, promoting adaptive, evidence-based participatory frameworks.
Affective Sensory Facilitation	Design to regulate emotional atmospheres via sensory cues, guiding participant moods and interactions.	Strengthens affective bonds and social cohesion, supporting collective meaning-making processes.

**Table 2.**  
**Incorporation of Theoretical Concepts in Participatory Design & Phygital Environments.**

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# 21. Designing Digital Participatory Platforms: "Lisboa Participa" and "Decidim"

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary society is marked by swift digital technology advancement, transforming citizen engagement with public authorities and democratic processes. Digital participatory platforms have emerged as crucial tools for reimagining collective decision-making and fostering collaboration in urban governance. This paper examines how democratic participation is influenced by digital platforms from designers' perspective, focusing on innovative practices in policy and decision-making. We compare *Decidim*, an open-source participatory platform, and *Lisboa Participa*, Lisbon Municipality's platform, based on three Participatory Design strategies: design before design, open-ended participatory design, and agonistic participatory design. The analysis reveals six key dimensions through which designers influence public participation: involving non-designers in design processes, implementing continuous feedback mechanisms, ensuring digital accessibility, promoting transparency, balancing power dynamics, and encouraging democratic dialogue.

## 21.1 Introduction

Digital technologies have enabled new forms of social interaction that transcend traditional spatial, temporal, and institutional boundaries. The rise of digital forms of engagement, with its emphasis on many-to-many interaction, has challenged intermediary functions of traditional political organisations, as citizens increasingly find new ways to organise themselves outside of established structures (Culén, 2023). Digital technologies have been regarded by authors such as Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (2005) as a new «democratic atmosphere», characterized by a:

**(...) hybrid physical and virtual space made of places, networks, platforms, and digital media, which together create a wide variety of public arenas in which to discuss questions of common interest, make decisions, and make them operative (Latour & Weibel, 2005 cit. Manzini, 2019, p. 108).**

However, while direct interaction between individuals operates without traditional intermediaries, it often lacks structured occasions for thorough deliberation and thoughtful discourse (Manzini, 2019). Deterioration of democratic participation shows how antagonistic media formats grow along with the multiplication of echo chambers that diminish potential for meaningful participation.

To address challenges related to political and social polarization, some platforms have sought to promote new spaces for convergence of public authorities and citizens, such as participatory budgeting, citizen consultations and forums (Ferreira, 2022). Therefore, the digital dimension is addressed by designers as the main way to create new opportunities of participation, thus shaping new forms of gathering, discussion, and collective decision-making. As Manzini (2019, p.111) argues, this requires:

**considerable design capability into play: a creative and political effort that should lead to convergence between the potential of digital technology and the new media, and the practices of social innovation.**



Against this backdrop, designers hold considerable power to transform social relations, particularly when they acknowledge who is contenting what in the real world (Silva & Baek, 2022). Of particular significance is the designer's capacity for critical self-examination of decisions made to influence parameters within which people interact online (Design Commission, 2015). This influence reveals how designers hold power through design choices, affecting how others can participate in collective processes (Wizinsky, 2022).

Following Amatullo *et al.* (2022), power is not a finite resource to be redistributed, but rather the product of multiple channels. This perspective frames design as a practice that can generate power through relationship-building over time. By analysing how designers shape digital spaces, their role in the redistribution and generation of power through technology-mediated participation requires in-depth examination. With this in mind, the following sections aim to understand how designers influence public participation through their choices.

## 21.2 Design's perspective on digital platforms for democratic participation

In recent years, designers have been at the forefront of developing contributions that enable new forms of civic engagement to leverage social interactions in participatory processes (Manzini & Margolin, 2017). These efforts by the design community address main challenges regarding digital democratic participation, including the digital divide, dense language and lack of public awareness (Design Commission, 2015).

Design practices used in creating digital participatory platforms are framed in Manzini & Margolin's (2017) definition of design for democracy, which addresses opportunities for citizens to engage in participatory processes through digital technologies. Participatory Design (PD) methodologies prove extremely relevant, as they prioritise values in the design process such as equity, transparency and autonomy to «create systems that reflect collective input» (Silva *et al.*, 2024, p. 3). Furthermore, PD considers participants to be actively involved in the

design process as co-designers (Hagen, 2004; Manzini, 2019). Three strategies that originate from PD's approach to digital participatory platforms are highlighted by Silva (*et al.*, 2024): design before design; Open-ended participatory design; and Agonistic participatory design. The first strategy, design before design, focuses on early preparation to bridge participation gaps that might occur in the design process (Franzato, 2014). It involves understanding participants' capabilities and providing technical support before the main design phase to ensure common-ground is established between different individuals.

Open-ended participatory design enables continuous participant feedback throughout the project, since participants can raise issues and suggest improvements at any time, allowing designers to adapt to emerging needs, without following predetermined agendas (Björk-vinsson, 2008). This strategy allows designers to accommodate unpredictable dynamics by focusing on enabling meaningful exchanges between individuals through digital participatory platforms (Silva & Baek, 2022).

Finally, agonistic participatory design takes into account the legitimacy of the adversary, rather than an enemy to be destroyed in a deliberation (DiSalvo, 2022; Mouffe, 2000). Encouraging spaces for democratic dialogue that allow the legitimacy of the opponent to be recognised is vital to include all perspectives during the design process (DiSalvo & Meng, 2021).

The role of designers extends beyond interface development as «protagonists or saviors for these complex situations» (Silva & Baek, 2022, p.11) to a facilitator of social interactions through creative tools, enabling non-designers to be considered in the collective decision-making (Manzini, 2019). Through careful consideration of accessibility and power dynamics, designers influence how different communities interact within these spaces (Design Commission, 2015).

## 21.3 Methodology

This research employs a comparative design on two case studies: open-source platform *Decidim*, and platform *Lisboa Participa*. In the Iberian Peninsula, Barcelona and Lisbon stand as cities confronting

mounting challenges stemming from evolving urban landscapes and shifting social demographics. Participatory mechanisms have necessarily engaged with these transformations, positioning both cities as pioneering centers of democratic innovation.

The first phase involved document analysis regarding design approaches and implementation strategies of *Decidim* and *Lisboa Participa*. Document analysis focuses on systematic examination of academic and grey literature, and web resources regarding each platform. The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with platform developers, to provide more detailed information about their decision-making processes and experiences.

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis following the five-phase approach outlined by Muratovski (2021, p. 121) «Organizing the details around the case; Categorise the data; Interpret all single instances; Identify any patterns; Synthesize and generalize». The analysis focused directly on identifying how designers' practices in each digital participatory platform aligns with the three PD strategies: Design before design, Open-ended participatory design, and Agonistic participatory design (Björgvinsson *et al.*, 2008; DiSalvo & Meng, 2021; Franzato, 2014; Silva *et al.*, 2024) as analytical lenses identified in the literature review. Therefore, this study prioritizes designers' perspectives and decision-making processes through a comparative analysis of both platforms.

## 21.4 Dissecting platform anatomies

### 21.4.1 Social contract and design principles: Decidim's approaches

*Decidim* is a free, open-source digital platform supported by an international community of designers and IT developers led by Platoniq (Bussu *et al.*, 2024). It aims to create transparent and accessible participation spaces where citizens can express their opinions, propose initiatives and take part in debates (Barandiaran *et al.*, 2024).

*Decidim* originated from the *decidim.barcelona initiative*, launched in 2016, which allowed a massive citizen engagement in municipal policy making, with 39000 people participating, including 1741 organizations (Garcia *et al.*, 2023). *Decidim.barcelona* started from Barce-

Iona's municipal government's desire to transform urban governance by creating a more participative and transparent democratic process (Barandiaran *et al.*, 2024).

According to Barandiaran *et al.* (2024), many institutions have shown resistance to the full application of participation tools, often limiting them due to fear and hesitation. The authors state that representative democratic institutions have had difficulties to adopt *Decidim* in policy processes and legal frameworks. Furthermore the Spanish government's ban on municipal referendums posed yet another barrier to this ambition. There have even been cases of direct opposition from large companies, as Barandiaran *et al.* (2024, p. 120) explain:

**in some cases, most notably Barcelona's attempt to bring to a referendum the municipalisation of water management, Decidim have faced fierce opposition from big corporations, such as Agbar, mobilising legal and communicative resources to discredit, block or even sabotage direct decision-making capabilities.**

The social contract serves as a fundamental set of technopolitical design principles that shape *Decidim*'s development, in which all technical decisions have democratic implications: Free Software and Open Content; Transparency, Traceability, and Integrity; Equal Opportunities; Participant's Privacy; Democratic Quality and Inclusiveness (Borges & Ferreira, 2022).

Spaces are frameworks that define how participation occurs, including processes for budgeting and planning, assemblies for councils and working groups (Decidim, 2017). These spaces are complemented by components, which are functional elements that enable interaction, including meetings, proposals, blogs, debates, information pages, surveys, results and comments (Borges & Ferreira, 2022). *Decidim*'s strength lies in flexibility with which these elements can be combined within spaces to create customized participatory processes (Cardullo *et al.*, 2023).

*Decidim* recognizes four distinct types of proposal creators, acknowledging the complex nature of social organization rather than reducing everything to individual actions (Cardullo *et al.*, 2023). *Decidim* represents a unique design challenge because its aim is not to serve

a specific market or user base, but to redefine governance and enable radical democratisation of social coordination (Cardullo *et al.*, 2023).

#### **21.4.2 From portal to platform: Lisbon's participatory journey**

The *Lisboa Participa* platform, designed by private company One-Source and held by the municipality of Lisbon, brings together participatory processes promoted by local authority, such as Orçamento Participativo de Lisboa (Lisbon Participatory Budget), Conselho de Cidadãos (Citizens' Council), and other projects (CML, 2025). It was launched in 2017 on the basis of the pre-existing Participation Portal created in 2011, to design a continuous functional participation system (Graça, 2018).

By concentrating all participatory tools in one platform, the platform seeks to promote co-responsibility between municipality and its citizens, while fostering transparency in the ways citizens' inputs are integrated within the municipal management (Smart Cities, 2017). *Lisboa Participa* also seeks to foster citizens' trust in participatory processes, as well as making citizens feel involved in the city's governance and policies (Participedia, 2017).

The Participatory Budget has currently given way to Citizens' Council, but it is still possible to access reports with information on past editions. Citizens' Council is employed once a year and entails a compromise from citizens, who are chosen by sortition, to reflect on a theme pre-defined by the municipality, in order to co-create several proposals for the city (Falanga, 2022). Selected citizens meet in person in two sessions which are moderated by a group of independent facilitators. However, the role of *Lisboa Participa* in Citizens' Council is merely to provide information on each edition, such as the methodology used and reports. On a technical level, *Lisboa Participa* was built as a proprietary system integrated with the municipality's existing IT infrastructure (Smart Cities, 2017). This approach means there are no provisions for other organizations, civil society groups, or municipalities to use, adapt, or build upon the platform. While the Municipality maintains tight quality control and alignment with specific municipal objectives (Programa Cidades Sustentáveis, 2020), the platform has limited opportunities for innovation through external contributions.

## 21.5 The design(ers) of *Decidim* and *Lisboa Participa*

### 21.5.1 Building democracy in code: platoniq's vision

During her interview, one of the co-founders of Decidim, emphasized the importance of combining digital and physical participation mediums to address digital divide: «when I think of *Decidim*, I also try to bring the offline space and layer also to the conversation». She highlighted additional features that enhance citizen engagement and transparency, describing the «history feature». This feature creates a visual timeline showing how proposals transform throughout the participatory process, helping citizens understand what happens to their input.

When asked about balancing political values, technical requirements and power structures, the co-founder provided insights from Decidim's evolution. She explained that initially, the project started with people who shared political affinity and values. However, as the project grew, other countries and regions – such as Finland and Latin America – placed new opportunities and challenges, including varying perspectives on governance and institutional trust.

By including varying perspectives on governance and institutional trust, she gave the example of Northern European countries that hold higher trust in public institutions when compared to Southern countries. Interestingly, this created tensions between participants who wanted a more neutral platform versus those who believed in embedded political principles. The interviewee also explained that they are currently in the middle of a process to define clearer rules on technological governance in conjunction with political aspects, demonstrating how *Decidim* is navigating the very balance between politics and technology.

Regarding the challenge of creating platforms that embrace complexity while maintaining accessibility, the co-founder acknowledged it as an ongoing struggle. She explained that they maintain accessibility by systematically collecting reports from different implementations worldwide, then incorporating feedback in development sprints. The interviewee described their design approach

as work in progress. She further elaborated on the participatory design philosophy, explaining that they open «the very design of the platform to anyone that wants to have an incidence on that».

The co-founder also acknowledged that implementing *Decidim* poses technical challenges, particularly for social movements. She suggested the need for a lighter *Decidim* specifically designed for social organizations, with simpler features more suited to their needs, in order to be embraced and used by these movements. Although she affirmed that the platform has been more readily adopted by institutions than by autonomous civil society groups, she pointed out that the implementation of *Decidim* varies significantly across different countries and contexts, requiring flexibility.

### **21.5.2 Between bureaucracy and participation: Onesource's balancing act**

The OneSource team, composed by the project manager, an IT developer and a sociologist emphasized, during their interview, that accessibility and transparency are core values embedded in the platform. They consciously aim to create interfaces that accommodate diverse user groups, especially considering technological literacy levels.

The project manager provided a detailed perspective during the interview, emphasizing their key principle «it's not the platform that defines a process. The process defines the platform». This approach reflects understanding that participatory digital spaces must be fundamentally adaptable to specific needs of each participatory process, rather than forcing processes into predetermined technological frameworks.

The OneSource team brings together diverse stakeholders and, in some cases, citizen representatives, into the design process to co-create prototypes. During the design process, they create three to four different interface design options for the same process, then deconstruct and reconstruct them. This approach allows for substantial flexibility, enabling them to completely invert process cycles, phases, and characteristics. The IT developer acknowledged limitations imposed by municipal bureaucracies, especially when dealing with an institutional platform for the largest municipal cham-

ber in Portugal. Mediation of the process was complex and often time-consuming, involving multiple layers of decision-making.

Yet, the project manager acknowledges that despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. Even with simplified interfaces, many participants struggle to understand basic participation rules. He notes that in some processes, 25-30% of votes are invalid because people cannot or do not follow the guidelines.

According to the project manager, simplifying inherently complex participatory processes is challenging, as he states that it cannot be done entirely. His approach is to break down the process into digestible phases, while avoiding detailed technical explanations that might discourage participation. For example, in a participatory budgeting process, the OneSource team initially focuses solely on encouraging people to contribute ideas, without immediately explaining the entire subsequent evaluation and voting mechanisms.

The IT developer also noted that complex registration requirements discouraged participation in public consultations. Therefore, they simplified the process by making forms publicly accessible without prior registration. This change led to over 2000 inscriptions for the Citizens Council last year, from which 50 participants were chosen, while also improving data collection.

## **21.6 Participatory design strategies in Decidim and Lisboa Participa: a comparative analysis**

*Decidim* and *Lisboa Participa* reveal fundamentally different strategies for enabling citizen engagement. *Decidim* presents a modular, highly configurable platform that allows for complex and multi-layered participation mechanisms. Its design embraces complexity, offering a wide range of components. This approach reflects a philosophy of technological empowerment, where participants are given tools to shape democratic interactions. In contrast, *Lisboa Participa* adopts a more streamlined and focused approach. The platform prioritizes simplification of participatory workflow and accessibility. Whereas



*Decidim* offers multiple interaction channels, *Lisboa Participa* focuses on creating clear participation pathways for each practice.

Fundamental principles of these platforms represent distinct approaches to digital democracy. *Decidim* emerges as a radical reimagining of democratic participation, built on a comprehensive social contract with principles of free software, transparency, and inclusivity. By contrast, *Lisboa Participa* operates within a municipal framework. Its design principles center on accessibility and transparency, but with a more pragmatic goal of improving existing governance structures rather than radically reimagining them. PD strategies further illuminate the distinctive approaches of these platforms, with key differences summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Application of the PD  
strategies (Silva *et al.*,  
2024) in each platform.  
Authors' own work adapted  
from Franzato (2014);  
Björgvinsson (2008);  
DiSalvo & Meng (2021).

	Decidim	Lisboa Participa
Design before design	Provides technical support to partners and participants through every stage of the process in order to bridge participation gaps.	Consciously designed to accommodate diverse user groups with different age ranges and technological literacy levels. Limited early development to experts only.
Open-ended participatory design	Maintains continuous global feedback through Metadecidim community with a "work in progress" philosophy, allowing participants to shape development. The platform's complexity can exclude some users, hindering full participation.	Incorporates a collaborative design process by developing multiple prototypes. Participant's feedback is also implemented, but only of those who can fully use it.
Agonistic participatory design	Creates spaces that legitimize different perspectives, positioning dissent as central to democracy. It accommodates these complex interactions, through a myriad of components.	Takes a simplified approach focusing on clear communication. Citizens' Council sessions promote dialogue, but platform participation is limited to those selected through sortition.

### 21.6.1 Design before design

In design before design phase, both platforms demonstrate unique preparation methodologies. *Decidim* aimed to create a comprehensive platform accessible to individuals with diverse technical skills, focusing on bridging participation gaps and providing technical support. In preparatory phases of participatory processes, Platoniq team supports its partners and participants with discussion sessions. This approach allows for greater reflection on how the platform can serve participatory processes in a practical way and establishes environments for people to realise their sense of co-creation.

However, *Decidim*'s comprehensive approach faces practical challenges in implementation. According to Barandiaran *et al.* (2024), many institutions have shown resistance to the full application of

participation tools, often limiting them due to fear and hesitation. The Barcelona City Council provides a compelling counterpoint, demonstrating how committed institutional leadership can successfully integrate *Decidim*.

*Lisboa Participa* similarly prioritized accessibility, but with a more localized approach. Early stages of *Lisboa Participa*'s development involved only a restricted group of professionals from different fields, limiting citizen involvement. While Silva (*et al.*, 2024) suggest these preparatory phases could reduce participation gaps by serving as mentoring experiences where participants learn together about platform development implications, this approach was not fully implemented in *Lisboa Participa*'s case.

### 21.6.2 Open-ended participatory design

Open-ended participatory design strategy reveals pronounced differences. *Decidim* embraces continuous feedback, with development sprints dedicated to incorporating participants' suggestions through the *Metadecidim* community. By maintaining a work in progress philosophy, the *Platoniq* team creates a favourable environment for participants to discuss and explore their involvement in participatory processes without being constrained by pre-established agendas.

*Lisboa Participa* approaches this strategy through collaborative design processes, creating multiple graphic design prototypes and involving diverse stakeholders in platform development. An open-ended strategy helps address lack of consensus on digital democracy conditions, enabling participants to shape the platform according to their needs (Silva *et al.*, 2024).

Nevertheless, *Lisboa Participa*'s content decisions occur through a restricted process before citizen involvement opportunities arise, meaning that citizens are not seen as active creative contributors.

These different approaches to open-ended participatory design reveal distinct participation outcomes. *Decidim*'s continuous feedback model has seen successful implementations in some cooperatives and collaborative economy projects such as *Som Connexió*, yet uptake by social movements remains limited (Barandiaran *et al.*, 2024; Peña-López, 2019). The platform's myriad of possibilities can generate enough complexity to exclude some users from fully participating.

*Lisboa Participa*'s more controlled approach addresses accessibility concerns but creates limitations. The newly reformulated Mais Participação (More Participation) page shows 3839 registered users in the platform (CML, 2025). However, activity levels remain unclear, reflecting the challenges of measuring engagement in simplified participation platforms.

### 21.6.3 Agonistic participatory design

Agonistic participatory design further distinguishes these platforms. *Decidim* explicitly creates spaces that recognise legitimacy of different perspectives, and accommodates complex and multifaceted interactions that reflect the nuanced nature of democratic discourse, which allows participants to shape their own paths within the platform.

*Lisboa Participa* takes a more subtle approach. While Citizens' Council in-person sessions promote pluralistic dialogue, *Lisboa Participa* doesn't provide space for citizens to comment on selected, ongoing, or completed projects unless they participated in these sessions. Consequently, citizens not selected through sortition lack opportunities to engage in decision-making processes affecting Lisbon. This technical decision creates a fundamental democratic limitation - the platform no longer encompasses the opinions of all citizens, functioning instead as a limited deliberation space restricted to a select few. This raises critical questions about the trade-offs between manageable participation processes and democratic inclusivity.

## 21.7 Conclusions

This paper contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of designers in digital participatory platforms by identifying six key dimensions through which designers influence public participation. Based on analysis of case studies *Decidim* and *Lisboa Participa*, we have observed that designers can influence public participation through their decision-making processes when designing digital participatory platforms. Our analysis reveals that each platform model proves most effective under specific conditions. *Decidim* succeeds when supported by strong institutional commitment and adequate techni-

cal resources, as demonstrated in Barcelona, while Lisboa Participa's streamlined approach may be more suitable for municipalities prioritizing immediate accessibility over comprehensive participation.

A more nuanced understanding of the impact of design choices on a practical level reveals six dimensions that shape how public participation will take place in digital platforms:

- Involving non-designers in design process;
- implementing feedback in work in progress approach;
- ensuring digital accessibility;
- promoting transparency and accountability through open-access features;
- maintaining the power dynamics balanced;
- encouraging democratic and constructive dialogue between parties involved.

These dimensions represent a novel framework for understanding how design decisions directly translate into democratic participation outcomes. Digital participation platforms are, as intended, tools. They should not be seen as the only way to overcome the participation crisis. Designers must be able to rely on them, but they must also be able to transform these digital platforms into hybrid platforms that connect not only physical and digital spaces, but also citizens and policy-makers.

Combining different dimensions, relationships and voices allows for more informed decision-making and therefore more comprehensive solutions that people can identify with and will use intentionally. The final considerations of this study prompted further questions that may be explored in the future. Although there are many ways to actively participate in democratic spaces, we are not entirely clear on why citizens increasingly choose not to. Likewise, we also wonder what designers could do to mitigate what looks like a contradiction in our democracies. The capacity to undertake action in this matter remains to be ascertained and we trust more research on this topic can offer tremendous insights in the days ahead.

# Acknowledgement

This research was conducted within the framework of the INSPIRE: Intersectional Spaces of Participation: Inclusive, Resilient, Embedded project, funded by the European Commission under Grant Agreement 101132292.

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## 22. Hybrid Spaces Network Milano.it/net/org. The need for a virtual hub

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### ABSTRACT

How to co-design a digital platform that brings together the uniqueness of each hybrid sociocultural space of the Network of Hybrid Spaces of Milan? How to highlight the network and the possibility of finding ways of being together not mediated by consumption, but by collaborations to experiment and collectively inhabit the spaces? How to define a common lexicon and recognize oneself within national and international practices and networks? Digital innovation will foster the exchange of knowledge and skills between the spaces and their audiences. These are the challenges that Stecca3 and Mare Culturale Urbano have undertaken since 2022, first with the support of the Ministry through the *TOCC call for proposals* of the Ministry of Culture and since 2024, with the support of the Municipality of Milan, Department of Welfare and Proximity Economy and the entire network of hybrid socio cultural spaces of Milan. The platform will be launched publicly by the end of 2025.

## 22.1 Context and motivation

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Milan's hybrid sociocultural spaces have confronted themselves with relevant questions, during the long period of inactivity and the many concerns, including not being able to have the economic and social resources to restart. However, the pandemic was also a period in which the experimentation of digital tools had a great development and acquired relevance, also to stay in touch with the communities of each space and network between similar realities. The idea of a digital platform to give relevance to the movement of Milan's hybrid sociocultural spaces and to cross-reference the self-organized activities and services that these entities offer in many neighborhoods of the city was born precisely between 2021 and 2022, together with the informal network of hybrid socio-cultural spaces to which 26 Milanese entities have joined. The twelve months that have passed between lockdowns and restarts have shown how a network of relationships and collaborations, born and developed also in hybrid socio-cultural spaces, are fundamental to create and encourage proximity relationships, collaborative welfare services and solidarity economy (Cacciari, 2016), as inclusive as possible, which address citizens with particular attention to the most fragile parts of the population. They are places of reference in the neighborhood where it is possible to activate self-organized services such as: popular bicycle workshops, social carpentry, organic market, coworking, public meetings and exhibitions, cinema, dance (see section 3). Stecca<sup>31</sup> and Mare Culturale Urbano<sup>2</sup>, among the founders of the informal network of Hybrid Spaces of Milan in 2023, participated and won the funding of the TOCC Call of the Ministry of Culture<sup>3</sup> (digital transition of cultural and creative organizations) an opportunity to investigate and above all create tools that can respond to the digital renewal and make the cultural contents of the network more accessible, contributing to greater awareness, within the territory, of the heritage and proximity services offered to citizens by these cultural outposts. The innovation and digital transition of socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces can contribute to an «open city» (Sennet, 2019) capable of adapting and welcoming unexpected uses and populations, new ways of producing self-organized services, part of a collaborative welfare.

**Note 1.**  
<http://www.lastecca.org/>.

**Note 2.**  
<https://maremilano.org/>.

**Note 3.**  
<https://creativitacontemporanea.cultura.gov.it/pnrr-tocc-azione-b2/>.





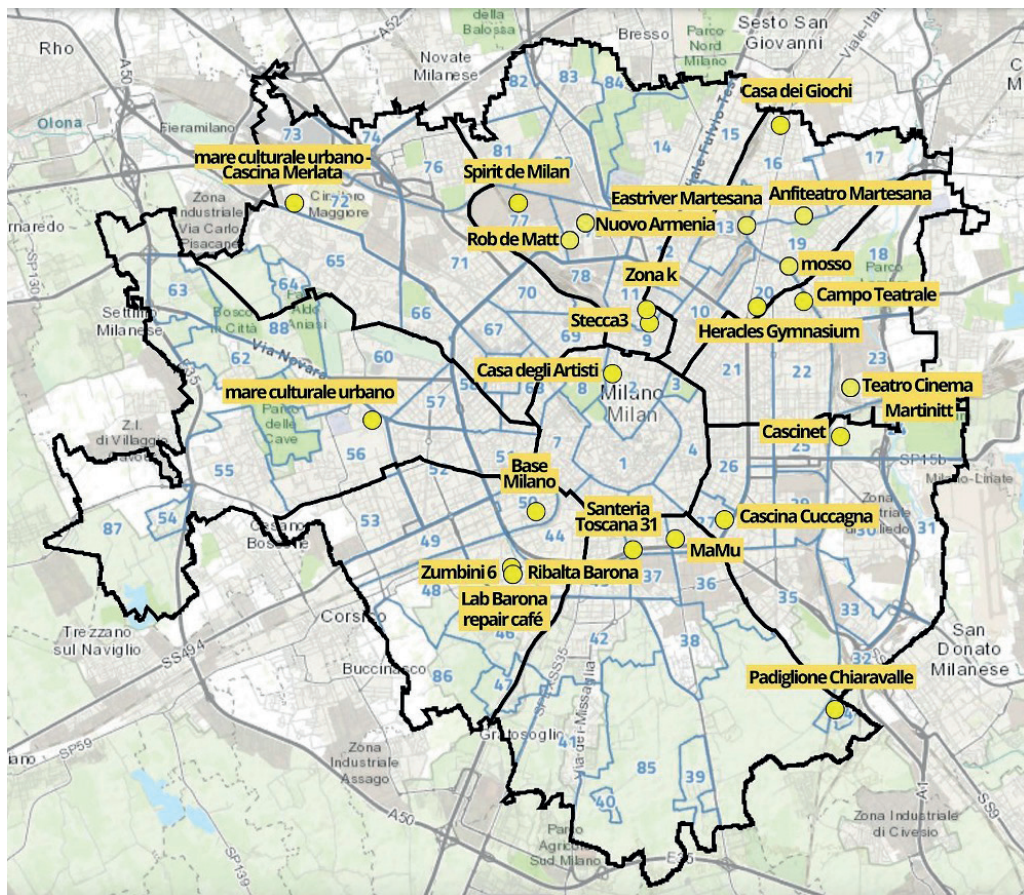
Since 2022, the Municipal Administration has given recognition to these entities with the establishment of the Qualified List *Network of Hybrid Spaces of the City of Milan* with the aim of surveying, networking and promoting new forms of collaboration. Among these, the Notice of public investigation aimed at identifying Third Sector entities available for co-designing interventions to strengthen the *Network of Hybrid Spaces of the City of Milan*, with which the Municipality has sought Third Sector Entities (ETS) for the co-designing of promotional activities towards the public, citizens and local organizations. Thanks to this opportunity, it was possible to implement the Hybrid

Spaces Network platform of Milan created thanks to the funding of TOCC, adapting it to the needs of the entities that have joined the call of the Municipality of Milan for the creation of the qualified list *Network of Hybrid Spaces of the City of Milan*, defined as follows by the Municipality of Milan:

Since 2012, the Municipality of Milan has launched a series of initiatives aimed at the reuse, regeneration and enhancement of underused municipal properties by entrusting said spaces to private entities or private social entities for the implementation of social and cultural projects. In addition to the initiatives carried out by the Municipality, in recent years in Milan several similar experiences of urban regeneration with a social and cultural basis have been born, supported by private investments and/or by other institutions or banking foundations and philanthropic entities. The combination of these initiatives has led to the creation of numerous places of sociality, aggregation and cultural enjoyment in the neighborhoods through the recovery of a portion of abandoned, underused or confiscated public and private real estate assets from organized crime. (e.g. former industrial spaces, farms, former places of worship, former schools, former office spaces, etc.). These experiences of socio-cultural urban regeneration - conventionally defined as Hybrid Spaces and also widespread in many other urban centers in Italy and abroad - have the ability to combine entrepreneurship, innovation, social inclusion and rootedness in local communities, through original forms of organization, management and production of products and services. On these premises, the Municipality of Milan establishes the qualified list *Network of Hybrid Spaces of the City of Milan* with the aim of surveying, networking and promoting new forms of collaboration with these realities spread throughout the neighborhoods, in the perspective of the 15-minute city<sup>4</sup>.

Note 4.  
<https://economiaelavoro.comune.milano.it/progetti/rete-spazi-ibridi-della-citta-di-milano>.

The twelve months that have passed between lockdowns and re-starts have shown how a network of relationships and collaborations, born and developed also in Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces, are fundamental to create and encourage proximity relationships, collaborative



**Figure 2.**  
Qualified List Network  
of Hybrid Spaces in the  
City of Milan City of  
Milan, Neighbourhood  
Economic Development  
Unit; 2025.

welfare services and solidarity economy (Cacciari, 2016), as inclusive as possible, which address citizens with particular attention to the most fragile parts of the population. They are places of reference in the neighborhood where it is possible to activate self-organized services such as: popular bicycle workshop, social carpentry, organic markets, coworking, public meetings and exhibitions, cinema, dance (see section 22.3).

The digital transition is transforming the way we interact, socialize and work. Trying to reconcile the physical and digital worlds, to create new inclusive and accessible experiences for an increasingly diverse audience is the challenge that led to the creation of the digital platform of the Sociocultural Hybrid Spaces Network of Milan.

Activate a network governance model, a virtual community, and digital platforms to support urban movements, such as the Turin

Neighbourhood Network<sup>5</sup> and Lo Stato dei Luoghi<sup>6</sup> at the national level, and the Urbane Praxis network in Berlin<sup>7</sup>, and Plateau Urbain<sup>8</sup> in France, and Trans Europe Halles<sup>9</sup> at international level.

## 22.2 Vision and platform functions

Stecca3 and Mare Culturale Urbano, together with Parco Studio, which has been designing communication systems and visual strategies since 2010, with particular attention to issues of socio-cultural relevance and the constant search for possible intersections with contemporary visual culture, have developed a B2C – business to consumer platform shared with the network of hybrid socio-cultural spaces in Milan that we believe can offer a series of practical and easily usable tools for the public to better understand the activities and nature of these spaces: a shared calendar that communicates the cultural schedule of the network to the entire city, facilitating knowledge and enjoyment of these realities. At the same time, it also offers useful ideas to a sector audience with, for example, the creation of a coordinated image of the network without overlapping with the brand identity of individual entities, with information sections on individual spaces, with a shared glossary, with a manifesto of intent, with the study of the impact generated by individual Spaces and the Network as a whole, with knowledge of international networks of similar experiences, all useful tools for recognizing hybrid socio-cultural spaces and for accompanying the activation of new ones.

Which tools were chosen? A VIRTUAL HUB with a geolocalized basis, in which the stories of the spaces of the network are collected, the activities that the different realities carry out are told and how to participate and propose new projects through a custom platform.

The output of the platform is a website where it is possible to consult the various events/courses/self-organized services that take place in the different spaces, an interactive map that automatically interfaces the calendars of all the realities filtered through a list of keywords defined by the network itself. Furthermore, a page dedicated to the common values of the network and to national and international networks to contextualize the sociocultural transformations taking

**Note 5.**  
<https://www.retecasesdelquartiere.org/>.

**Note 6.**  
<https://www.lostatodeiluoghi.com/>.

**Note 7.**  
<https://www.urbanepaxis.berlin/>.

**Note 8.**  
<https://www.plateau-urbain.com/>.

**Note 9.**  
<https://www.teh.net/milano>.

place, not only in Milan. The platform also includes a backend section, a B2B (business to business) software shared only with the entities of the hybrid spaces network to create virtuous exchange economies aimed at promoting sustainable development and competitiveness opportunities. An integrated system of services for the hybrid spaces network, including tools to facilitate the circulation of internal information; solutions to facilitate the sharing of tangible and intangible resources and internal knowledge; solutions for the centralized purchasing of goods and services and the promotion of agreements and conventions; technical and organizational solutions for raising funds, monitoring; and training and skills development activities. By using these tools, organizations belonging to the Hybrid Spaces Network will be able to share resources, reduce costs, benefit from economies of scale and organize common services for the benefit of the spaces themselves.

In order to make the network operational, it is therefore necessary to activate a set of coordination tools between partners that can promote aligned decisions and convergent actions to support collaboration within the network and, ultimately, the achievement of the objective that each company sets itself when joining the network. The main expected outcomes are facilitate the knowledge and offer of self-organized services. The platform allows users to know and access more easily the self-organized services of hybrid spaces. What is meant by Self-organized Services? An offer in the absence, in complement or as an alternative to traditional public or private services at market price. Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces usually have a prevalent vocation that attracts a target audience and animators and managers who are highly recognizable for a profession. However, the platform tool favors the flow of information and circulation between spaces in order to learn to welcome different knowledge, services attentive to local requests for different ages, and if possible also seek collaborations and international audiences:

- Allow the interaction of population flows. The B2C platform implements the knowledge of the spaces and favors the access of different populations and interaction through sharing, co-presence, overlapping, conflict/collision, coalition, cooperation, collaboration.



- Plan a management and animation for interaction. The B2C platform enhances the different skills, make them meet and interact, offer them to the public both in everyday life for sector audiences, but also create a schedule and animation inside the hybrid space towards the neighborhood and towards the city
- To facilitate communication it was decided that the url of the platform should have a contracted form: *retespaziibridi.mi.it*, while the name of the network in the texts should always be expressed in full *Network of Hybrid Spaces of the City of Milan*, because the word sociocultural defines the very nature of these places.

Stecca3 and the other hybrid sociocultural spaces of Milan are places spread throughout the territories, in the neighborhoods and are generative spaces of self-organized services for a 15-minute city (Moreno, 2024), inclusive and enabling spaces for people and the community. The work of these entities pays attention to the knowledge of the contexts in which they operate, also implementing an ability to network with different subjects, experimenting with new forms of use. The diversification of the cultural offer and the planning of new spatialities manage to involve different audiences.

The initiatives proposed by the project aim to increase the knowledge of these places to the community so that it can use them and at the same time be an active part in the planning. Make known and promote these spaces of freedom, of possibility, where one can express one's creativity, spaces of education in sharing, in the use of common space also to consolidate the culture and education in the use of public and collective spaces. The planned digital tools will help to intensify the dialogue with the neighborhood, the city regarding the public utility work that is produced in these spaces.

## 22.3 Co-design process

Between December 2024 and March 2025, with the support of the Municipality of Milan, three meetings were organised to discuss the structure of the future website and to create a shared glossary and

a common vision. The first meeting took place at Stecca3 in plenary session, with all spaces participating with one or two representatives for the Milan hybrid spaces network project. The structure of the digital platform was presented by Stecca3 and Parco Studio, which was met with positive feedback from all participants. The need to share a common lexicon emerged, namely the creation of a glossary as well as a page dedicated to common values and a newsletter dedicated to the network's actions. The second meeting was conducted in smaller groups of 8 spaces at a time, in order to go into finer detail. The third meeting was dedicated individually to each space in order to collect data for each file to be uploaded to the website and to define the self-organized services for the image coordination of each entity. One of the outcomes of the co-design phase was to try to redefine keywords and definitions that take into account the diversity of the individual hybrid spaces, but which at the same time help an external audience understand where to find what they are looking for. An open and indicative list of words is provided to the referents of each space, words that define a new common lexicon for sociocultural hybrid spaces. To fill in the table it is useful and important to keep in mind that services, courses and events will have different frequencies and times of use, and to try to identify in which space they are carried out, whether monofunctional/fixed (e.g. laboratories, offices) or multifunctional/flexible (large rooms, gyms, grand hall); they are asked to specify the frequency of the different courses, events and services and whether they are held in fixed or flexible spaces.

To identify similar activities, a word is collectively chosen that can bring together the different nuances of the self-organized services of the 26 spaces that participated in the co-design. Here is a first list that identifies 29 self-organized services of the sociocultural hybrid spaces of Milan, still under discussion with the Municipality of Milan:

1. after-school (children's entertainment activities, campus, outdoor education);
2. artistic residences (atelier);
3. book consultation (bookstore, book presentation, book crossing, library, publishing, play library);
4. cinema (cineforum);
5. community garden (nursery, social garden);

6. co-working, co-studying;
7. dance hall (music-dance hall-disco-club);
8. exhibition space (exhibition, art, displays);
9. guesthouse (hostel);
10. job placement;
11. laboratory (diy, self-production atelier, crafts, bicycle workshop, social carpentry, tailoring, toolmaking, violin making, personal care workshops, open studio);
12. legal help desk (listening, psychological, legal, study and work orientation desk);
13. live music (dj set, live music, music, concerts);
14. market (beehive, organic, self-produced food and artisanal, second-hand, garage sale 1 barter, agricultural market)
15. neighborhood infopoint (neighborhood concierge, neighborhood hub, informal listening point);
16. performing art (theater, dance, theatrical performances, shows, stand up, performance events, singing);
17. play library- games, tournaments (games, board games, game manuals, street games, game library);
18. popular gym (sports, wellness activities, yoga, boxing, functional training, cross training, preventive gymnastics, calisthenics, historical fencing, capoeira, muscle toning, baby rugby);
19. public meetings (talks, debates, presentations);
20. recording studio (music, video, radio-podcast, film, artistic productions (multimedia productions));
21. rehearsal room;
22. refreshment point (kiosk-restaurant-bar-bookshop-agriritoro-wine bar);
23. shared oven, kitchen (catering, food hub);
24. shared transport (van, cargo bike, share bike)
25. shared warehouse;
26. shop (organic, shop);
27. social agriculture (agroforestry, green);
28. training-courses (continuing training, internships, cooking courses, dance courses, dialect courses, marketing courses; music mentor, tour manager, dj set, how to make a record, the



- record company, art therapy, wellness courses, educational beekeeping, theatre workshops, chess, games, gardening courses, nursery plants, seeds and plants, self-production of scenic elements and installations, drawing and data collection workshops, training for companies, artistic workshops, diction, corporate team building, art);
29. territorial animation (guided tours, territorial animation)

## 22.4 Challenges and next steps

As this is an ongoing process, there are still many challenges to be faced in order to understand how the platform works and how to modify it to accommodate possible changes in the network's needs and new partners. Some of the critical issues and challenges that emerged during the co-design phase are:

- highlight that hybrid sociocultural spaces are *territorial antennas* capable of capturing what comes from below, which allow ideas that arise from informal groups to flourish and give them a hearing and space for it to happen; understand what is moving and give it space, train for collaborations with experts, give space, support and tools. Give space to what is born spontaneously;
- how to cover the costs of maintaining the platform and attracting new partners. An initial proposal is to self-tax in order to ensure the continuity of the project;
- reaffirm subsidiarity with neighborhood services. A shared value is not wanting to replace the public, but to be complementary and integrative. (Manifesto informal network hybrid spaces, 2022);
- highlight the aspect of self-sustainability of spaces, the ability to reinvent new economies (not only culture, not only volunteering, but also trade and sustainable tokens for organized activities);
- make it clear that there is solidarity between spaces rather than competition, even if similar events and activities are held, there is undoubtedly solidarity between spaces and a

recognition that the exchange of knowledge and skills brings greater advantages than individual competition;

- reaffirm accessibility to spaces, you do not necessarily have to consume to enter and many activities are also free or affordable in terms of costs for courses and activities;
- give prominence to smaller or younger entities, so that they can experiment with the support of the network;
- highlight the differentiation of the proposals. Milan is a city that works a lot with audience targets and univocal themes and vocations, while hybrid spaces are multi-identity in the imagination of the neighborhood and citizen.

In conclusion, the network of hybrid sociocultural spaces in Milan represents a unique opportunity to promote culture and foster social inclusion. Digital social innovation<sup>10</sup> is less about technological innovation and more about social innovation – a process of finding innovative, effective and sustainable solutions to pressing societal challenges, such as those listed before, and if approached carefully, can help transform access to cultural content, making it more usable and accessible to all. The next steps are to launch the online platform by the end of 2025, together with the 26 spaces participating in the Milan municipality's hybrid spaces network register. By strengthening communication and promotion of hybrid spaces, we aim to highlight the realities that work for a new role of culture in the places we live in. The future goal is to innovate cultural, artistic, educational and welfare practices, promoting contemporary artistic productions and combating inequalities, thus promoting social inclusion.

**Note 10.**  
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This volume investigates the potential of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces as engines of urban regeneration, democratic participation, and cultural innovation. Emerging at the intersection of cultural production, social experimentation, and territorial transformation, these spaces challenge conventional boundaries between public and private, temporary and permanent, physical and digital. Through four main sections, the book develops a critical and impactful perspective on the functions, design and interdisciplinary approaches, and transformative potential of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces. From their evolving role as plural ecosystems to their capacity to generate declinations of public value; from cultural and participatory practices that reclaim and reimagine the commons to the opportunities and challenges introduced by digital technologies; it offers a multifaceted lens on *hybrid practices* in contemporary urban and territorial contexts. By weaving together theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and case studies, this book provides critical reflections by and for scholars, practitioners, and institutions. How can cultural initiatives generate new alliances between institutions and communities? What forms of participation can strengthen the democratic role of public space? And what challenges arise in connecting physical and virtual dimensions for collective engagement?