# Situated Vocabularies

A SITUATED AND AGONISTIC CONVERSATIONAL PLATFORM

Edited by
Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda, and Francesco Vergani

FrancoAngeli
DESIGN INTERNATIONAL

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# Contents

PART 1

# Introduction

# Preface. Words in Place: Building a Platform for Responsible Research

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The Situated Vocabulary (SV) project began with a preliminary study rooted in the philosophies of Hannah Arendt (1958) and Chantal Mouffe (2013), particularly reflecting on the concept of *politics*. In Arendt's work, we explored concepts such as those of *agoràs* as places for conversations and identification of common interests, empowering citizens to transformative actions in the common realm, where power is intended as a form of empowerment – translating the identification of common interests into collective action (Arendt, 1958; Tassinari & Staszowski, 2020). On the other hand, Mouffe's theoretical framework provides a basis for thinking about *democracy* and *design* from an agonistic perspective, enabling the ideation of a more democratic and polyphonic realm, countering the risk of ending up with consensual *agoràs* for conversations on common interests. This dual foundation enabled us to analyze the theoretical framework critically and use it to guide our thinking, aligning it with cosmopolitics and design practice.

This approach emphasized not only human common interests but also the expansion of these interests to encompass marginalized

voices that are often cut out of participatory practices, such as the voices of marginalized communities and of the more-than-human realm. This shift occurred in 2019, marking the beginning of the SV project. The project specifically delved into the idea of *cosmopolitics*, drawing on the work of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, to expand Arendt's idea of politics into a cosmopolitical agonistic realm. It also engaged with the concept of care, as developed by María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), seen not as a moral obligation but rather as a logical choice (if we inter-depend from one another, we cannot but care) and of care as *radical interdependence*, as described by Arturo Escobar (2018), that opens up the conversation to include other worldings and pluriversal understandings of relationality and care. In encountering cosmopolitical issues, the project also embraced the contributions of Donna Haraway, particularly her framing of situated knowledges as an epistemological framework for cosmopolitical thinking. This perspective underscored the importance of integrating contextual forms of knowledge while recognizing the intricate entanglements of all actors – human and non-human – within these specific situated contexts. Besides, it also emphasises the role of the body in knowledge production and situated knowledges' fallibility and resistance to essentialism. This served as a conceptual framework to envision ways of designing that are situated, embodied, fallible, embracing relationality and care, agonism, and empowering all stakeholders – including the (ontologically) marginalized ones – into transformative and regenerative actions.

The project seeks to amplify their diverse *voices*, enabling them to generate agonistic and therefore democratic conversations. By fostering genuine dialogue among diverse voices, the SV project explores social innovation as a form of cultural and social creation. This approach emphasized the importance of deeply situated knowledge and collaborative processes as essential elements in imagining new ways of being and making together.

A first experimentation of the SV project took place within the context of Off Campus (OC) Nolo in 2020, which had back then not yet opened as a physical space but was rather envisioned as a metaphorical place for encounters and dialogue (see Chapters 2 and 12). We explored the format of a vocabulary as an *agorà* bringing together

diverse understanding of keywords chosen by and for the Nolo neighborhood. When we began with the design process, our approach started with a simple question: which words should we bring to the table? Which concepts are experienced as relevant by citizens, and are key to tell the story of the neighbourhood now?

Initially, we introduced some terms inspired by the vocabulary of Mouffe's and Arendt's philosophies, such as *action*, *power*, *agonism* and *common interests*. Additionally, we included words we deemed relevant in the context of participatory design, such as *participation*, *commons* and *infracturing*. Furthermore, we invited contributions from citizens, encouraging them to bring their own words to our initial list, identifying words they considered significant for building a shared discourse around the neighborhood.

To facilitate this process, we developed a participatory design activity, inviting a group of engaged citizens to select key terms. This group of proactive citizens were gathering around *Radio Nolo* (the local participatory neighbourhood radio). At the end of these sessions, nine words have been finally chosen: *Public Space*, *Degradation*, *Common Good*, *Sense of Belonging*, *Memory*, *Fun*, *Change*, *Commitment*, and *Nolo*. These words actually reflect the priorities and concerns of that specific community, but also include some tension, (more or less) hidden polarizations and dissent, but also opportunities and weak signals of positive change.

We then gathered definitions and perspectives from the citizens, which allowed us to assemble the first prototype of a SV, following the semantics of a vocabulary, addressing words with multiple definitions and subcategories within the diverse definitions (see Chapter 3). The idea is not to provide final definitions of those words, but rather to address their open-ended, polyphonic value. Here the vocabulary is intended as a space for contestation, for dissent, for agonistic dis-articulation and re-articulation of points of view, revealing similarities between diverse publics but also unexpected dissonances within the same ones. Do we really mean the same when we use the same words? Can meanings emerge from a collaborative discourse making process? Those are the initial questions animating our vocabulary, and still present also in the iteration of the Nolo SV into the second situated context of this exploration: the prison of San Vittore.

This initial vocabulary became a foundation for experimentation in 2020 – the same year OC Nolo officially opened in the neighborhood Municipal Market. One of the first activities we organized in this living lab was a light exhibition showcasing the selected words. The physical location of OC Nolo, situated within a market, attracted many passers-by. Exhibiting these words served not only to signal our presence as design researchers but also to engage a broader audience in conversation. We also used the space to host small co-design activities, employing tools like cards and maps to invite citizens and visitors to share their ideas about *Public Space*.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our plans, notoriously halting in-person activities. We therefore had to adapt by transitioning to online co-design workshops. This triggered significant challenges, particularly in maintaining inclusivity and ensuring that the project upheld its democratic and agonistic principles. In particular, engaging marginalized voices such as the voices of migrants and *sans papiers* in online formats proved difficult. Despite these hurdles, we collaborated with local organizations – such as Italian language schools for foreigners – to succeed in involving these communities in the (online) co-design process of the Nolo SV. Once restrictions eased, we resumed in-person co-design activities, which brought renewed momentum to the project. Interestingly, the pandemic also led to an unexpected innovation: the creation of a database featuring diverse perspectives on each word. We invited contributions from scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, activists, linguists, poets, and artists to explore the meanings of these terms through their distinctive lens (see Chapter 3). This database, initially developed online, later expanded to include offline engagements as well.

The process began with nine words chosen by citizens during our 2019 workshop. It evolved after the pandemic through the exploration of the remaining eight words, engaging citizens, local stakeholders, and associations. For each word, the focus was placed on a specific marginalized community, such as children, the elderly, or teenagers, through the development of tailored co-design activities, including collaborative mapping, design performances, word-play exercises, and more. Over time, this initiative has grown into a robust platform for interdisciplinary and interspecies dialogue. It highlighted the inter-

play between human and non-human perspectives and allowed us to explore language as a medium for fostering deeper connections with the environment and with each other.

This process led to ontological mappings – a method of charting the various interactions between agents. Drawing on Puig de la Bellacasa's concept of *care*, this mapping focused on identifying what is in need of care and what it takes to foster care and work in regenerative ways. The ontological mapping facilitated recognition of the entanglements between social and environmental forms of injustices. Meanwhile, ontologizing the design process enabled the development of different regenerative scenarios for change within the neighborhood. These scenarios accounted for the ecosystemic composition of social and environmental injustices, presented both in the physical OC space – via a looping video displayed on a screen – as well as they have been shared across social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The aim was to spark agonistic discussion and extend engagement beyond the local passers-by to reach a broader online audience. It is worth noting here that the neighborhood has an active presence on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, with dedicated neighborhood pages that foster vibrant online activities such as neighbourhood breakfasts and other similar forms of collaborative activities (see Chapter 2). Therefore, in this context, social media represents a particularly poignant medium for reaching out to the local community – either if it has been less effective in reaching out beyond the usual suspects, requiring us to develop *ad hoc* design activities to better succeed in reaching out to them.

Another tool we used to bring the vocabulary to life has been the aforementioned *Radio Nolo*. In the Nolo SV, we have been making a massive use of a collaboration with volunteers from *Radio Nolo* to create podcasts building on the ongoing work. This enabled us to reach out to diverse communities, thanks to the local volunteers and their network to enrich the vocabulary of more diverse voices, by expanding our vocabulary with interviews and conversations on the nine words. At the same time, the radio format helped us to explore new ways to reach out to the local population beyond the constraints of a physical space. These interviews together with our co-design activities enriched and refined the initial version of the SV, to come

to a final version, both in booklets as well as in radio podcast format. Each word became the foundation for an individual podcast, and the collaborative process with the radio's editorial team highlighted gaps in the vocabulary. This allowed us to address those gaps through additional interviews and activities, ensuring that as many voices as possible from the neighborhood could possibly be represented.

The process activated with *Public Space* helped us to further emphasize the importance of engaging with more-than-human issues. This work naturally led to the second word, *Degradation*. Here, our focus shifted toward more-than-human agents and the role of indigenous culture. We explored the various power dynamics in the neighborhood and identified a specific physical space, *Piazzetta Transiti*, as a focal point for community activation. This physical space became central to our efforts, serving as a hub for activating a group of citizens around shared interests and concerns around the issues concerning the square. This group has been formed under the framework of a collaborative pact, a tool provided by the municipality of Milan that enables citizens to adopt and care for a neighborhood space for a designated period. As a result, an informal but diverse group emerged. Though they held differing perspectives and priorities, the different stakeholders – oftentime polarized on many issues, and bringing together representatives of contested communities such as squatters, shop owners and migrants – came together in an activist-oriented way, driven by common interests and shared issues. This process unfolded in a highly agonistic but productive manner, illustrating the potential for collaboration amidst diversity.

After the words *Public Space* and *Degradation*, we then focused on the words *Common Good*, *Sense of Belonging*, and *Memory* (see Chapter 4). For each of these, we engaged with different audiences, including other marginalized groups such as children, teenagers, and the elderly. Collaborating with students and fellow researchers, we designed performances and co-design activities tailored to these diverse groups, exploring approaches such as participatory design performances and the creation of speculative future narratives. We also partnered with local organizations to strengthen the connections OC Nolo already had established throughout time and to create new ones, using the vocabulary as a foundation. These efforts allowed the

two projects – the SV and OC – to complement and reinforce each other's presence in the neighborhood. The co-design sessions and performances resulted not only in new podcasts, but also served to enrich the initial ontological mapping and to envision from this mapping other possible scenarios of collaborative actions for the neighbourhood, to be communicated via social media on Facebook and Instagram but also in the physical space of OC as an ongoing, light video exhibition. Beyond these digital outputs, the work materialized into physical formats such as booklets – each word comprises in another dedicated booklet – and culminated in an exhibition at the ADI Design Museum, Italy's national design museum, and a short listing for the *Compasso d'Oro*, the Italian national design prize.

In 2023, we expanded the project with three new words: *Change*, *Fun*, and *Commitment* (see Chapter 10). We continued exhibiting the work, notably during the *New European Bauhaus Week*, where we organized a display in the physical OC space. This exhibition highlighted the words, the processes, and the resulting scenarios, bringing visibility to the work and giving back to the local community. In addition to the exhibitions, we presented the scenarios throughout the market space where OC is based. Unfortunately, the neighborhood radio recently faced significant challenges, which prevented the creation of podcasts for the last words. Nevertheless, the work was documented in new booklets and scenarios, ensuring its continuation of the SV beyond the podcasts. Meanwhile, in 2022, the initiatives in *Piazzetta Transiti*, inspired by the scenarios generated through the SV project, began to spark a new wave of activism in the neighborhood. This movement grew beyond the existing community activities and has evolved into a legacy of the project.

In 2024, the SV project began to reflect more deeply on its original purpose, that had been tamed by the pandemic: namely, using vocabularies as tools for dialogue, not only as metaphorical *agoràs* for encounters, such as the digital space and the podcast, but also for physical encounters. This idea took shape in various ways, particularly through seminars organized in the OC spaces (see Chapter 11). These initiatives attracted many people to these *agoràs*, underscoring how vocabularies can serve as activators of conversation. Beyond the

podcasts, they became catalysts for physical encounters, fostering live discussions that reflected the project's initial goals.

Moreover, the vocabularies have also been used as tools to develop other projects, promoting the idea that words for design have a political potential, for instance that to spark meaningful conversations about the future of situated communities, encouraging reflection and collaboration. As we now unfortunately face the possibility of OC Nolo closing, there is hope that the seeds of change planted through initiatives sparked thanks to the SV and the scenarios co-designed thanks to its keywords, like in case case of the *Piazzetta Transiti* project, will continue to thrive beyond the physical presence of OC and with it also the conclusion of the Nolo SV project. This ongoing activism can be seen as one of its enduring legacies.

In 2023, another significant milestone was the opening of OC San Vittore, based in a prison in the heart of Milan. This expansion prompted us to explore the idea of creating a SV in this new, challenging context. While the Nolo SV could not be directly transposed to the prison context due to its situated nature, the inspiration to work with language was the pivotal element that transitioned from one vocabulary to the other.

The context of San Vittore presents unique challenges, particularly around issues of *power* and *social injustices*. Words like *Degradation* and *Sense of Belonging*, which were pivotal in Nolo, take on even greater significance in this new environment. This context amplifies the urgency of addressing these issues and exploring how they may resonate within a setting as complex and multilayered as that of San Vittore. If our work on the idea of situated vocabularies have been deeply inspired by feminist theories, particularly Haraway's concept of *situatedness*, in the prison context we mainly drew from thinkers like bell hooks, focusing on intersectionality, and María Lugones, who expanded Aníbal Quijano's idea of coloniality to include patriarchal power structures.

Our initial conceptual framework also evolved, extending Arendt's idea of common interest to embrace a broader, pluriversal perspective, as discussed by thinkers like Arturo Escobar and Marisol de la Cadena. In their work on *Pluriversal Contact Zones* (2023), it is discussed what it might mean to design from the idea of zone of

contacts between diverse worldings, where interests that are in common are not necessarily in common for the same reasons, as other world-making projects might attribute other values and expectations to those common interests. In *Piazzetta Transiti* we already explored political empowerment through identifying common interests with local communities, including dissensual points of view and negotiating between diverse understandings of what is common and why interests are in common, however, applying this framework to San Vittore, presented unique challenges. Here, interests are often silenced, and conversations are frequently simply made impossible.

In San Vittore, the idea of real change felt distant due to fundamental structural problems – for instance, lack of communication and dialogue and the fundamental goal of such a total institution to perpetuate itself both in terms of infrastructures and spaces, even more in terms of power dynamics. The prison system legitimates and perpetuates itself, operating with institutionalized silences: there is minimal interaction between its three main pillars – *security*, *education* and *health* – and even less between prison staff and prisoners. For instance, prisoners are not even allowed to know the names of the guards for safety reasons. No real communication is possible.

This lack of dialogue framed our project as an *impossible dialogue*. With the opening of OC San Vittore, the collaboration in the SV project evolved from the Polimi DESIS Lab – the research lab that initially started the SV in Nolo – to include *Imagis Lab* – the research group that had previously initiated *StoryLab*, a storytelling project with prisoners. Having developed weekly meetings dedicated to collaborative storytelling activities, *StoryLab* helped us to better frame the context of the prison system and to make the OC (as the university's living lab) and its researchers (academic community of *offcampusers*, see Chapter 2) at least recognized and trustworthy by the different stakeholders of San Vittore prison.Through this collaboration, it became evident that the lack of communication was the most pressing issue to address amongst the three pillars as well as amongst prisoners and non-prisoners.

The San Vittore SV began with *StoryLab* in a specific section of the prison, focusing on young adults. This section included a significant number of young prisoners from marginalized communities,

such as unaccompanied minors who migrated alone and illegally to Europe. Many of these individuals faced systemic neglect during their transition into society that often pushed them into marginalization, leading to criminal behavior or convictions for minor or misunderstood offenses. Compounding this injustice, many lacked linguistic competences, but also the needed linguistic support, translators, or even a basic understanding of the charges against them.

This context highlighted profound social injustices, prompting us to investigate power dynamics both within and beyond the prison context. Therefore, the prison served us as a magnifying lens for societal inequalities. Our approach involved creating impossible dialogues amongst prison's stakeholders, connecting prisoners with agents and staff such as educators, healthcare workers, and religious or other volunteers. Instead of bringing everyone together to define the vocabulary – which would have been both logistically, legally and ethically challenging – we prioritized amplifying the voices of what we considered the most marginalized ones – i.e. the detented young adults – providing them a platform to articulate their own experiences.

By working directly with them in a long process of negotiation and translation, eventually enabled those voiceless young prisoners to express their own identities and develop a language to articulate their personal perspectives, experiences and understandings of realities. With the support of the collaborators, including cultural and linguistic translators, we worked to include these contributions. This work became the foundation of the San Vittore SV. The words chosen by the young adults reflected the lived realities of the participants. Examples of words included oppositional pairs such as *Fun* and *Boredom*, *Justice* and *Injustice*, *Life* and *Death*. Rather than focusing solely on singular individual words, we explored the space in-between them – the liminal margin where meanings blur. This choice has been particularly relevant in the prison setting, where concepts like oppression, freedom, right and wrong intersect in ambiguous and multifaceted ways. Once the pairs of words have been selected and discussed within the group of young adult inmates, the same pairs have been proposed to educators, police officers, volunteers, healthcare personnel, religious figures. While the Nolo SV words were addressed one at a time, in the San Vittore SV participants were presented with all the

word pairs together and asked to freely choose where to start. Each participant thus articulated a reflection that – in moving from one word to another – allowed for the exploration of in-between meanings and new possible hidden connections between oppositional pairs, elaborating and verbalizing the meanings through a flow of thoughts. We delved into the tensions and intersections, examining how these ambiguities shaped perceptions and experiences. The process involved in co-design activities, in-depth interviews, and group discussions. These forms of engagement gave participants – whether young adults, volunteers or prison staff – the opportunity to adjust, tweak, or add words to the evolving SV.

One of the most striking findings has been the unexpected commonalities between seemingly polarized groups, such as young adults and prison agents. Despite their contrasting roles, both groups often shared difficult life circumstances, marked by limited opportunities and external pressures that shaped their decisions. For example, young adults often found themselves drawn into crime due to their socioeconomic environments, while many agents entered their professional roles due to similar systemic constraints, such as lack of access to education or alternative career paths. Both groups faced significant challenges related to mental health, including stress and trauma connected to the self-harm or even suicides around them, amongst prisoners but also colleagues. However, agents revealed that these concerns are actually often hidden or suppressed among them, as acknowledging them could jeopardize their professional standing. The perspectives of volunteers and educators working in prisons also offered surprising insights. While their views sometimes diverged from those of other groups, they often revealed unexpected similarities about the prison environment. Engaging with them through the vocabulary process illuminated the complex interplay of *power*, *care*, and *resistance* within this contested institution. Ultimately, we might underline that participants share a widespread sense of impotence and frustration, since prison as a total institution affects every human being, the bodies and souls.

The San Vittore SV fostered trust among participants, particularly among those working in the prison. By experiencing the care and intention behind the process, participants – whether prisoners,

agents, educators or volunteers – began to trust us with deeper reflections and broader collaborative opportunities. For instance, within *StoryLab*, this trust extended to exploring further narratives and activities that complemented the SV work. This became more than just a collection of words; it served as a tool for shared understanding and a foundation for ongoing dialogue. The SV has also served as a tool for collective reflection, bringing insights back into *StoryLab*. This process naturally raised several critical issues, particularly regarding the politics of translation. In detail, we delved deeper into conceptual frameworks such as Spivak's ideas on *subalternity*, Foucault's theories of *power*, and Agamben's concept of *state of exception*, recognizing the prison as a very tangible, almost literal manifestation of state of exception, on which bases the norm (in this case, law) is founded. Additionally, we engaged with pedagogical approaches, including Paulo Freire's *pedagogy of the oppressed* and bell hook's *radical pedagogies* and broader theories of social pedagogy, framing our work as a form of radical pedagogical exploration within the prison context. For instance, we began to see our vocabulary as a tool akin to a theater of the oppressed – a pedagogical tool that resonates with Freirean methodology.

We also explored complementary philosophical frameworks, such as the idea of oppressors and the oppressed coexisting in a shared ambiguity, rooted in Freire's and Fanon's reflections on internalized and externalized oppression. Prisons, as inherently enclosed and liminal spaces, became a focal point for interrogating the politics of marginality. This idea of the margin – as articulated in bell hooks' thinking – inspired us to view marginal spaces as sites of resistance. We explored the spatial dynamics of these margins and how activities related to the vocabulary and *StoryLab* could serve as reflective spaces that originate from and engage with the margins. In this context, the SV became not just a tool but a medium to facilitate these explorations, acting as a bridge between individual and collective reflections. The San Vittore SV also serves as a physical artifact that can be returned to the stakeholders involved – currently in the form of an installation, showcased at the *For Love of the World* festival in Delft in 2025 (see Chapter 11) – portraying the complexity of meanings and their queering in the space in-between opponent meanings, en-

abling further conversations and fostering ongoing dialogue. As also experienced with the Nolo SV, the physical presence of the artifact in communal spaces encourages interaction and reflection. We are also currently developing prototypes – such as an instant book and travelling exhibitions – to make these experiences more tangible and accessible. These tools help complete the SV work, even as we acknowledge that the San Vittore SV itself is never really truly concluded as long as the OC San Vittore will run, and necessarily needs to stay open ended, open to new contaminations and experimentations, also across one another. And also, the SV project as such can never really be finally concluded, as other situated contexts or designers with other personal history and geography can possibly appropriate it, and re-think it from other situated contexts.

Instead, the SV has evolved into a situated methodology – a flexible tool that can be adapted to different contexts, inspiring and enriching our practice as designers. For what concerns our own practices, it has become almost a second nature to us, shaping our roles and frameworks as designers. It prompts us to continually question what it means to design with care, to design from and with the margins, and to see this as both a personal and collective journey. This work reinforced the values of *openness*, *situatedness*, and *ephemerality* while challenging us to rethink our roles as designers. It highlighted the importance of fostering polyphony – a diversity of *voices* and approaches – and interacting as a collective rather than as isolated individuals. This process invited us to question our own voices and encouraged a multiplicity of perspectives, enriching how we understand and engage with the world.

This was not a project to be accomplished alone. It required collaboration across diverse skills, personal histories, and shared commitments to cosmopolitical values. Together, we aimed to identify injustices in neighbourhoods and situated contexts, supporting the emergence of visions for change originating from the communities themselves. Inspired by Isabelle Stengers' ideas of *idiocy* as a fallible form of knowledge, understanding that we cannot really think we possess the meaning of what we think we know, we acknowledged the limitations of our work while maintaining a political commitment to act. Instead of striving to solve issues, we focused on raising ques-

tions and facilitating conversations. This mindset – one of humility and responsibility – became an integral part of our design practice. Our political commitment to act remains vital, even if we approach our work with humility and an understanding of its inherent constraints.

While this preface ends up with a conceptual introductory section (*Situated Vocabularies: Exploring Designing as a Situated Practice*, Virginia Tassinari), the first section of this volume verges on the SV experimentations held in Nolo. This comprises the three chapters *Off Campus Nolo: Co-producing Knowledge with Situated Communities* (Francesco Vergani), *Narrating Collective Meanings through Tangible Artifacts and Immersive Spatial Experiences* (Ambra Borin), and *Gaia's Club: Embodying Situated Vocabulary in Public Spaces through Transmedia Storytelling for Kids* (Valentina Ferreri).

Throughout these three chapters, the experience of Nolo is presented, starting from addressing the infrastructural context of Off Campus Nolo, then looking into the physical and digital artefacts and events connected to the making of the SV, and finally focusing on the work around a specific word, exemplifying the co-design sessions laying the ground for the making of the SV.

The second session of this volume focuses on the making of the SV in the context of San Vittore prison. While Francesca Piredda lays the conceptual and infrastructural ground for this project in her chapter *Off Campus San Vittore: Bridging Prison and Society*, the following four chapters focus on the scientific approach to storytelling in Off Campus San Vittore as a conceptual framework for the SV (*Leveraging Storytelling for Meaning-Making*, Mariana Ciancia), the exploration and mapping of power dynamics in *Power Mapping to Bring Out Possible Interdependencies in San Vittore Prison* (Chiara Ligi), then focusing on the meaning-making made possible through the SV (*Intersections of Agency, Translations, and Meanings*, Elettra Panepinto), and finally addressing a design experimentation connected to the San Vittore SV (*Translating the Research into a Communication Tool*, Valentina Altrocchi).

A final section weaves back the experimentations of the SV in the two contexts, connecting them and bringing them into a fertile dialogue on a meta-level, reflecting on how the SV in both contexts challenged the role of designers (*Situated Vocabularies and the Shift-*

*ing Role of Designers*, Nour Bergaoui) and on the value as such of designing situated tools (*Prototyping Situated Tools*, Maria Maramotti).

The volume closes with a broader framework of the Off Campuses sketched by Davide Fassi and Francesca Cognetti, zooming out from the SVs to explore their potential value in the situated contexts in and from which they are designed (*Off Campus: A Multi-level Platform for Responsible Research*).

This volume also follows Haraway's idea of *situated knowledges*, as it is a polyphonic work. As such, it does not need to be read chronologically and it has no beginning or end point. Each chapter is designed in a way that it can stand alone, and can itself work in an exemplary way of what it might mean to design situated tools and methods in, with, and for civil society.

This book attempts to document and celebrate this collective attitude, developed through our shared work in SV. It captures the ephemeral yet impactful nature of the project, showing how it has shaped our understanding of design as a situated, collaborative, embodied and dialogical practice. Each chapter represents a piece of this journey, seen from the personal perspective of those who have contributed to the project over the years. While each contribution can be read on its own, together they offer a personal lens on this collective journey, revealing the details, points of view, and aspirations of each of us.

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# 1. The Situated Vocabularies: Exploring Designing as a Situated Practice

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The SV project, initiated in 2019, remains an ongoing, open-ended experiment involving citizens, students, researchers, colleagues, scientists, members of civil society, intellectuals, institutional representatives, and volunteers. This project is fueled by a concept I encountered in Donna Haraway's seminal essay, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988). Although I was already familiar with the concept of *situated knowledges* prior to engaging with this text, addressing it as a conceptual framework for designing answersed to a long-standing need to question my own design practice's adherence to pre-defined, hegemonic, and essentialist approaches. As a matter of fact, I have always struggled with the universalist tendencies of design – its reliance on fixed methodologies, subfields, or tools. My practice has always engaged with the context from which I design, listening and attending to it (Tassinari *et al*., 2017). Storytelling in my work is foremost an act of story-listening (Bertolotti *et al*., 2016), deepened through ethnographic research and open-ended infrastructuring approaches, enabling collaborative initiatives to emerge rather than imposing

solutions to societal challenges (Ibidem). Questioning my role and rejecting the rhetoric of the designer as a *deus ex machina* – a problem solver parachuting in with definitive answers – has been a core concern (Tassinari & Vergani, 2024). Therefore, Haraway's concept of *situated knowledges* (1988) profoundly resonated with me, prompting a more serious interrogation of my work as design researcher and the very notion of design itself, often bound by universalist and essentialist paradigms.

The years 2019-2024 of the SV project coincided with a personal phase of transition, during which I started to acknowledge design's patriarchal, colonial and anthropocentric underpinnings and legacies. I came to recognize that patriarchy, coloniality, and anthropocentrism had not only shaped my worldview but that I was also, unknowingly, perpetuating this same perspective.

The SV situates itself at this pivotal moment in my personal journey of ontological transformation – acknowledging my privileged position and embracing the need to question and dismantle this inherited thinking within my own practice, making it more relational and caring. This project has been my personal way of exploring how to counter the «disembodied scientific objectivity» that I identified in mainstream design discourse – a discourse that, through standardized tools and methods, promises solutions to societal challenges and claims to fix «wicked problems» (Buchanan, 1992).

Somewhat reluctant to engage with this triumphalist rhetoric, I sought ways to articulate a discourse that would not reinforce existing power dynamics but instead engage in questioning what-is. The idea of situated knowledge has marked the beginning of a personal journey of exploration beyond the modern, colonial, anthropocentric, and patriarchal limitations of design (Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026).

Such triumphalist rhetoric is ultimately problematic, as it still engages with a modern/colonial (Quijano, 2000) and patriarchal (Lugones, 2007) epistemological framework. Instead, I sought ways to question and reimagine the act of designing as a critical practice (Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026) that does not reinforce existing power dynamics but engages critically with what-is, embracing complexity and contradictions. It is at this injunction that Haraway's philosophy came into the picture, proving a powerful framework for reframing my

own practices in more critical and transformative ways countering the risk of falling back into a solutionist approach to designing.

## 1.1 Designing as a situated Critical Praxis

The decision to work with vocabularies arose somewhat coincidentally as I explored in previous work the making of philosophical vocabularies for designers (Tassinari & Staszowski, 2020). My interest in the philosophy of language – particularly Frankfurt School's reflections on the sayable and unsayable – provided a rich backdrop. Adorno (1970), for instance, critiques dichotomous thinking as inherent to language, which limits its capacity to capture reality's multifaceted and contradictory nature. His assertion that art can point toward reality without forcing it into rigid mental schemes, inspired me to consider whether designing might also gesture toward reality without encapsulating it in definitions.

This led me to examine whether designing today is actually working in non-dichotomous ways, serving as a gesture rather than following the epistemological paths of Western dichotomous and hierarchizing logocentrism. Isn't the language of design often another form of naming, labeling, and controlling reality, exploiting its own power over it? Isn't design itself rooted in dichotomous thinking – subject/object, nature/artifact, problem/solution? And, in this case, is this truly the only way to design? Is this vision of the designer – as a *deus ex machina*, a neutral, extraterrestrial, disembodied, and universal subject applying scientifically grounded methodologies to transform a «situation into a preferred one» (Schön, 1983) – really the path we should follow? Is this vision of design ultimately universally valid, and therefore disembodied, or is there behind it a body to be found? Isn't this body the Caucasian, male body from which the vision of a disembodied, universal knowledge found its formulation in the first place? And also, is design inherently about generating consensus on this preferred situation, by means of standard tools and approaches? Finally, then, the question is: this situation is preferred by whom? Who is the designer to sense what is preferable and by whom? If so, design's essence lies in power, exactly like science, in Haraway's reasoning: «persuading social actors that manufactured knowledge

is the route to an objectively better future» (Haraway, 1988). If «all knowledge is a condensed node in an agonistic power field», design knowledge makes no exception. Within this framework, *good* designers are those who decide to *include* others. The word *inclusive design* has often had on me a genuinely disturbing aftertaste. It implies an exclusion, and the *good* designers are on the patronizing side of who is not excluded. What if, behind designers' *good* intentions, matters of power would still be in place? The individual of *good* will, as framed by Isabelle Stengers, is often unaware of being of a rather dangerous kind. This abstract *good* designer has traditionally been a *he*. If this is often an automatism, there might be some truth behind it. A so-called objective, universal, disembodied knowledge is, after all, a «concept of abstract masculinity» (Haraway, 1988).

This is genuinely critical. But how can we possibly envision a non-ideological kind of gaze – one that does not divide, hierarchize, or promise exact solutions, but instead engages with open-endedness, fallibility, limitations, and doubts (after all, can I possibly ever know what is a preferred situation? What ensures that I am accountable for what is a better future?), and self-irony (meaning the deconstruction of one's own authoritarian gaze)? Most of us have already experienced that this «minor» (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Manning, 2016) approach has often proven its limitations in academia. And yet, does it mean this is necessarily wrong? How can we explore a feministic way of being a designer, meaning a gaze that is not essentialist and disembodied, but embodied and fallible? Haraway's (1988) idea of «a feminist version of objectivity» may support us here.

This has been my own personal experience. Reading her essay, I could feel, from my own positionality, in my own body and history, the weight of every single word. In a sense, they did not serve as an external source of inspiration but as a confirmation – giving voice to an internal, not-yet-fully-articulated perspective that was awaiting to surface. Haraway's words have been both comforting and terrifying, as they left no room for excuses to withdraw. I had to explore them myself, throwing even more of my own story, body, geography, and vulnerability into my own practices. They pushed me to embrace the contradictions of starting from myself – a specific situation, a particular story – while resisting the push to *scale up*, to generate new uni-

versal tools, methods, narratives. Her approach resists the creation of universal models and strong narratives, while simultaneously refusing the parcelization of knowledge or the total relativism in which «all cows are black» (Hegel, 2018):

> So, I think my problem, and our problem, is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own *semiotic technologies* for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a *real* world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. (Haraway, 1988)

«Staying with the trouble» (Haraway, 2016) might literally mean sticking to the world (*sozein ta phainomena* with Plato – literally, *saving* the materiality of the world around us), committing to it, and responding to it, starting from one's own positionality. What Haraway delineates here is a field of tension – a contradiction that cannot be resolved. The tendency to resolve contradictions could itself be seen as a form of problem-solving, as design is often considered. Countering this means resisting the temptation to solve the contradiction. Situated knowledge does not represent a mere parceling of knowledge or a denial of objectivity. Rather, it offers another form of objectivity – one that does not crystallize once and for all, but continually resists becoming yet another form of power:

> Harding calls this necessary multiple desire a need for a successor science project and a postmodern insistence on irreducible difference and radical multiplicity of local knowledges. All components of the desire are paradoxical and dangerous, and their combination is both contradictory and necessary. Feminists don't need a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence, a story that loses track of its mediations just where someone might be held responsible for something, and unlimited instrumental power. We don't want a theory of innocent powers to represent the world, where language and bodies both fall into the bliss of organic

> **symbiosis. We also don't want to theorize the world, much less act within it, in terms of Global Systems, but we do need an earthwide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different – and power-differentiated – communities. We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life. (Haraway, 1988)**

If we agree that there is a «positivist arrogance» and «power moves» in science's rhetorical games, we could also argue that this essentialist, power-driven approach makes no exception for design. Her notion of a kind of knowledge countering this disembodied, power-led idea of knowledge – ultimately following the hierarchies (envisioning humans, Caucasians, males and able bodies as being in a dominant position) of the one-World world (Law, 2015) – opens up genuine possibilities for questioning design as a modern, essentialist, patriarchal, colonial, and anthropocentric practice. Her feminist understanding of objectivity – that she terms *situated knowledges* – provides a counterpoint: «I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges» (Haraway, 1988).

If she counters that situated knowledges are a project of feminist objectivity – an objectivity that does not standardize or essentialize but instead preserves differences, agonistic fields of tension, the truths of each body, and each personal story – then, when looking for ways to design beyond its modern limitations, we might also envision the act of designing from the epistemological framework of situated knowledges not from a dichotomous, hierarchical framework of oppression but from a relational and caring one, embracing fallibility, vulnerability, and partiality. Partiality and objectivity, then, are not irreconcilable: feminist objectivity is the sum of all partial points of view, an open-ended process always on the verge of «becoming» (Ingold, 2013), rather than a well-defined, all-encompassing project.

This vision of feminist objectivity – a situated, embodied, partial perspective – provides an alternative to design's patriarchal underpinnings, countering the risk of falling back into a modern/colonial/

patriarchal idea of design as a socio-technical praxis of the one-World world. A feminist objectivity is not a denial of objectivity but a reimagining of it as a partial, relational, ongoing, and open-ended process. This does not yet equate to a postmodern form of relativism. Rather, it embraces partial, diffracted (Barad, 2014) perspectives. If we interplay this idea of feminist objectivity with the current decolonial discourse, and, particularly, Escobar's work, we could state that these perspectives could also be considered pluriversal (Escobar, 2018), drawing from the specific world-making project of one's own positionality.

Envisioning designing as a «critical praxis» beyond the modern/colonial epistemological framework (Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026) involves thinking and acting in the world – transcending their dichotomous division, itself a product of an essentialist, objective, Western idea of knowledge. It means countering global systems while modestly contributing to ways of thinking about «meanings and bodies that hold a chance for life» (Haraway, 1988), without yet assuming a triumphalist tone. It also means challenging dichotomous divisions like subject/object or nature/artifact, but also theory/practice, even in designing. To go beyond its essentialist, modern understanding, we could explore the act of designing as a form of thinking/acting, where discourse is formed by acting, doing – a «thinking-by-making», as framed by Ingold (2013) – engaging with the body and with the situated context in which one happens to design (Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026). It acknowledges the histories of oppression inscribed in our bodies and practices and seeks to navigate beyond the unidirectional, disembodied gaze of modern/colonial design practices. SV, as a polyphonic, potentially open-ended project, embodies this *ethos*, exploring what it means to design from a place of relationality, care, and embodied knowledge.

Embracing situated knowledges also means resisting mere solutionism and its corollaries, such as scaling up, evaluation, fixed methodologies, and universal tools. These issues are not wrong in essence but are wrong when viewed from the perspective of feminist objectivity. The temptation to provide definitive answers risks betraying the very *ethos* of situated practices. Haraway reminds us that feminist objectivity demands we remain with tensions and contradictions,

recognizing them as productive rather than obstacles to be overcome (Haraway, 1988).

If situatedness, rather than the abstraction of contexts, is central, then one's own body (and the histories of oppression carved into it) is fundamental to understanding how to avoid falling into essentialist, universal, and abstract frameworks. Disembodiment – the «God's trick» – represents the view of the modern/colonial epistemic paradigm, characterized by the male Western gaze. Isn't this also the gaze of patriarchy? How might we envision a feminist designer gaze, an embodied and situated perspective that moves beyond a unidirectional, disembodied viewpoint? Haraway, following Zoe Sofoulis's footsteps, calls the patriarchal gaze «the cannibaleye of masculinist extraterrestrial projects for excremental second birthing». As such, it embodies an «ideology of direct, devouring, generative, and unrestricted vision, whose technological mediations are simultaneously celebrated and presented as utterly transparent». The designer's «cannibaleye» is disembodied – a «God trick» contrasted with the «embodiment of all vision (although not necessarily organic embodiment and including technological mediation)». To achieve this more diffracted and pluriversal vision, we ultimately need a body.

## 1.2 Embodiment in Designing as situated Critical Praxis

The centrality of the body in designing as a form of «thinking-by-making» (Ingold, 2013) cannot be overstated. Designers have bodies, as do those with whom they design. Yet, the canon of design knowledge is often disembodied – or rather, standardized through the implicit body of the Nordic, male (and, we could add, able), Caucasian, as Papanek already critically highlights in his *Design for the Real World* (1971). This disembodiment overlooks the relational and situated nature of bodies, which is crucial for a nuanced and ethical approach to designing.

Bodies, as objects of knowledge, are not static but «material-semiotic generative nodes» (Haraway, 1988). Their boundaries are drawn through social interactions, making them relational and dynamic rath-

er than fixed. The body is relational, materializing literally in relation to its other – metabolizing or being metabolized by it. Bodies are neither subjects nor objects; they are the embodiment through which we think, act, and correspond with what lies outside and inside ourselves. Ingold describes breathing as a fundamental experience that embodies relationality – the movement of «correspondence» (Ingold, 2017) that we also call life. This is what I personally explored also when starting to work with the context of Nolo, where we engaged with our bodies – privileging the physical embeddedness in the neighbourhood (thanks to the constant presence in the physical space of OC Nolo but also by engaging with the work of *Radio Nolo*, as part of the neighbourhood rather than an external stakeholder), and an embodied approach to participatory design, by means of design performances and physical interventions. Also, we engaged there with personal histories of exclusion and with making tangible marginalized voices, with an explicit focus on overlooked non-human voices, «corresponding to them». This particular perspective dismantles the Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind, emphasizing that we think, act, and correspond to the world through our embodied selves: «Correspondence is about togethering. It is about the ways along which lives, in their perpetual unfolding or becoming, answer to one another» (ivi, p. 40).

We design from our own bodies, which are texts that tell our stories, the stories of our ancestors, the mountains where we were born, the seas we have crossed, and the places of detention that held us hostage. They are inscribed with histories of displacement, conflict, and survival. In prison, this inscription becomes stark. In this physical structure «of exception» (Agamben, 2005), one no longer owns one's own body, so to speak. Politics owns it, and the discourse shifts from the body to bio-politics (Foucault, 1978). One encounters written bodies, scarred bodies, where the scars – often self-inflicted – speak volumes. Judith Butler's phrase «bodies that matter» (1993) here becomes a chimera. Bodies here do not matter. People do not matter. What can designers do in such a context? What can they promise, solve, or fix? The prison, in a sense, is the ultimate *agorà* (Arendt, 1958) where design, as a modern and essentialist practice, is unmasked. If you come to work in prison with a solutionist mindset, the prison will reject you. In such a space, one must enter on tiptoe, as if

entering a cathedral. The only meaningful action is probably listening – an act of listening that begins with the body, with how you position yourself in the space, staying in prison, corresponding to other bodies, often racialized, brutalized, but also violent and unpredictable.

This is what my colleagues from the OC San Vittore courageously do: be there, stay in prison, in a small laboratory carved out of two cells, «in the presence of» (de la Cadena, 2021) prisoners. A space where you share some of their physical limitations: the cold, the constant noise, the shouting, the repetitive clang of the blackjack on the bars, and above all, the feeling of enclosure. The senses react to these stimuli. The first time you enter the cell/laboratory, there is a constant sense of fear – a continuous awareness of palpable danger. Over time, one tends to forget this, as the body becomes accustomed to it. Yet, despite all contextual adaptations, the designer's body remains at risk. But it is the prisoners' body the one that risks the most. Occasionally, inmates appear with changed, mutilated, or self-mutilated bodies. Embodiment means risk.

The risk-taking, which is implicit in every design activity, comes here almost to a paradoxical stance. We are mortal; they are mortal. Stories of death and deaths themselves unfold here. There is a raw truth, an essentiality, that one is exposed to when working in prison. Feminist objectivity is also about recognizing that we're not in control. The risk is always there: «Objectivity is not about disengagement but about mutual and usually unequal structuring, about taking risks in a world where *we* are permanently *mortal*, that is, not in final control» (Haraway, 1988).

Prisons unmask the reassuring essentialist and modernist tendencies of design, where there is supposedly no space for risk-taking. It works as a magnifying lens, highlighting its inconsistency. The act of designing in such spaces requires humility – the humility of a «cautious Prometheus», to say it with Latour, that begins with the body. As Haraway posits, feminist objectivity involves acknowledging our limitations, vulnerability, and even mortality – a lesson starkly evident in the prison environment. Haraway's framework of feminist objectivity is a guiding principle here. Objectivity, she argues, is not about transcendence but about recognizing our situated, partial perspectives. Designing in situated contexts becomes a deeply political act of «dis-

sensus» (Mouffe, 2005), challenging the disembodied and unlocated knowledge claims of modernist design. It means taking risks.

Haraway uses the metaphor of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to explore the risk she sees in the tension between words and bodies: «Feminist embodiment, feminist hopes for partiality, objectivity, and situated knowledges, turn on conversations and codes at this potent node in fields of possible bodies and meanings» (Haraway, 1988). To work from a situated context means engaging with the body, an embodied thinking through making, rethinking words and meanings beyond the Cartesian dichotomy. What one experiences here is the act of designing as embodied meaning-making. The thinking here originates from the body, *corresponding* to other bodies, paying attention to them, learning to listen to the unsayable.

The trajectory of the SV project – engaging with un(der)listened voices – eventually evolved in the prison's context into an exploration of radical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). The SV served here as a pedagogy of the oppressed device (Freire, 2000), bringing together the voices of young prisoners (often from marginalized, or even unrecognized communities) with the voices of those who work in the prison, such as guards, medical personnel, pedagogists, psychologists, and volunteers. Over the years, this project has increasingly become an explicit «correspondence» to the bodies of the oppressed, in the interplay of oppressed/oppressors.

Like in Freire's radical pedagogy, by articulating their thoughts in a shared vocabulary, young prisoners have slowly begun to engage in a non-linear, often challenging process of self-liberation. «Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one» says Freire. This process goes beyond the carceral techno-scientific apparatus and naturally transgresses the epistemological limitations of academic production. This personal journey is unsayable. It has to do with recognizing humanity in others but also in oneself – which, for Freire, equates to a process of self-determination. This dialogical process became a means of self-liberation for the incarcerated – a counterpoint to the carceral system's oppressive structures. The SV became here an embodied artifact, born from our vulnerable bodies in prison «corresponding» (Ingold, 2020) to prisoners' scarred bodies, revealing both the atrocities and potentials of prison life.

Here, in a sense, there is a journey from words back to bodies. The SV ultimately aims to open up a non-binary, fallible «vision» (Haraway, 1988) of prison's reality – its injustices and beauty – not only for those who literally give voice to the vocabulary but for all of us. This journey shifts from the panopticon vision of control to a diffracted (Barad, 2014) vision of partial objectivity:

> **I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and powers of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the objectivity debates. (Haraway, 1988)**

The metaphor of vision-as-power (Foucault, 1977) – embodied in San Vittore as a physical historical panopticon (chronicles mention the beginning of its construction in 1872), physically hanging over the prisoners – is here surprisingly twisted. When one considers the bodily underpinning of the act of seeing, we cannot crystallize it in an abstract idea as a disembodied form of vision (*idein*, in ancient Greek meaning *to see*). An embodied vision escapes abstraction. The embodied point of view rather sees from a specific angle, acknowledging its partiality in naming «where we are and are not» (Haraway, 1988):

> **So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision.**

This vision-making, starting from one's body and moving toward someone else's, is not the tunnel vision of Western epistemology. It does not allow for clear-cut separations such as oppressor-oppressed, good-bad, or right-wrong. While with the Nolo SV we aimed to open up agonistic spaces, revealing unexpected «dissensus» (Mouffe, 2005) within the same publics (such as, for instance, citizens volunteering within the same association, supposedly sharing similar values), along with surprising similarities between polarized publics, the situation in prison – where polarization is more extreme and dia-

logue is sometimes not even allowed for safety reasons – brings this dynamic to the forefront. In a sense, the SV there enacts an impossible dialogue, a «state of exception» (Agamben, 2005) from which to prototype potential «roads to justice» (Arendt, 1958). By situating words within embodied contexts, it shifts from a panoptical view to a diffracted, partial vision that resists binary oppositions. In a sense, San Vittore SV helps to further illuminate Nolo SV: all dialogues are impossible – as equivocations are always present, and all meanings are ultimately processual and self-contradictory – and yet they are necessary. All SV cannot but be incomplete, fragmentary, self-contradictory, inconsistent. But if we embrace a situated, embodied perspective, we then have to reckon that this does not invalidate their intrinsic transformative value.

In prison, words carry an immense weight: they cannot be chatter but acts of resistance and survival. This reminds us that all words have a specific weight – a weight often not fully addressed when using them in modern ways, by fixing them in static meanings of a supposed neutral point of view, the «God's trick» of Western epistemologies (and ultimately of design vocabularies). Once again, San Vittore SV represents the ultimate, perhaps most extreme form of vocabulary, where words must give way to bodies and ultimately become silent. This silence creates space for multiple points of view – visions – that come together, forming a spectrum of «white light», being the sum of all colors rather than their subtraction (Benjamin, 1968). All visions, when combined, compose the constellation of perspectives Haraway describes as objectivity, which is never fully graspable. It is a paradox, yet a concrete and generative one. The experience of the SV shows us that we are always on a road to objectivity, yet never fully there.

## 1.3 Words and Fabulations

For Walter Benjamin, the sum of all translations of a given text throughout history equates to the pure language – the language that aligns with reality, seen from the perspective of profane redemption (Benjamin, 1968). It expresses reality in its totality, encompassing all moments of history and all points of view. This is the objective view – a view that is, in this case, akin to God's perspective (though not to

be confused with the «God's trick») – allowing us to save the past by identifying the potential in what has not yet been said, in histories of oppression, in the field of tension, in the gaps of history.

The road to objectivity, then, is truly a road to justice: a justice not projected in transcendence but in the small «messianic task» given to each human being. This translates into paying attention to others and their untold stories, to *correspond* with them, to imagine, to envision, to become accountable for what-is. Situated designing is, then, a deeply political and radical act of dissensus against the many forms of oppression we struggle to recognize in contemporary societies, including those forms of oppression that have been designed: the panoptical design of the prison, the Kafkaesque carceral communication system, and even the very act of designing in disembodied, non-situated ways. Design, in this sense, can be seen as one of the «various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims» (Haraway, 1988). However, when questioning its power-led nature, it can also become generative and prefigure, in histories of oppression and what has been discarded and passed un(der)seen, potentials of what-is-not-yet, through «storytelling» (Arendt, 1958; Benjamin, 1968; Bertolotti *et al*., 2016) as a form of «critical fabulation» (Hartman, 2008):

> **One of the things that I was really struggling with thinking through in *Venus in Two Acts* was the violence of the archive and the way power is registered through absences and silences, the obliteration of lives, all the things that we could not know. I wanted to topple the hierarchies that determine how we know things and who people are in the world, and so I was thinking about the relationship between history and the violence of the archive as well as its fiction and its elasticity. For me, what's really enabling about artistic practice is the way poets and filmmakers and visual artists use materials, the way beauty as both a practice and a method might enable some kind of redress, right? That might be a possible antidote to the violence that is a part of the everyday. […] I think that artistic practice becomes the exercise of imagining beauty and what it might make possible in the world.**

As critical fabulations, situated, embodied practices in designing and beyond may open up possibilities for new beginnings that are deeply transformative and caring, where humans are truly seen. In this space, there is the potential to explore mutuality and reciprocity rather than subsidiarity and care rather than the drive to solve or fix. It is from this situated and embodied sensitivity that we can also envision a concept of «care» (de la Bellacasa, 2017) that includes what lies beyond the human, in ways that are neither ideological nor programmatic but rather open and unsterile: «All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view» (Haraway, 1988).

The attention toward the point of view of the other – to *correspond* to it – is a very specific form of care. When these points of view come from the margins, there is a kind of brilliance, of epiphany manifesting itself: «There is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful». Haraway recognizes the margins as a vantage point. From the margins, one sees reality more clearly as it is and can better identify unexplored possibilities. This echoes bell hooks' lesson, identifying the margins as sites of resistance, the spaces from which to develop counter-hegemonic practices: «As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, the politics of location calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision» (hooks, 1989).

Embodied, situated knowledge helps train our sight in a process of *revision* re-envisioning, literally viewing again, embracing Haraway's embodied idea of view versus the abstract «God's trick», allowing us to look into the margins and uncover their transformative potential. This sensitivity must be nurtured, just as eyes in the dark must get accustomed to shadows and shades: «To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if we naturally inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges» (Haraway, 1988). To see the unseen, listen to the unlistened, and read the gaps through critical fabulations requires specific skills of attention:

> ***Subjugated*** **standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world. But how to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the *highest* technoscientific visualizations.**

Haraway's words remind us of the political agency inherent in situated designing: «Feminist accountability requires a knowledge tuned to resonance, not to dichotomy». This accountability calls us to train our sight, to look into the margins, and to uncover the transformative potential there. It is a radical act of care – one that insists on seeing faithfully from another's point of view, embracing complexity and difference. From such a vantage point, the act of designing becomes a tool not for fixing or solving but for witnessing, envisioning, and prefiguring justice.

Giving voice through critical fabulation is a very crucial, potentially transformative act. Situated and embodied designing can extend beyond the human into a more-than-human realm. This «cosmopolitical» (Stengers, 2010) perspective resists sterile programmatic solutions. Instead, it fosters care, reciprocity, and mutuality. To design from this perspective is to engage in the «messianic task» of Benjamin's storyteller (1968): to pay attention, to *correspond* to the untold stories of others, and to envision what is not yet (Bertolotti *et al*., 2016). Nevertheless, *giving voice* is not an unproblematic concept. Both Haraway and Spivak caution against the «God's trick» of claiming to give voice to the subjugated (Haraway, 1988; Spivak, 1988). Representation is never neutral; translation carries power dynamics. SV grapple with this tension. Who are we to translate the voices of others? How do we navigate the politics of translation without perpetuating even more sophisticated forms of oppression? These questions remain unresolved but essential for accountable situated and embodied critical practices.

## 1.4 Designing from the Margins

The margins offer a vantage point for resistance and transformative potential (hooks, 1989). Seeing from the margins requires training one's vision to notice shadows and listen to silences. It demands skill with bodies and language to engage in «critical fabulations» (Hartman, 2008) that uncover hidden histories and subjugated knowledge. This is not an innocent endeavor; the subjugated positions themselves are subject to repression and forgetting. The risk of romanticizing the oppressed, as Haraway warns, is ever-present. The process of making the SV brought us to suspend our judgment and embrace multiplicity and contradictions. The aim was not to rush toward synthesis but to listen deeply and hold space for conflicting perspectives:

> **There is a premium on establishing the capacity to see from the peripheries and the depths. But here there also lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions.[…] The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation; that is, from both semiological and hermeneutic modes of critical inquiry. The standpoints of the subjugated are not *innocent* positions. They are knowledgeable of modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts – ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively. (Haraway, 1988)**

The risk of becoming a «men of good will» (Stengers, 2010) is also always present. Giving voice, after all, is also a form of power. This is also the case for the «representatives» (Latour, 2004) of more-than-human voices. In Nolo, we encountered firsthand the limitations of asking scientists to *translate* the voices of plants. As also addressed by Latour in *The Politics of Nature* (2004), the voice of scientists can never possibly be a genuine, neutral representative of the voice of other-than-human agents. Throughout the process, we learned more and more to resist translation. In San Vittore, when amplifying the voices of young prisoners, Esperanto that emerged there served as a space where we resisted translating the voices into fluent Italian. In both cases, translation (including cultural translation) was a key con-

cern. In every act of translation, there is always a politics of translation (Spivak, 1988) involved. The translator is another of «God's tricks». We can never fully escape it, but we must, perhaps, come to terms with it. Also, the *oppressed* is not a stable, unproblematic concept, as it is entangled with its counterpart, the «oppressor» (Freire, 2000). An innocent position simply does not exist: «Feminist accountability requires a knowledge tuned to resonance, not to dichotomy» (Haraway, 1988). We have to resist generating binary oppositions between innocent/guilty, oppressor/oppressed, but rather engage in the thickness of the in-betweenness of all forms of life. Our thinking/acting makes no exception.

Haraway invites us to engage with the mess of in-betweenness: the field of tension where situated knowledges struggle to emancipate themselves, entangled with the very things they wish to free themselves from. Situated designing registers this field of tension, this contradiction. The politics of translation is just one example of the contradictory, slippery nature of feminist objectivity.

Speaking of translation, Haraway (1988) calls for an open-ended approach, claiming that it «is always interpretive, critical, and partial». When reading a vocabulary, one always adds one's own lenses. When making SV, matters of politics of translation (Spivak, 1988) came continuously to the surface. We realized that, to preserve as much as possible the heteroglossia of voices, we had to resist translating them and keep the operation of translation open. What mattered was not smoothing over the gaps or mistakes in language but recognizing that these gaps themselves – these «caesura» (Agamben, 2005; Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026) – were where the unsayable resided. Translation, when seen as open-ended, processual, and critical, reveals to be a genuine act of «correspondence» (Ingold, 2023).

Designing beyond the modern (Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026), cannot exist in spark opposition to the modern design we inherited. The risk is to create a new foundation that becomes solidified into another system – a compact ground (Ingold, in conversation with the author, 2023) generating another new canon, solidifying and reverting to a new, more sophisticated form of essentialism. This tension is essential and constitutive. This is evident in SV's contradictions, as when they occasionally fall back into the solutionist trap, attempting

to decode the knowledge produced into a fixed language, to grasp it. This book also registers the conflict of being positioned within this field of tension: academic production-life, objectivity-feminist objectivity, situatedness-abstract discourse. The SV brings evidence to the fact that any attempt to design in situated, embodied ways needs to come to terms with the messiness and thick entanglement with what design wants to emancipate from. What we must resist is the trap of looking for a purity beyond this messiness: «Only the God's trick is forbidden. Here is a criterion for deciding the science question in militarism, that dream science/technology of perfect language, perfect communication, final order» (Haraway, 1988). We must resist this, even within this book. We must preserve the ephemerality and imperfection of this project. The SV is not a perfect communication, nor is it a perfect translation. Rather, it embodies the impossibility of perfect language, of flawless translation or representation. However, this does not mean that we fall into total relativism. As Haraway (1988) notes, «Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well». Relativism and total vision are two sides of the same coin.

Location and positionality are what can counter both relativism and total vision, exploring a middle path in the field of tension between the two: «The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology».

Location, for Haraway, is about vulnerability – resisting closure and finality while embracing fallibility. This ethos shaped the SV as a prototype for «idiotic» designing (Stengers, 2010; Tassinari & Vergani, 2024), characterized by open-endedness, partiality, and embodied engagement:

> **In the Ancient Greek sense, an idiot was someone who did not speak the Greek language and was therefore cut off from the civilized community. The same meaning is formulated in the word *idiom*, a semi-private language that excludes from a form of communication characterized by an ideal of transparency and anonymity (interchangeability of the speakers). But Deleuze's idiot,**

> **borrowed from Dostoevsky and turned into a conceptual character, is the one who always slows the others down, who resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action. This is not because the presentation would be false or because emergencies are believed to be lies, but because «there is something more important». Don't ask him why: the idiot will neither reply nor discuss the issue. The idiot is a presence or, as Whitehead would have put it, produces an interstice. There is no point in asking him, «What is more important?» for he does not know. (Stengers, 2010, pp. 994–995)**

The semi-private language of one who senses there is something more important that cannot be codified, something we will never know – an interstitial use of language – is possibly the reply to the ultimate impossibility of an ultimate translation, an ultimate vocabulary. An idiotic designing (Tassinari & Vergani, 2024; Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026) embracing Stengers's cosmopolitical proposal comes from a given body, and engages with its limitations. The idiot recognizes what *she* does not know, embracing it as a pivotal foundation of her work. There is no preoccupation there with constructing one's own authority but rather in deconstructing it, as this is the price to pay to learn to listen to the unsaid, the gaps, where the sparkles of potential reside. Participatory workshops as the ones addressed in this volume – the performances, the role-plays, the many kinds of free, apparently non-designing playful activities together with kids, the elderly, migrants, and prisoners – embodied this spirit, often blending humor and emotional depth to deconstruct «professional» designer's authority (Illich, 2000).

Haraway calls for the preservation of ephemerality and imperfection. In this sense, the SV embodies the impossibility of universal representation while recognizing that designers are inherently present, with power and biases, even when attempting to dismantle them. Haraway reassures us that a perfect translation is a «God's trick». Instead, she invites us to consider what a «minor» (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), *idiotic* form of translation, always imperfect, always comprising the act of «not knowing» (de la Cadena, 2015): an *idiom* that resists the solidification of concepts in a fixed form: «Feminism loves another

science: the sciences and politics of interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood» (Haraway, 1988).

This acceptance of partiality underscores the feminist objective of resisting both relativism and totalization (Haraway, 1988). The SV project works as a feminist device, as it resists relativism and forced convergence, engaging with partiality as a critical antidote to these forms of domination.

## 1.5 The Praxis of Situated Designing

Haraway argues for a form of objectivity that supports contestation, deconstruction, and passionate construction while fostering solidarity. This double movement – critique and hope – emerges as a key principle in designing as a form of critical praxis (Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026). Through the SV, we have prototyped designing as a form of situated knowledge, a critical praxis of feminist objectivity. In this sense, it can be considered – in its fallibility and frailty – a partial, embodied, situated thought/action questioning power structures and looking for unexplored potentials, envisioning futures less dominated by patriarchal, colonial, or anthropocentric logics.

> **We are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary – that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination. But not just any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms built out of summing and subsuming parts. (Haraway, 1988)**

The more we worked with our SV, the more this tension between knowing and unknowing became more evident. In essence, it does not focus on the inclusivity of voices but on diffracting (Barad, 2014) marginalized voices that demand grounded, transformative change. This aligns with Escobar's and de la Cadena's concept of «pluriversal contact zones» (de la Cadena & Escobar, 2023) – spaces where modern and non-modern epistemologies engage in transformative dialogue without reproducing colonial hierarchies. Haraway's empha-

sis on «splitting» contrasts with the dichotomous, hierarchical thinking of patriarchal and colonial epistemologies: «Splitting represents heterogeneous multiplicities – subjectivities and visions that resist homogenization or totalization» (Haraway, 1988).

This *ethos* shaped the SV, which resists organic unity, capturing complexity through partial, overlapping visions: «The only position from which objectivity could not possibly be practiced and honored is the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all difference» (Haraway, 1988).

Haraway's concept of «engaged, accountable positioning» underpins our politics of designing. Accountability requires us to acknowledge our positionality in our own work and its political consequences. If we want to engage with our own positionality, we need to literally throw ourselves into our projects, «corresponding» (Ingold, 2020) to them from our own sense of urgency, and learning to (re)view, «making space for solidarity and transformation» (Haraway, 1988). To do so, we first need to question our own vision, the soil from where we look, the same eyes from which we see:

> **Also, one cannot relocate in any possible vantage point without being accountable for that movement. Vision is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?**

Positionality implies becoming aware of one's own privileges: «Positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices». It is a process of self-knowledge. This means highlighting the relevance of understanding one's own positioning and engaging in a non paralyzing operation of self-critique. This stands in contrast to the dominant Western patriarchal gaze, stepping outside the individualism of Global Systems:

> **We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice – not partiality for its own sake, but rather for the sake of the connections and unexpected situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals.**

The SV is a project one could have possibly never thought of or developed alone. It is necessarily polyphonic and heteroglossic. This book – as an attempt to bring these voices together, to look together at what has been, and how it has worked on us, questioning the way in which we design, but also how our designs design us (Willis, 2006) and how we look at ourselves as design researchers and as human beings – mirrors this polyphony. Polyphony and diffraction are present both in the composition of the collective work as well as in the book *translating* this project. The collective behind it emerged organically, through elective affinities. This polyphony is also reflected in the choral dimension of the agents involved, as well as in the way the project has been diffracting, multiplying in a kaleidoscopic image our own ideas of designing, questioning, and challenging them:

> **The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere. (Haraway, 1988)**

Many design researchers and other actors have contributed to this project, engaging with itfrom their own histories, bodies, geographies, and experiences of oppression. They all contributed to bringing their own contradictions and dilemmas, together with their hopes and possibilities. This book, in essence, reflects this polyphony and can genuinely be considered both an attempt to translate this experience through a diffracted lens and an invitation to new translations, new interpretations, and new (re)visions. We like to think of the SV as a visor, a kaleidoscopic apparatus to diffract visions, questioning them, and opening them up to new meanings: quoting Haraway (1988), «A splitting of senses, a confusion of voice and sight, rather than clear and distinct ideas».

## 1.6 The Designer as Trickster

Location, for Haraway «is about vulnerability» – resisting closure and finality while embracing fallibility. It is the vulnerability of one's own positionality that allows for «correspondences» (Ingold, 2020). Therefore, we simply cannot bring a final coherence to the SV, making it scalable for other experiences, and bringing «simplification in the last instance» (Haraway, 1988).

We can read Haraway's plea for positionality as an invitation to resist reducing our situated designing into a final, complete toolkit, or a series of design guidelines, to be used in other situations. Instead, the entire experiment can be viewed as a prototype for «idiotic» (Stengers, 2010; Tassinari & Vergani, 2024) designing grappling with the «not knowing» (de la Cadena, 2016; Stengers, 2004; Staszowski & Tassinari, 2026) at the heart of a very feminist form of objectivity. It can only serve as a unique, partial moment that cannot be replicated or form a blueprint. Rather, in its unicity and partiality, it manifests designing as a situated, embodied, critical praxis: an ongoing, fallible, idiotic, open-ended process, that cannot but be partial, depending on the bodies, histories, and geographies from which it happens to take place. These situated contexts are not «fully self-contained or fully formalizable» but are «contestable and contested» (Haraway, 1988), in a dynamic, dialectic interplay with the bodies and histories of those who explore the generative potential of their partial (re)vision. In Haraway's (1988) words: «the politics of engaged, accountable positioning» is about «accountability and responsibility for translations and solidarities linking the cacophonous visions and visionary voices that characterize the knowledges of the subjugated».

We need to be accountable, take responsibility, and learn to «know for real» (Ingold, 2013) – in other words, understanding the matrices of oppression (Quijano, 2000; Lugones, 2007), underpinning the situated contexts in which we design, listening to the voices of the un(der)represented and silenced, and infra-structuring possibilities for these voices to enter into dialogue, agonistically disarticulating and rearticulating points of view (Mouffe, 2005). Ensuring that these voices are treated with care and respect, and recognizing their unexplored potential, also involves building solidarity – finding ways to work

together across differences – while acknowledging the complexities and struggles of those whose knowledge often goes unheard. Sara Ahmed's (2017) work further frames this feminist ethics of accountability, stressing that accountable practices can only draw from positioning oneself within an epistemological framework that can enable us to address what it means to be accountable, and what we should be accountable for. His concept of the feminist killjoy embodying feminist accountability captures the dynamic interplay of laughter and emotion, suggesting that joy and rebellion often emerge from shared recognition of oppressive structures. This was evident in our co-design activities, where humor and complicity helped us navigate existing power structures. Irony is also, for Haraway, one of the cornerstones of situated knowledges. The figure of the coyote/trickster she proposes almost literally mirrors what it might take to «become» (Ingold, 2013) a feminist designer:

> **Acknowledging the agency of the world in knowledge makes room for some unsettling possibilities, including a sense of the world's independent sense of humor. Such a sense of humor is not comfortable for humanists and others committed to the world as resource. There are, however, richly evocative figures to promote feminist visualizations of the world as witty agent. We need not lapse into appeals to a primal mother resisting her translation into resource. The Coyote or Trickster, as embodied in Southwest Native American accounts, suggests the situation we are in when we give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while that we will be hoodwinked. (Haraway, 1988)**

What does it mean to be a designer in a non-patriarchal, non-colonial, non-anthropocentric way? How can I become a feminist designer? Irony could be one of the most promising entry points. «Feminist objectivity makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world». We designers cannot save the world. There is very little we can do, and in a very fallible way. And yet, our work has political implications. We are accountable for them. Haraway's trickster illuminates the humor and humility necessary for designing as a situated practice. It suggests a way of

engaging with the world that is non-patriarchal and non-ideological, embracing irony and fallibility. SV's participatory trickstery workshops were full of elements – dressing up, taking on roles – making the performative nature of the process explicit. Even in more serious activities, self-irony has been used to deconstruct the traditional authorial role of the designer, fostering a collaborative and reflexive approach. And yet, as the prison made very clear, designing remained serious work, as it entailed significant responsibility and accountability.

Designing as a feminist, accountable critical practice does not exclude. It rather holds contradictions together, going beyond reductionist approaches that tend to oversimplify reality by putting it into binary frameworks. In this sense, irony and vulnerability can both be part of the trickster's attitude toward the world. This double interplay of humor and emotions is innate in many of us and is often intuitively experienced as something rather scary and powerful. The experience of the SV has proved to us that when you find others who do not need to play the *cannibaleye* designer, and who also feel the same urgency to go beyond the modern/colonial epistemologies when designing, then there is room for both irony as well as vulnerability. There is no need there for a «killjoy» (Ahmed, 2017). There are no self-protection mechanisms to put into place: one can risk designing in *idiotic* ways, make mistakes, and manifest doubts, in a safe, shared space of collective learning and exploration. Through its contradictions and imperfections, the SV reflects a situated feminist objectivity that resists domination and embraces the complexity of designing in the *mud* of this in-betweenness. This book is a modest attempt to capture its essence by diffraction (Barad, 2007, 2014), by exploring its potential from multiple perspectives: in a sense, a vocabulary of voices for telling the stories of SVs, «a reinvented coyote discourse obligated to its sources in many heterogeneous accounts of the world» (Haraway, 1988).

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PART 2

# Nolo Situated Vocabulary

# 2. Off Campus Nolo: Co-producing Knowledge with Situated Communities

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## 2.1 Introduction

Knowledge production is one of the university's core missions. The scientific community is entrusted with gathering data and refining knowledge in order to provide society with a body of insights that can shape future orientations and lead to the development of potential solutions. This is what I had always understood at the beginning of my journey as a researcher in the field of Design for Social Innovation. The process was clear: getting into a context with defined goals, engaging a community through questions, issues, and participatory activities, extracting data and visualising it. Going on-field and getting back carrying results – while also aiming to contribute proactively to the community through a set of tools and competencies drawn from my researcher's background. As a member of an academic institution, with the university campus as my base, field engagement was proportional to the timeline of each research activity. Relationships with the context and its communities occurred during specific, pre-established situations.

Everything took on a different tone when I was invited to join the Off Campus (OC) initiative, taking an active role in establishing a second research space for Politecnico di Milano in the neighbourhood of Nolo – at the time a vibrant and rapidly changing area in the northeast of Milan (Italy). As we explored the context and gradually activated the space, the experience of being rooted in a specific place – with its own unique social fabric – naturally raised deeper questions about research ethics, the role of academia, and the very nature of knowledge production.

This chapter traces the origins of Off Campus Nolo (OC Nolo) through a personal lens – that of an early-career researcher involved in shaping an initiative that remains experimental within the Italian academic landscape. Though developed within the university, OC Nolo was quickly reshaped by the everyday realities of the local context, gradually evolving over five years into a hybrid form: both a situated research hub and a *collaborative platform* supporting a diverse and dynamic community. From the outset, the project has challenged conventional notions of knowledge production, encouraging reflection on its collaborative nature and highlighting the value of polyphony and partnership with non-academic actors. Its very first project, the Nolo Situated Vocabulary (Nolo SV), sparked critical conversations around the limits of solutionist thinking, the oversimplification of complex contexts, and the difficulties of scaling scientific approaches. At its core, the project uses dialogue and language to explore marginality, embrace diverse perspectives, and investigate the relationships that emerge across differences.

## 2.2 Exploring the context

### 2.2.1 Nolo Neighborhood

Urban neighbourhoods are increasingly evolving into laboratories where new methods for collaboratively redesigning cities are being explored, addressing social, environmental, and cultural issues from a community-centred perspective (Burayidi *et al*., 2020). The so-called «creative communities» (Meroni, 2007) supporting these explorations are developing ever more initiatives to preserve and enhance

the «commons» (Ostrom, 1990; Wall, 2005; Marttila *et al*., 2014) while generating inclusive and democratic regeneration processes in environmental, economic, and social spheres (Manzini, 2019; Fassi & Vergani, 2020). These proactive communities comprising citizens, local shopkeepers, neighbourhood associations, and informal groups, act as «active collaborators» (Thorpe & Rhodes, 2018) at the heart of the design process. They increasingly embody both potential and a moral responsibility (Deshpande, 2016) in creating physical and digital spaces that foster civic engagement, interaction, and the exchange of knowledge among their diverse members. However, these neighbourhood communities are usually highly diverse, including not only proactive groups but also many individuals who are often entirely excluded or marginalised from social innovation processes. This social richness creates *pluralistic* contexts (Mouffe, 2009) that are challenging to map, especially when engaging situated and marginalised communities while striving to maintain an inclusive and ecosystemic perspective – a process that can give rise to particularly difficult friction points (von Busch & Palmås, 2023).

This is certainly the case of Nolo, located just outside the city centre, that has become a focal point of regeneration, driven by its proactive residents who have cultivated a virtuous tapestry of initiatives (Fassi & Vergani, 2020; Fassi & Manzini, 2021). One of the first initiatives ignited by the residents was the Nolo Social District – a social street founded in 2016 and managed by local residents through a Facebook group that now counts over 13,000 members – that has played a pivotal role in the neighbourhood's transformation. Since its outset, the *Nolo Social District* has successfully connected local residents – particularly newcomers coming from other places in Italy – by offering a digital platform where they could ask practical questions and build relationships with their neighbours. Following this initial phase of online interaction, part of the community decided to meet in person, gathering in the neighbourhood's public spaces and organising small events such as community breakfasts – informal moments of conviviality and discussion, often accompanied by food and drinks brought by the participants themselves (Fassi & Manzini, 2021). Experiencing public space collectively led the community to recognise the value of urban environments as powerful drivers of social connection,

rediscovering places in the neighbourhood that hold particular architectural, artistic, and cultural significance.

Within these spaces stands the Municipal Market in Viale Monza 54, a commercial gallery built in 1933 and one of the earliest examples of covered markets in Milan made of reinforced concrete (Figure 1). Today, this building remains a neighbourhood landmark and functions as a hybrid space, blending commercial areas with common corridors that frequently host cultural, social, and community events. However, the limited environmental comfort of such a structure has recently drawn the attention of the local municipality. After many years, this has led to a planned temporary closure for refurbishment, now overseen by a new owner. It was within this transitional context that the Polimi DESIS Lab – the research lab at the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano, where I work – identified a timely opportunity to establish Off Campus Nolo (OC Nolo), envisioned as a headquarters for extensive fieldwork in the Nolo neighbourhood.

### 2.2.2 Moving Beyond University Borders. The Opening of Off Campus Nolo

In recent years universities have increasingly embraced their *third mission* (see Chapter 12), moving beyond teaching and research to promote social values through community engagement and societal development (Cognetti, 2013; Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Auad Proenca *et al*., 2022). This shift has led to the creation of spin-offs


Figure 1.
The Municipal Market in Viale Monza, 52 (Milan).

and initiatives aimed at transferring academic expertise to a broader social context. Working directly with local communities offers a unique opportunity to enhance the quality of research, identify practical actions, and explore new ways to disseminate knowledge from academia to society, paving the way for social innovation (Fassi & Vergani, 2020). This approach aims to create meaningful cultural, social, and educational impacts that may benefit both academia as well as the communities it serves.

In this light, the responsible co-production of situated forms of knowledge between academic institutions and local communities represents an innovative approach. Through this synergy, universities move away from traditional vertical knowledge transmission models, adopting instead the role of facilitators and mediators in co-creation processes. This mutual exchange may enrich the knowledge produced – making it more situated – while fostering a sense of shared responsibility and direct positive impact on local territories. In this perspective, OC represents a radical and groundbreaking project within Italian academia, serving as a pilot action-research experience that fully immerses the academic community in addressing the social challenges of unique urban contexts (see Chapter 12).

Within the OC programme, OC Nolo specifically aimed at promoting social innovation within the Nolo community through research projects, co-design, and local activation activities, developing pilot projects to transform the Municipal Market and the wider neighbourhood. Once Politecnico confirmed its commitment to the initiative in 2020 – and the Municipal Market was identified as a suitable site – OC Nolo officially opened its doors in the Nolo Municipal Market (Figure 2).


Figure 2.
The original space of Off Campus Nolo back in 2020.

Over the past five years, OC Nolo has continued to grow and strengthen its mission by expanding social partnerships, developing strategies for spatial transformation, launching new activities, projects, and services for the neighbourhood, and fostering the co-production of collective, situated knowledge (Fassi & Vergani, 2023, 2024).

## 2.3 Letting Emerge – and Attuning to – Different Voices

From the very beginning, OC Nolo demanded consistent and meaningful involvement from the Politecnico community. Located inside the Municipal Market, the space posed an immediate challenge: how to maintain a steady, welcoming presence for the Nolo community. This required more than just physical availability, it meant being truly open to spontaneous encounters and everyday conversations – something that doesn't typically fall within the usual responsibilities of a university researcher. This new context quickly revealed the need to rethink our roles as academics. On one hand, our institutional responsibilities required us to carry out structured tasks – collecting data, analysing it, and finding appropriate ways to share our findings. On the other, our daily presence in the market called for a more grounded, responsive approach, one that could engage with people's concerns in real time. At the same time, this blending of roles offered us a rare, immersive perspective on the neighbourhood. By keeping the space open on a regular weekly basis, we were able to form deeper relationships with a diverse range of local actors, including members of specific communities with varying degrees and types of engagement.

These early frictions were, in hindsight, clarifying. They helped us better understand our position within the context, leading us to recognise two primary groups interacting with the space. On one side were the *offcampusers* – ourselves –, the academic community navigating the ambiguity of our role within the neighbourhood. On the other were the «situated stakeholders» (Fassi & Vergani, 2022): local residents and community groups who, rooted in their daily connection to the area, began interacting with the project through various forms of participation.

### 2.3.1 Offcampusers

The concept of the *offcampusers* was born directly within the context of OC Nolo (Fassi & Vergani, 2024) (see Chapter 12). The challenge of defining the academic community's role in the market space led to a reflection on their evolving functions. *Offcampusers* operate in a hybrid context, crossing academic research, local actions, and community-oriented projects. They contribute with their expertise to *marginal* neighbourhood contexts, mediating between the needs of the community and local administrative policies. *Offcampusers* are not just professors, researchers, PhD candidates, interns, and students working at OC Nolo, but most of all facilitators, listeners of social dynamics, activists, and – sometimes – technicians. They regularly transcend the boundaries of traditional scientific research, embracing social and managerial skills often absent in more conventional academic knowledge production. Their contribution has been marked by a consistent ability to foster participation among local stakeholders, approaching the neighbourhood with care and dedication. Over the years, *offcampusers* demonstrated listening skills, cultivated meaningful relationships, and shown a remarkable capacity to negotiate effectively across a wide range of stakeholders. This role is not merely a response to definitional challenges but stems from a deliberate effort to create a horizontal, mutually supportive working group, breaking free from the hierarchical structures typical of university settings. This approach is particularly evident in collaborations with student interns, who are immediately integrated into the team and entrusted with managerial roles in various projects.

### 2.3.2 Situated Stakeholders

As previously mentioned, Nolo's historical and social evolution has fostered over the years an increasingly vibrant and diverse community. However, the term *community* risks here oversimplifying the richness and complexity of this neighbourhood, which comprises multiple, often interconnected, groups with varying degrees and modes of interaction amongst each other. Beyond differences in cultural background or shared interests, Nolo's «situated stakeholders» (Fassi & Vergani, 2022) can be broadly categorised into two groups: the proactive community – members of the «creative class» (Florida, 2002)

or «professionals of the everyday» (Meroni, 2007) – and the marginal community – those «under the radar» (Emilson *et al*., 2014) with «low social resilience» (Thorpe & Manzini, 2018), including migrants, the elderly, children, and individuals with physical or mental disabilities.

While the proactive community quickly engaged within OC Nolo, becoming involved in pre-opening activities – such as Design Studios led by Politecnico's professors (Fassi & Vergani, 2023) –, connecting with marginal communities instead proved significantly more challenging. These groups are often excluded – due to various barriers (for instance, linguistic and cultural ones) – from ongoing discussions and transformations in the neighbourhood. Marginal communities have often limited access to socio-political tools, leading to their rejection and the frequent neglect of their needs. Furthermore, these discussions often fail to acknowledge the broader value of the community, excluding non-human agents such as plants and animals that also inhabit and share the neighbourhood's spaces (Tassinari & Manzini, 2023; Tassinari & Vergani, 2023).

However, every community has a voice that must be recognised to foster a genuinely democratic and horizontal dialogue. Our understanding of *situated stakeholders* draws from Donna Haraway's «situated knowledge» (1988), highlighting the importance of context, positionality, and the local environment's specificities in co-producing knowledge. From the very beginning, the presence of these marginalized communities was immediately evident when OC Nolo opened. Families and older residents passing through the market – curious about such an unusual space – were quickly invited in the space and


**Figure 3.**
The exhibition of the nine words during the opening of Off Campus Nolo.

later encouraged to join emerging projects and initiatives. These initial moments of engagement were pivotal: not only did they help us establish connections with local communities, but they also revealed just how partial and biased our understanding of Nolo's dynamics had been. On its own, that understanding was not enough to meaningfully support social innovation in the neighborhood. It was within this context that the Nolo SV – still in its early exploratory phase – emerged as a crucial resource.

## 2.4 Enabling the Nolo Situated Vocabulary

As described in the introduction to this book, the launch of OC Nolo coincided with a small exhibit showcasing the Nolo SV project (Figure 3), which had already been activated in the neighbourhood prior to the physical opening of the space. Nine keywords – *Public Space*, *Degradation*, *Common Good*, *Sense of Belonging*, *Memory*, *Fun*, *Change*, *Commitment*, and *Nolo* – emerged from conversations with the local web radio group, *Radio Nolo*. These words represented the community's priorities and worries at that moment, yet they also hinted at hidden tensions, divisions, and opportunities for future change.

From the outset, the project aimed to maintain polyphony, a broad perspective that acknowledged the multiple actors – both human and non-human – and their interconnections in the neighbourhood. Early challenges in reaching and engaging different neighbourhood voices made it evident how important the framework provided by *Radio Nolo* was, not only for the project itself, but for opening up an ongoing process of neighbourhood exploration. It was at this point that the core idea behind the Nolo SV project truly came into its own: its mission was to find, let emerge, and amplify the multiplicity of voices in the local context, fostering dialogue that generates «agonistic spaces» (Mouffe, 2007) for transformative conversations (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023). Theoretically grounded in the power of words and language (Tassinari & Staszoswki, 2020) and participatory democracy, Nolo SV emphasises deeply *situated knowledges* and collaborative processes as fundamental for imagining new ways of being together. In this sense, the project recognizes «gaps» (Tsing, 2015) in the social fabric,

spaces that may appear empty but are full of potential experiences and connections waiting to be awakened. Through the «art of noticing», combined with attentive listening and attuning – these «latent commons» may reveal themselves: hidden moments and alliances among living beings – human and non-human – that emerge through interaction, collaboration, and even competition in a specific context.

The approach initiated through Nolo SV highlights the importance of identifying and exploring these *interstitial zones* via participatory methods. Over time, this work itself led the development of an ephemeral *agorà* (Arendt, 2013; Tassinari *et al*., 2017; Tassinari & Staszowski, 2020), a *collaborative platform* for democratic conversations with the local community, where the interdependencies of a «complex we» (de la Cadena, 2021) can be articulated into the building blocks for more sustainable and just futures. Such agonistic and democratic exchanges across neighbourhood communities enable the disarticulation and rearticulation of perspectives and voices (Mouffe, 2013; Huybrechts *et al*., 2022; Tassinari & Vergani, 2023), challenging simplistic interpretations of what constitutes good for the community. These *voices* not only kept on nourishing the Nolo SV, but also sparked inquiries into «matters of care» (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Huybrechts *et al*., 2022; Manzini & Tassinari, 2022), culminating in the co-production of situated knowledges.

## 2.5 Situated Knowledges Co-production

As previously outlined, *offcampusers* are those who contribute expertise (in terms of tools and know-how) to the production of new, responsible knowledge. At the same time, *situated stakeholders* are not merely recipients; they play a crucial role in providing knowledge themselves. Their embeddedness within the local context enables them to offer unique, context-specific insights that may remain invisible or inaccessible to external people. But how does this exchange and subsequent knowledge co-production take place within the context of OC Nolo? How did the Nolo SV project contribute to this co-production?

Following the development of a network of *situated stakeholders*, OC Nolo faced its second challenge: providing meaningful support to the neighbourhood community. This entailed fostering continuous exchange and promoting the co-production of situated knowledge. This dual approach involved leveraging the academic community's resources, skills, and tools while enabling local actors to apply their own skills and knowledge. In this sense, OC Nolo promotes «collaborative platforms» (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023): spaces, services, and tools designed to bring together a diversity of actors to exchange knowledge and dynamically generate a collective form of intelligence (Huybrechts *et al*., 2022). The small size of the market stall hosting OC Nolo, along with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, initially limited effective knowledge exchange between the two communities. It was only after subsequent expansions (such as Off Campus Nolo +, the adjacent stall opened in 2023, and *OUT. Il Cortile Sociale*, the former garbage storage area outside the market transformed into a space for fostering community interaction among Nolo's residents) that OC Nolo was able to take on a pivotal role. These expanded spaces have facilitated the creation of collaborative projects, events, and activities (Fassi & Vergani, 2024). By hosting meetings, workshops, seminars, co-design sessions thanks to its flexible equipment, OC Nolo + became an attractive hub not only for the Nolo community but also, and above all, for the associations and informal groups in the neighborhood that usually gather in the space after their daily work activities. While *OUT. Il Cortile Sociale* hosted a diverse set of cultural, artistic, and recreational events, catering to various age groups in the neighborhood during spring and summer time.

Within this OC Nolo's ecosystem – and prompted by the Nolo SV different formats and outputs (see Chapter 3) – the exchange and subsequent generation of new knowledge occur through specific initiatives led by the academic community – such as funded research projects or scheduled events – or through «collisions» (Fassi & Vergani, 2024) between the *offcampusers* and the *situated stakeholders*. These collisions often arise spontaneously and are fostered through activities like workshops, co-design sessions, events, or informal meetings (see Chapters 3, 4, 11). The term *collision* – inspired by the very concept of «agonism» (Mouffe, 2000; DiSalvo, 2010; DiSalvo &

Lukens, 2011; Hillgren *et al*., 2016) – derives from its etymology, which relates to the interaction between two or more bodies, resulting in an exchange of energy and, in this case, knowledge. A *collision*, therefore, represents a serendipitous moment that, when properly analysed and acted upon, enables the collaborative development of new forms of co-creation and knowledge dissemination between the two communities.

Among the many *collisions* that have emerged over the years at OC Nolo, the Nolo SV has proven especially valuable in sparking some of them. For instance, the word *Degradation* – and the co-design sessions developed around it with situated stakeholders – brought to light the need to revitalize an overlooked and inaccessible space in the neighborhood. This space, *Piazzetta Transiti*, had been excluded from public use due to disruptive behaviour by certain community groups, leading to the Municipality's decision to enclose it with a fence. This issue was first taken up by the *offcampusers*, initiating a process that eventually led to the signing of a *Collaboration Pact*, an institutioning collaborative platform offered by the Municipality of Milan (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023). Designed in partnership with a coalition of *situated stakeholders* – including residents, associations, and formal groups – the pact aimed to reimagine the space through occasional activities and events. In this instance, the *collision* originated during interviews conducted for the Nolo SV project but subsequently evolved into a broader discussion. This led the *offcampusers* and *situated stakeholders* to engage deeply with themes such as the relationship between public and private spaces, the exclusion of marginalised communities in urban planning, and the civic responsibility of citizens in caring for «common goods» (Ostrom, 1990; Wall, 2005; Marttila *et al*., 2014) (Figure 4).

Another *collision* triggered by a set of live talks on the Nolo SV, fostered the development of *Quartiere Competente – Neighbourhood Open Lectures*, a series of thematic seminars conducted by local experts (see Chapter 11). In these seminars, residents use OC Nolo's space to share their knowledge with a mixed audience, reversing the conventional notion of OC Nolo as a platform for disseminating scientific knowledge exclusively from the university context. This initiative, born from a specific collision with a neighbourhood resident,


Figure 4.
One of the first meetings with the coalition of *situated stakeholders*.

would not have been feasible without OC Nolo's spatial expansion through the subsequent opening of OC Nolo +. Moreover, the debates stimulated within these seminars, thus activating an *agonistic space*, contributed to the emergence of further *collisions*.

## 2.6 Reflections and Implications

The creation of new knowledge does not always follow strictly scientific or academic pathways; it quite often arises from insights, ideas, and social movements sparked by these unplanned *collisions*. A significant portion of the effectiveness of these processes can be attributed to the academic community of offcampusers who mediate and harness the potential of what unfolds from a collision, steering it towards a specific trajectory to nurture further initiatives. By introducing multidisciplinary projects that prioritise human and social development, we have brought forward themes and approaches that have proven valuable and impactful within the Nolo community. For instance, the Nolo SV flattened traditional hierarchies, fostered an democratic discourse in which all project collaborators – academics, residents, shopkeepers, experts, and others – had equal agency to share their opinions and knowledge, therefore activating a process of *democratisation* of knowledge.

Nevertheless, there are additional aspects that can provide further points for reflection to better understand the project's effectiveness, as well as its challenges and limitations. First of all, OC Nolo

ecosystem has been instrumental in grounding the *agonistic spaces* developed through the Nolo SV, creating the aforementioned ephemeral *agorà* (Mouffe, 2007; Arendt, 2013) that facilitates continuous knowledge exchange and spontaneous *collisions* between *offcampusers* and *situated stakeholders*. The various OC Nolo spaces are regularly booked by neighbourhood associations and informal groups, who bring their skills, ideas, and initiatives to life on a daily basis, managing activities autonomously.

Secondly, being *situated* in the local context enables a deeper understanding of the territory and facilitates the development of longer-term projects with local actors. Initiatives like OC Nolo are typically spread out over time, offering the significant advantage of being adjustable in response to emerging challenges. Constant interaction with local stakeholders helps foster strong, sustainable relationships and networks over time. At the same time, being *situated* doesn't mean having the *hubris* of being the only one acting in the neighbourhood. Many of the initiatives undertaken often integrate seamlessly into a constellation of existing projects within the area fueled by other actors operating in the Nolo neighbourhood. It was clear from the beginning that it was important to scale back our role in favour of those within the neighbourhood who possess far greater knowledge and expertise, developed through years of dedicated work.

From the perspective of the Nolo neighbourhood, the initial phase following the opening of OC Nolo proved challenging as the arrival of Politecnico generated mixed reactions within the community. On the one hand, it sparked interest; on the other, it bred scepticism. Being part of a large institution, such as a public university, can create expectations that are difficult to fulfil, while a university's presence may also be perceived as intrusive by the local community. To address this, we tried to work with care and dedication, expanding our knowledge of the neighbourhood, building relationships, and actively responding to the various needs that emerged. However, potential challenges may arise when becoming an integral part of the neighbourhood. From the perspective of local residents, a synergistic relationship can lead to an overreliance on the capacities of the academic community, potentially resulting in disappointment or a loss of trust when outcomes do not align with expectations. Conversely, from the perspective of

*offcampusers*, the relationships formed with the local community – sometimes complex, but quite always deeply enriching – inevitably lead us to become integrated into the neighbourhood. Through participation in events or the pursuit of interests beyond OC Nolo objectives, we increasingly embed ourselves in the community. This fostered a positive alignment with the neighbourhood while potentially compromising our objectivity. As active members of the community, we have always been directly impacted by our own decisions and initiatives, influencing our satisfaction and sense of responsibility toward the neighbourhood. Through the years, this blurred role generated tensions between the need to act responsibly within the community and the ability to provide detached, impartial analysis. Finding a balance between personal involvement and professional judgement remains a nuanced challenge for *offcampusers* navigating these intersecting roles.

## 2.7 Conclusions

The OC Nolo initiative offers a compelling example of how a university can step outside its traditional boundaries and actively engage with the complexities of everyday urban life. In doing so, it challenges conventional academic paradigms and highlights the transformative potential of co-producing knowledge with situated communities,

Rather than simply delivering expertise from a distance, OC Nolo has created the conditions for mutual learning and shared authorship of both questions and answers, redefining the university's role as a civic actor embedded in the social fabric. This experience also reveals that when researchers embrace the ambiguity of their role as *offcampusers* – navigating between institutional responsibilities and everyday neighbourhood dynamics – they not only deepen their understanding of the context but also unlock new forms of engagement, care, and responsibility.

In this process, projects like the Nolo SV have played a crucial role. By fostering participatory, polyphonic conversations around key terms and local concerns, Nolo SV has supported the emergence of truly situated knowledges that are grounded, relational, and responsive to

the lived realities of the people and places involved. By exploring Nolo, fostering democratic exchange, and co-envisioning future transformative actions, the Nolo SV project has not only enabled the co-production of new knowledge but has also helped make that knowledge more visible, shareable, and meaningful beyond the academic sphere.

Ultimately, OC Nolo shows that the co-production of knowledge is not just a method, but a commitment: to listen actively, to remain present, and to continuously re-negotiate one's position within a shared space. It calls for a reimagining of academic work as a collaborative, open-ended practice – one that values proximity over detachment, dialogue over prescription, and care over control. As such, OC Nolo represents both a challenge and an invitation for academia to re-situate itself – physically, ethically, and politically – within the communities it aims to serve.

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# 3. Narrating Collective Meanings through Tangible Artifacts and Immersive Spatial Experiences

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## 3.1 Introduction

Nolo Situated Vocabulary (SV) explored the transformative power of language in participatory design, fostered civic dialogue on the needs, challenges, and potential of the Nolo neighbourhood. By engaging local expressions, it facilitated the co-creation of future scenarios and collective actions, amplifying marginalized voices, often excluded from decision-making processes. This chapter focuses on the project's exploratory approach to testing and developing different formats. Particularly, it examines Nolo SV through three main narrative artifacts – physical booklets, online podcasts and hybrid events – highlighting how these distinct formats were used not only document linguistic interpretations, but also reframe them as performative experiences, prompting new interactions and regenerative social processes. From written definitions to oral translations and immersive spatial installations, Nolo SV materialises a plural, evolving lexicon of place-based forms of knowledge. The final reflection aims to under-

stand its communicative and experiential dimensions, bridging audio narratives and spatial design as collective knowledge platforms.

## 3.2 Co-creating Narrative Artifacts

Words are materialised in their plural meanings which evoke emotions, stimulate reflection, discourses and generate shared narratives. Words are not just mere tools of communication; they are vehicles of narration, conceptual instruments capable of articulating abstract ideas and reflecting collective identities. They encapsulate the memory of an era, a place, and a community, stimulating debate and continuously redefining the shared perception of reality. One of the Nolo SV primary objectives was to foster civic dialogue concerning the neighbourhood's needs, potentialities, and challenges, exploring how local language and shared expressions can help the articulation of new possible future situated scenarios and actions triggered and imagined by the community itself, with a specific focus on those marginalized voices that risk being unheard in participatory design processes. Implementing a widely diffused and open approach to social innovation design necessitates creating conditions that foster dialogue and empathy among the actors involved. In an articulated system of meanings no longer confined to individuals, a need to share a common vocabulary and engage in a progressive recodification of knowledge arises – moving away from speculative and self-referential notions to construct an explicit, transmissible, and shared discourse (Manzini, 2015). The Nolo SV harnesses its transformative potential through multiple expressive *narrative artifacts* (Figure 1) that not only document the community's shared definitions but also translate them into narrative forms that stimulate new interactions and regenerative social processes. The voices coming from several communities in Nolo became part of the Nolo SV, first in its written form, and then in its oral translation, to be finally reassembled in a podcast, and prototyped as an immersive exhibition. As previously stated in Chapter 2, the Nolo SV manifests itself in a variety of ways across its lifespan:

- Physical booklets (handbooks): the first format consisted of physical booklets that document each word and its associat-


Figure 1. Narrative Artifacts of Nolo SV: from the top-left the booklets; to the right, the logo of the podcast *In Poche Parole*; below, details of the exhibition *Situated Vocabularies – Reframing Participation with Fragile Communities* at Off Campus Nolo. Photos by the author.

ed meanings. Inspired by the aesthetics of traditional vocabularies, these booklets meticulously record contributions from participants, including transcriptions of their insights and names, and the methods through which their input was collected. These *artifacts* served as the primary source of data, forming the foundation from which all other formats were derived.

- Podcast: to further open up the SV format, we explored its performative potential through orality. This idea emerged from our collaboration with *Radio Nolo*. The podcast brought the Nolo SV to life, enabling a real-time exchange of words and perspectives, fostering reflections, and encouraging the community to keep the conversation alive across various social media platforms. The podcast production allowed us to carefully curate the narratives of different *voices* while maintaining their polyphony and intrinsic contrasting nature.
- Exhibitions: to expand the SV beyond textual and oral formats, we transformed the living lab space into a dynamic exhibition platform, showcasing the work developed for each word. This performative shift allowed for real-time interactions between

participants, breathing new life into the SV and generating fresh meanings through dialogue and engagement.

- Future scenarios: each discussion developed within the Nolo SV became a design opportunity to imagine new ways of fostering social life in the neighbourhood's future. The various contributions helped to articulate shared visions and design scenarios that grew out of reflections sparked by the conversations around the different words explored in the SV and the corresponding podcast episodes.

In this chapter, I intend to conduct an in-depth analysis of several emerging narrative devices, adopting a personal perspective informed by my active role in the transformation and dissemination of the results. Accordingly, this chapter presents and analyses three narrative transformation experiments related to Nolo SV, in which my involvement was commensurate with the design process: booklets, podcasts, and exhibitions. Through these initiatives, the SV evolved from written and oral forms to an immersive spatial prototype, demonstrating its potential as a communicative and experiential platform for collective knowledge production in participatory design.

## 3.3 Written Transformation: Booklets

The initial format comprises printed booklets that capture the nine Nolo SV words – *Public Space*, *Degradation*, *Common Good*, *Sense of Belonging*, *Memory*, *Fun*, *Change*, *Commitment*, and *Nolo* – alongside their related meanings. Drawing on the visual style of conventional and traditional vocabularies, these booklets systematically compile participant contributions, including transcriptions and stakeholders, as well as the methodologies employed for data collection. Throughout the years, numerous editorial and graphic experiments were conducted on this narrative artefact. At times, it was essential to showcase and distribute it for trivial events at OCN or other instances, rather than to obtain a clear and comprehensive understanding of the incomplete results we were attaining. The preliminary iteration of the SV was crafted effortlessly, with an editorial typeface like *Times New*

*Roman* on a pristine white background, with centred block alignment on A5 pages. The entirety was finalised with a dark cover featuring a plain and straightforward title that underscored the draft status of this inaugural edition (*Situated Vocabulary – Nolo. Edition Zero*). The initial 20 copies have been crucial in articulating the early interactions with the community and in refining the narrative voices that would subsequently emerge in the podcast episodes, as well as for all participants involved. Those copies served as a business card, affirming that words, despite being compiled and structured in this instance, possess an unequivocal and potent significance as catalysts and agents of change.

Subsequently, in 2022, we decided to submit OCN and Nolo SV to the post-Covid-19 edition of the *ADI Index 2021*. The *ADI Index* is a digital archive curated by the Associazione per il Disegno Industriale (ADI), that collected and documented industrial design projects that could then be shortlisted to compete for the *Compasso d'Oro* Prize, one of the most prestigious awards in the field of design internationally. After only two years since the opening of the living lab in Nolo, the results achieved through various projects activated in the area – and the strong positive response to Nolo SV – made us hopeful of gaining at least some national recognition. We only needed a *product* that could represent us in all our complexity, even though we defined ourselves as an incubator of social practices and felt that reducing our work to a single artefact was limiting. Therefore, we managed to narrate our work and highlight the social and territorial impact we had achieved through a kind of interactive archive artifact, in which we presented for the first time the most updated and finalised version of the vocabularies in the form of physical booklets for the Nolo SV project. In detail, four physical vocabularies in a square format were designed, maintaining a clear, clean and understated style, for the words explored and completed up to that point: *Public Space*, *Degradation*, *Common Good* and *Sense of Belonging*. Each individual vocabulary consisted of:

- Introduction: a presentation and analysis of the context of investigation and reference, such as the Nolo neighbourhood,

with an explanation of the Nolo SV project and the expected outcomes.
- Vocabulary section: a definition of the word in all its complexity, accompanied by a series of multi-voiced reflections.
- Podcast section: an in-depth section with a QR code linking to the episode produced on the chosen word in collaboration with *Radio Nolo*.
- Scenarios section: the presentation of desirable future narratives in the form of digitised collages, which were then shared on the social media channels of OCN and the neighbourhood.
- Workshop section: a description of the activity specifically designed for a group of local stakeholders in the neighbourhood, in which they were invited through a playful and performative process to reflect on the chosen word after listening to the podcast and after generating and constructing the scenarios.
- Acknowledgements: a list of the voices involved and the people who contributed to defining the word.

The same physical vocabularies were later reused as exhibition objects for other internal events or to present the project. At the time of writing, despite other experiments activated in connection with Nolo SV, there was no updated editorial version of these narrative artefacts. However, there was an active publication plan aimed at disseminating the results and making the research format scalable and adaptable to other contexts (see Chapter 11), with the intention of integrating or expanding the vocabulary words.

## 3.4 Oral Transmission: Podcast

One of the project's main criticalities has been to achieve the full suite of podcast episodes – succeeding in producing only five of the nine intended words. This must be linked to the energy-intensive nature of getting numerous *voices*, perspectives, and expertise, coordinating every technical necessity within a non-extractive, ethical framework. *In Poche Parole* – literally *In few words* –, the podcast produced in collaboration with *Radio Nolo*, sought to capture and amplify a diverse

range of voices, collectively addressing pressing and controversial issues concerning the collection of words forming the Nolo SV. Each of the episodes is named after one specific word and is constituted by a dynamic collection of definitions, chit-chats, reflections, originated both from experts and researchers both from common inhabitants of Nolo. The podcast could be seen as an auditive digital space in which experts and public knowledge co-exist, negotiate and collaborate in creating a crystallization of the discourse around certain topics.

The *voices* of guests or pre-recorded contributions have been selected thanks to the continuous work of situated applied research in the context of OCN, which allowed a process of discovery, mapping and building of a network of local actors: experts, citizens, organizations or associations, grassroot initiatives, with whom the *offcampusers* (see Chapter 2) entered in contact in multiple occasions, in relation either to the Nolo SV project, either to neighbourhood events or to other projects carried on by the living lab. Moreover, the SV promotes a more systemic and ecosystemic design perspective by actively listening to and integrating the voices of scientists who speak on behalf of non-human biological life forms. These contributions help to make visible the often-overlooked presence of plants, animals, and other organisms that inhabit the neighbourhood as well as the multiple identities and social layers of the neighbourhood, with particular attention to amplifying marginalized voices that are often excluded from participatory design processes (see Preface and Chapter 2). Alongside these groups, the SV incorporates the *voices* of residents, writers, linguists, artists, designers, local activists, and scientists, contributing to a rich and multifaceted understanding of the urban and multispecies realms.

The opening episode – dedicated to the first word *Public Space* (February 2021) – examined the intricate significances of public space as a domain of negotiation, accessibility, and conflict. It explored the role of urban squares, sidewalks, and parks as settings for community development, highlighting how these spaces had been transformed through grassroots interventions such as *guerrilla gardening* (Crane *et al*., 2013) and tactical urbanism (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). The discussion also addressed the reappropriation of urban spaces following the lockdown focusing on experiences in parks, squares, and informal

gathering places. The shared reflections on the podcast also conveyed relational and social connotations: giving space or creating space, allowing room for youth lacking space, reclaiming personal space, or acknowledging distance between individuals. These varied nuances became even more evident through cross-linguistic comparisons. Finally, the episode speculated on the evolving functions of public space in the coming decade. Such distinctions highlighted the semantic richness and cultural specificity inherent in the concept of space, underscoring the need to understand it not as a fixed entity but as a dynamic, context-dependent construct.

The second episode, *Degradation* (May 2021), explored the phenomenon of urban deterioration, challenging dominant narratives that linked decline to criminality and chaos. Instead, it examined its connections to gentrification, racial politics, and economic conflict. The discussion addressed subtle yet deeply impactful forms of degradation within communities, including social segregation and the erosion of cultural identity. It also highlighted examples of community-based initiatives that aimed to foster neighbourhood solidarity and resilience. The concept of degradation is inextricably tied to urban contexts and functions as a broad, flexible category encompassing a wide range of phenomena. What unites these is the act of labelling a specific urban area, typically by external social actors, as problematic. Rather than a neutral sociological construct, degradation operates as a politically charged, common-sense term often mobilized to justify aggressive neoliberal urban policies. These strategies frequently involve the deliberate neglect of certain spaces until a disruptive, large-scale intervention can be framed as both necessary and urgent. In this sense, degradation serves as a discursive tool wielded by political actors and moral entrepreneurs to legitimise responses to social issues, particularly in urban areas marked by high mobility and the visible presence of marginalised or stigmatised populations.

The third episode, *Common Good* (October 2021), explored community engagement through the construction, regulation, and contestation of urban common goods. It examined residents' perceptions and interactions with shared resources, highlighting the multiple meanings and manifestations of the common good. The episode presented concrete examples of community-led projects aimed at re-

covering and preserving communal assets and addressed the historical evolution of the term, situating contemporary practices within a broader linguistic and social context. Following this exploration of the common good as an immaterial resource, the episode shifted focus to its understanding as a physical place, discussing squares and public spaces. In closing, it introduced a perspective often overlooked: that of a multispecies realm. It considered what the common good means from the viewpoint of water, incorporating insights from environmental and civil engineering experts. The following episode, *Sense of Belonging* (March 2022) examined the politics of inclusion and exclusion in a changing urban environment. It emphasised the role of individual and collective participation through urban gardens, public spaces, and informal networks in fostering community attachment. The discussion highlighted the variability of belonging experiences across different places and times within the neighbourhood, considering how diverse social groups including children and street performers engage with specific sites in distinct ways. Additionally, the episode incorporated interdisciplinary perspectives to deepen understanding of belonging, integrating ecological, sociological, and anthropological viewpoints to capture the complex and dynamic nature of the sense of belonging in urban contexts.

Lastly, the special episode *Memory* – which aired on Italy's Liberation Day on April 25, 2022 – delves into Nolo's profound history within the Resistance and the concept of resilience and sharing memories. The episode examined stories of past and ongoing resistance, highlighting how these narratives offer perspectives oriented towards the future. Also, it investigated how commemorating the past through monuments, street naming, and narrative projects played a crucial role in shaping contemporary struggles for freedom, democracy, and rights. It also considered how these memories resonated across generations and influenced urban transformation.

## 3.5 Immersive Spatial Transformation: Exhibition

The project's first spatial experimentation – beyond the opening exhibition – took place, interestingly, not within the Market itself but in an international setting. In early 2021, the Nolo SV was featured in *ExpoAction: Infinite Creativity for a Finite World*, a design exhibition curated by ENSAD – the School of Decorative Arts in Paris – held from March 30 to April 16, 2021, at Folie nº 6 in Parc de la Villette and at the Villette Makerz in Paris. The exhibition aimed to showcase design's unique capacity to actively engage in shaping a desirable future, by surfacing and amplifying forms of *common sense* rooted in resilient, time-tested practices. This experience helped the *offcampusers* understand the value of spatially translating the project – prompting them to explore new communication formats that could, on the one hand, make the project accessible to a broader audience, and, on the other, actively foster an *agorà* for dialogue among diverse voices.

The second spatial experimentation, *Situated Vocabularies – Re-framing Participation with Fragile Communities*, is a hybrid event-exhibition combined with a series of workshop activities held at OCN within the Municipal Market. The event was also selected as an official side event of The Festival of New European Bauhaus (9 to 12 June, 2022).

This initiative represented a pivotal moment for reflection and experimentation, providing a critical assessment of the work conducted between 2020 and 2022 while envisioning new design scenarios across different urban contexts. The physical dimension of the event rendered the multiple layers of tangible understandings, transforming words and conversations into three-dimensional components of a community-making process. Through the hybridization of the event, hidden *voices* have been staged and made perceptible, fostering an environment in which plural meanings could literally be materialized. The space itself became an experimental platform and a narrative immersive experience, where Nolo's situated communities actively engaged in shaping new design frontiers applicable to other contexts. The hybrid event-exhibition sought to communicate to a broader audience the potential value of participatory design

and social innovation projects, particularly in contexts involving (ontologically) marginalized communities. By fostering dialogue and engagement, this initiative aimed to inspire and support the development of new situated vocabularies – such as those explored within the OC San Siro project (see Chapters 5-11) – thereby promoting a cultural discourse rooted in local neighbourhoods. At the same time, the event served as a platform to prototype a renewed role for universities within communities, positioning them not as external observers but as active participants in processes of social and cultural transformation. Beyond reflecting on past experiences, the event also sought to envision future scenarios for urban neighbourhoods, encouraging communities to translate these visions into tangible, transformative actions. Through a transdisciplinary and participatory approach, it facilitated meaningful exchanges between residents, stakeholders, and academic experts, ensuring that underrepresented voices played a central role in shaping the discourse.

The event's transdisciplinary and participatory approach ensured the co-design of every phase of the Nolo SV, from word selection to meaning articulation. Likewise, the event itself promoted extensive engagement, bringing together insights from residents, stakeholders, and academic experts, with a particular focus on un(der)represented communities. Furthermore, discussions around the Nolo SV's key terms have been continuously enriched through contributions from experts across multiple disciplines, transforming the initiative into a dynamic transdisciplinary knowledge-sharing experience.

Throughout the event, the space has been equipped with visual materials and interactive, immersive installations – including illustrated cards, posters, and other artifacts – designed to facilitate engagement among residents, passersby, and the broader community, encouraging reflections on the meanings collected so far. The co-design sessions held in Nolo and San Siro exemplify the project's commitment to fostering participatory knowledge production and collective urban reflection. These activities can be considered as integral moments of engagement that deepened the relationship between local communities and the evolving Nolo SV.

## 3.6 Conclusions

The Nolo SV thus positioned itself as an inclusive, participatory project with a hybrid methodological nature. It demonstrated the need for a more participatory and ecosystemic design culture, capable of embedding design practice within concrete, situated, and complex contexts such as those found in contemporary cities. A diffused and participatory design process demands a higher sensitivity to the conditions under which dialogue and empathy among actors are possible. The Nolo SV, in its various formats shared in this chapter, served as a tool to map radical interdependencies within the neighbourhood (Huybrechts *et al*., 2022; Tassinari & Vergani, 2023), countering closed-ended perspectives (Parker, 2006) and envisioning small but meaningful scenarios of change that can contribute to empower citizens' actions. The scenarios generated through this process do not merely aim to improve the neighbourhood's physical environment; they also play a key role in enhancing the services and infrastructures supporting Nolo's diverse community. Over 150 individuals have actively participated in this project, and through six workshops, we have tried to create a space to amplify the *voices* of (ontologically) marginalized groups. Additionally, with the involvement of experts from over 12 scientific fields – including design, art, literature, poetry, biology, ecology, and anthropology –, the Nolo SV has been enriched by a multiplicity of perspectives (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023).

A fundamental aspect of the hybrid spatial experience has been its situated approach to knowledge production and dissemination. Rather than imposing a rigid structure, the Nolo SV has been designed to remain open and adaptable, evolving alongside the communities involved. Ultimately, the co-design sessions underscored the project's broader objective: to create tools in dialogue with communities, in order to articulate narratives and engage in critical urban discourse. Therefore, a diverse audience of residents and external guests has been invited to listen to the podcasts, engage in discussions, and imagine how these narratives could possibly shape the future of the neighbourhood. Ultimately, it is precisely through these three complementary experimentations that the Nolo SV achieved its aims. The written transformation of the physical vocabulary booklets offered a concrete and accessible

record of collective meanings. The oral transformation of the podcast extended participation beyond the immediate locality, giving voice to diverse perspectives and fostering critical dialogue. The immersive spatial transformation of the exhibition created shared experiences that encouraged reflection and debate within the neighbourhood. Together, these formats did not simply communicate predefined content but actively shaped new ways of knowing, interpreting, and imagining the urban context.

This integrated approach demonstrates how design can act as a catalyst for situated knowledge production, collective meaning-making, and the ongoing regeneration of social ties in complex urban environments. This process challenges the designers' role as translators/facilitators, keeping the shared common understandings open, interpretative, critical, and partial. The process has reconfirmed the necessity of – paraphrasing Haraway (1988) – staying within the situation, learning from its complexities rather than seeking to generalize or scale up solutions uncritically. In taking up other alternative wordings (Tassinari & Vergani, 2024) the project represents a significant contribution.

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# 4. *Gaia's Club*: Embodying Situated Vocabulary in Public Spaces through Transmedia Storytelling for Kids

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## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter narrates and reflects on *Gaia's Club: Little Neighborhood Explorers* – in italian *Il club di Gaia: Piccoli esploratori di quartiere* – , an experimental workshop that used narrative, performance, and design tools to engage children as urban explorers and interpreters of multispecies radical interdependence, developed within Nolo SV project as part of my master's thesis . Designed for children living in the area, the project invited them to become *more-than-human ambassadors*, combining embodied exploration and transmedia storytelling to open a collective and playful reflection on public space, degradation, sense of belonging, and multispecies interdependence.

More than a project, it became a learning process that initiated me into new conceptual territories – such as *pluriversal design*, *situated knowledges*, and *embodiment* – as a tool of research and engagement. In this chapter, I reflect on this experience through an autoethnographic lens, retracing the steps that led me from personal

curiosity to an experimental laboratory in the public space of Parco Trotter in Nolo, Milan.

## 4.2 If It Wasn't for "Situated Vocabulary", I Wouldn't Be Where I Am Now; A Brief Autoethnography

During my first night as a student living in Milan, I touched – without looking at it – a plug that needed to be replaced. I got a slight electric shock, and the circuit breaker tripped. It was September 2019, and I was living in a shared room, run-down and pricey, as always. It was there that I first discovered the Nolo SV project; I found it on the *Polimi Career Service* platform – the Politecnico di Milano website offering internships and job opportunities for graduate and post-graduate students – while browsing for an internship. I had just started my Master's Degree in *Communication Design*. I was new in the city, eager for a new phase of my life, grasping all the opportunities that I encountered along the way. That was the energy and the motivation that made me enroll in the students' web radio of Politecnico di Milano, *POLI.RADIO*. I loved it, and soon I was given a role on the board. When *Radio Nolo* requested to meet with *POLI.RADIO*, I went for the first time at the Municipal Market in Viale Monza, where OCN designed and hosted a small space dedicated to the participatory radio.

I didn't know much about the project or the people involved, and I hadn't had yet the opportunity to learn about the conceptual framework and methodology underlying it, but I felt drawn to it. Two parallel paths – radio and research – were bringing me to the same place. That moment of convergence and entanglement led me to apply for the internship. I stepped in with curiosity and excitement, but without clear expectations and background in participatory practices or social innovation. Before starting this long and intense journey that eventually led me to where I am now (a PhD candidate exploring the intersection between queer theories and participatory design for public space) I had never encountered the term «pluriversal» (Escobar, 2018), nor had I been exposed to the concept of «situated knowledges» (Haraway, 1988) or the notion that design could be situated,

relational, embodied, feminist, intersected with critical and political studies, rather than just aiming to sterile techno solutionism with an universalizing aim. Looking back, *Gaia's Club* was not just an experimentation for the Nolo SV and my thesis. It was my personal initiation into a different way of thinking and doing design. Now, after having learnt and, mostly, critically unlearnt all of this, I could never go back, and I am forever grateful for the opportunity I had of working in that field and context. Personally, I see the work presented in this chapter as the seed that people who tutored me during my internship and my Master's thesis have planted and that oriented my current research frameworks, practice and topics of interest.

## 4.3 Walking the Streets of Nolo – Initial Phases of the Project

When I began the internship, COVID-19 restrictions were still partially in place. The design of *Gaia's Club* involved a lot of walking through Parco Trotter – an urban common with a dense and interesting history and present, shaped by pedagogical utopias, migration, animals and plants, and generational memories. Many activities that would normally rely on proximity, encounters, and situated co-presence had to be carefully negotiated or delayed. It was a challenging start for a project so deeply rooted in context and public space. The first phase was slow, fragmented, and mediated through screens. However, as restrictions eased, I was finally able to walk around the neighborhood, meet people face-to-face, and immerse myself in Nolo's layered urban landscape and demographics. I began wandering through its streets, that nowadays I can call home, asking passersby how they defined the words that Nolo SV was trying to reframe. These encounters, casual yet revealing, taught me the importance of embodied situatedness – being there, listening in place, letting meaning emerge from the terrain rather than imposing it (de la Bellacasa, 2017). My role shifted constantly between researcher, facilitator, and learner, as I was confronted with the challenge of designing in a layered and complex context still marked by the presence of COVID-19 restrictions. These limitations impacted how encounters and research could happen –

but they also encouraged a slower, more attentive engagement with the neighborhood of Nolo.

The aim of the research was to investigate how transmedia storytelling could be meaningfully integrated into participatory processes through play, fiction, and multisensory engagement. Particular attention was given to groups that are often marginalised or rendered invisible within transformative urban design processes, such as children, whose imaginative and experiential ways of engaging with space can be undervalued in institutional and participatory contexts. Recognising children not merely as future citizens but as present and active agents of urban transformation, as well as a powerful potential bridge for the engagement of adults (their families), opened up new possibilities for participatory and narrative-driven approaches, kid-tailored.

Research questions were: how can transmedia storytelling support participatory dialogue on complex urban issues such as public space, degradation, sense of belonging, and more-than-human entanglements? Can parts of communities such as children act as protagonists of urban citizen science projects if they are properly involved through narrative and embodied tools? How can a storytelling-based approach foster awareness and plural imaginaries around radical interdependence?

These questions were explored through a hybrid methodology combining participatory design, speculative fiction, transmedia storytelling, citizen science, digital ethnography. The first phase focused on situated ethnographic research – both digital and in-person – through interviews, field observations, community events, and social media monitoring, leading to gaining personal definitions of the terms of Nolo SV on which we were working at the time, such as *Public Space*, *Degradation*, *Sense of Belonging*. These insights informed the development of *Gaia's Club*; while building on the themes identified in Nolo SV, the project expanded them through a transmedia narrative inviting children to relate to urban space from a multispecies and affective perspective. Rather than approaching design as a tool to deliver predetermined outcomes, the project embraced design as a relational and open-ended process shaped through dialogue, play, and improvisation, embracing unpredictability and aiming to leave behind not only physical outputs, but also a framework for ongoing reflection

and collective sense-making within the community. By walking, playing, and telling stories together with children, we reimagined what it means to design with care in a plural and entangled urban ecosystem.

## 4.4 *Gaia's Club* – Concept and Activities

To create the structure of the experience, the project drew on Ciancia's (2016) *Transmedia Design Framework* and Jenkins' (2003) notion of transmedia storytelling as a multi-platform strategy in which different media channels each contribute uniquely to the unfolding of a shared storyworld. The fictional narrative revolved around Gaia, a mysterious and caring entity symbolizing the planet and its fragile ecosystems. Alarmed by the behavior of humans and no longer able to reach adults, Gaia turns to the children of Nolo to help her rebalance relations within the urban ecosystem. Through an immersive challenge, children were invited to join *Gaia's Club* to participate either as explorers or more-than-human agents (such as a bee, oak tree, frog, mole, or flower), and complete a series of tasks inside Parco Trotter.The storyworld has been constructed according to seven generative elements adapted from narratological theory (Pinardi & De Angelis, 2008):

- *Epos*: the transformation of Nolo from rural farmland to a multicultural urban district.
- *Ethos*: a community shaped by values of solidarity, care, and coexistence despite fragmentation.
- *Logos*: the polyphonic linguistic landscape of the neighborhood, from Italian dialects to Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, and beyond.
- *Genos*: kinship and affective ties extending beyond the nuclear family, across communities and species.
- *Topos*: the location in which the storylines take place is the whole neighborhood of Nolo – or the *Upper World*, which includes aspects relating to society, nation, State, continent, nature, planet (Pinardi & De Angelis, 2008) and Parco Trotter, a park that is also a diffused school, situated inside the neighborhood – representing the underworld, that is the space

including professional, artistic, scientific, religious, political and affective environments (Pinardi & De Angelis, 2008).
- *Telos*: the collective aspiration to live well together and care for shared space.
- *Chronos*: the present moment, marked by rapid transformation and overlapping temporalities within the district.

After the identification of the storyworld, the main characters and the storylines supporting the transmedia project were developed as follows:

*Primary Characters*
- *Gaia*: a symbolic and enigmatic entity entrusted with safeguarding the balance of ecosystems across the planet.
- *The explorers*: imaginative and inquisitive children from Nolo neighborhood who respond to Gaia's call, taking on the role of active protagonists as they navigate and investigate the tasks set within Parco Trotter.
- *The more-than-human agents*: children embodying the perspectives of non-human life forms – such as plants, animals, and insects – inhabiting the park's ecosystem, engaging with empathy and creativity in their roles.

*Secondary Characters*
- *Gaia's helpers*: adult facilitators, comprising the *offcampusers*, members of the research team and local volunteers, designated by Gaia as her trusted messengers. Their role is to support and guide the children throughout the experience, helping to bridge the communication between Gaia's world and the participants through care, storytelling, and playful mediation.

The design of the experiential workshop followed a six-step structure:

*Pre-activity Phase*
In preparation for the experience, participants received a digital toolkit via e-mail, designed to introduce the narrative and thematic foundations of the project. This toolkit included a short podcast in

which Gaia's helpers provided an introductory narrative and contextual framing. Accompanying the audio was a personalized letter signed by Gaia herself, serving as a call to action inviting children to take part in a mission to restore balance between human and more-than-human beings.

*Welcoming and Role Activation*

Upon arriving at the park, children were welcomed into the narrative world through a carefully designed second toolkit (Figure 1) that supported role-play and character immersion. This physical kit included various low-tech items such as a compass, paper collection bags for natural elements, notebooks, and pens. Also included were an interactive map of Parco Trotter with small exercises, thematic pins symbolizing nature or exploration, an official ID/membership card for *Gaia's Club*, and simple costumes that helped children embody their roles as


Figure 1.
The second toolkit given to participants.

either explorers or more-than-human agents. This introductory phase helped participants step into their characters and feel part of a collective story, fostering group cohesion and imaginative readiness.

*Park Exploration*

The first task assigned by Gaia involved a guided yet open-ended exploration of Parco Trotter. Children were encouraged to walk through the park attentively, collecting natural elements and observing their surroundings (Figure 2). The goal was to uncover the park as a living ecosystem – shared not only by humans but also by plants, insects, and other non-human agents. This phase introduced key ecological concepts in an intuitive, playful manner, encouraging children to discover entanglements, interactions, and traces of interspecies cohabitation.

*Mapping and Mirroring*

The second challenge built directly on the exploratory phase. Children used printed maps to annotate the places they visited and record the natural elements or species they encountered. Following this, they engaged in a performative activity: a group mirroring game in which participants mimicked each other's movements in sync. This embodied *chain reaction* exercise was designed to illustrate the concept of radical interdependence – the idea that all elements within an ecosystem are interconnected and co-dependent. The physical configura-

**Figure 2.**
**Walking and mapping the multispecies entities living in the park.**

tion of the group, including moments where children sat or moved in response to one another, became a metaphor for the invisible threads linking all forms of life.

*Construction of the Bugs' Hotel*

In the final mission launched by Gaia, children were invited to co-design and build insect shelters – referred to as *bugs' hotels* – intended as functional and symbolic habitats for the more-than-human creatures of the park. Equipped with materials like wood, cotton, and those collected earlier, participants constructed small structures meant to support insect life (Figure 3). This activity allowed children to translate abstract concepts of care, empathy, and coexistence into a concrete and shared creative action, reinforcing the workshop's themes of environmental stewardship and collective responsibility.

*Afterlife and Community Sharing*

Following the completion of the workshop, a version of the toolkit was made publicly accessible in digital form, allowing it to be downloaded, adapted, and reused by the broader Nolo community. This gesture aimed to ensure the continuity of the project beyond the original event. *Gaia's Club* acted as a temporary ecology of learning that blurred the lines between fiction and lived experience, and between human and more-than-human participation. The performative and embodied dimension of the project can be meaningfully read through

**Figure 3.** Participants co-constructing the *bugs' hotels*.

the lens of theatre as spatial practice, in dialogue with Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 2000), which reclaims performance as a site of political learning and relational transformation. Boal's notion of the *spect-actor* – a participant who is invited to intervene in the unfolding narrative – mirrors the role assigned to the children in the project, who were not mere recipients of content but situated co-authors of an emerging storyworld engaged through walking, role-play, mirroring, and collective movement In this sense, embodiment functioned as both method and message: a tool for exploring interdependence not through explanation, but through sensation, presence, and improvisation, activating public spaces.

## 4.5 Reflections and Conclusions

*Gaia's Club* workshop proved to be a meaningful and engaging intervention for the children and families involved, fostering collaboration, creativity, and ecological awareness through playful, narrative-based participation. The narrative world of Gaia functioned as a powerful driver of curiosity and motivation: children readily immersed themselves in the fiction, never questioning Gaia's existence or the logic of the storyworld, but instead embracing the roles of explorers and more-than-human agents with ease. This affirmed the potential of storytelling as an effective, low-barrier tool for cultivating empathy, imagination, and situated ecological literacy. Many of the participants, already somewhat aware of environmental issues, demonstrated an intuitive ability to envision themselves as agents of change and caretakers of urban ecosystems. Among the activities, the mapping and mirroring exercise proved particularly effective in conveying the concept of radical interdependence. As children physically connected their bodies to form a living *chain* of relationships, they began to grasp the delicate balance between different species and roles in the ecosystem. This embodied understanding of cooperation and interrelation carried over into the final activity, the construction of *bugs' hotels*, where children displayed a deep sense of purpose and attentiveness. The project's ability to make complex ecological and social themes more accessible was largely due to the integration of

the *Transmedia Design Framework*, which layered storytelling with tactile and performative activities. Rather than relying on digital media, the storytelling unfolded through physical props, rituals, and tools distributed over time which helped anchor the experience in the local context and maintain the children's immersion. While this analog approach was chosen deliberately to foster accessibility and collective embodiment in public space, the absence of a multimedia digital ecosystem limited the depth and longevity of the narrative in some respects. This constraint, however, stemmed from the intentional decision to privilege offline, situated engagement with a young audience less attuned to digital media autonomy.

*Gaia's Club* was not conceived as a pre-packaged format but as an open-ended, emergent process shaped by walking, sensing, listening, and improvising in relation to context. Working alongside children in the park, I observed how their instinctive ways of relating often bypassed adult-centered epistemologies, speaking instead to what de la Bellacasa (2017) defines as affective *ecologies of care*. Simple tools – like magnifying lenses, fictional maps, and role cards – enabled children to become urban researchers of the more-than-human, generating relational knowledge through movement, play, and attentiveness. Their gestures and findings became small but powerful acts of «making kin» (Haraway, 2016), reconnecting overlooked elements of the city's ecosystem to the realm of shared meaning and collective responsibility. Suggestions for future iterations include spacing the activities across multiple days to deepen continuity and integrating follow-up exercises to imagine urban futures from the children's new perspectives. Ultimately, *Gaia's Club* did not aim for measurable transformation at the urban scale, but it marked a significant moment in extending the Nolo SV project toward a child-centered, ecosystemic, and performative approach to urban inquiry.

Reflecting on the process as a novice facilitator and researcher, this was also a personal initiation into participatory design as a situated, relational, and often unpredictable practice. I began to recognize the value of staying with uncertainty, contradiction, failure, and ambiguity – what Donna Haraway (2016) describes as «staying with the trouble». Through this process, I came to understand

storytelling not just as a means of engagement, but as a space of negotiation where multiple ontologies – human, non-human, child, adult, designer, researcher, resident – can temporarily coexist. *Gaia's Club* thus became both a speculative and grounded experiment in «pluriversal design» (Escobar, 2018), creating a temporary ecology of co-learning, care, and imagination.

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PART 3

# San Vittore Situated Vocabulary

# 5. Off Campus San Vittore: Bridging Prison and Society

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> **The words here do not resonate with me. They are very out of tune – even annoying. There's no fun or boredom here. (Quote from the conversations of San Vittore SV around the words *Fun/Boredom*)**

## 5.1 The Prison *Twists You*

Each time I leave my backpack at the reception, go through security, show my badge, and enter the detention area, I feel stripped of my usual roles – professor, researcher, designer, mother. While I remain a woman, my status as a citizen feels threatened. My relationship with prison has been marked by misunderstanding and discomfort, feeling alien to its still-unfamiliar rules, to the people who instead exhibit familiarity, habit, a way of being and living there, sometimes even their personal commitment still persistent. Being a middle-aged western woman and design researcher, each encounter is a step toward understanding the cultural differences between myself and

the prison, as well as among its various social groups – detained persons, officers, educators, healthcare workers, volunteers. This often frustrating process involves reframing misunderstandings as opportunities for mutual understanding. It is an ongoing journey of increasing awareness, as I try to create analogies that connect my own perspective, the reasons and ways of being in that environment, the lives and stories of the other people, and the complex, incomprehensible institution of detention – that I consider a contradictory system of safety and justice and a form of power exerted over human-beings. These analogies do not work. Even though I can share challenging conversations and very deep reflections with people in prison – relationships rich in humanity that continually remind me of the urgency of being there present –, I feel and acknowledge that references are not the same. The examples don't align; I remain a foreigner, someone unfamiliar with the cultural coordinates of the environment, often asking naive or inappropriate questions. How could we turn these inconsistencies into clues to understanding each other? How could we avoid hiding these frictions? How could we embrace the differences, «staying with the trouble» (Haraway, 2016)?

Prison is not just a separate place; it is another culture – a different universe of feelings, thoughts, and perceptions that deeply influence and twist one's own experience. The «twist» (Curcio *et al*., 1990) is not a metaphor or psychological state but an entry into an «other» (Sclavi, 1993) often absurd world. This social landscape is dominated by power dynamics (see Chapter 7), where every action reaffirms a static order, and time seems frozen. It is a complex, intense environment that challenges perceptions and invites ongoing reflections.

## 5.2 The San Vittore's Panopticon

San Vittore opened in 1879 as a prison, built on the 19th century ideas of rationalized control and correction through isolation. It follows Bentham's *Panopticon* model, with a central hub and six radiating wings, each holding 100 cells, for a total capacity of 768 inmates. This model of prison emphasized isolation and cellular confinement, with no communication made possible between prisoners. Still today, its design reflects the modern era's focus on detention as punishment.

Having housed political prisoners and partisans during World War II, San Vittore is a significant place in the history of Milan and of the Italian Resistance. Official Italian documents dated from 1944 (*AS MI - Gabinetto di prefettura secondo versamento - busta n. 396 - fascicolo categoria 37: documento del 2/11/1944 "Appunti al Duce. Carceri giudiziarie" firmato da Mario Bassi*) do confirm the existence of a German tribunal within San Vittore that used to operate independently from Italian judicial oversight. Surviving testimonies and historical records provide insights into the harsh conditions and injustices suffered by prisoners back in time.

According to Michel Foucault (2019), the concept of the Panopticon is important not only as an idealised form of detention, but also, and perhaps more significantly, as a model of power. In this vision of a panoptic society, the final stage of punitive measures is the confinement in prison. He (p. 305) writes:

> **The observation that prison fails to reduce crime must be replaced by the hypothesis that prison has been very successful in producing delinquency; a specific type – a form of illegalism that is politically or economically less dangerous, and even usable; a form of delinquency that is apparently marginalised, but controlled by the centre; and the delinquent as a pathologised subject.**

Today, San Vittore is located in Milan's city center, preserving both its historical and cultural value as well as its position at the center of the Italian public debate on the necessity of a prison reform. Its main function remains a remand prison (Casa Circondariale di Milano San Vittore *Francesco di Cataldo*), primarily for people awaiting trial or serving short sentences. Specifically, it houses inmates with sentences of less than five years, including those with remaining sentences under five years (Ministero Della Giustizia – Istituti Penitenziari, n.d.). This sets it apart from a penitentiary (Casa di Reclusione), which is meant for those serving long-term sentences after a final conviction. As a remand prison, San Vittore primarily handles temporary detention rather than long-term rehabilitation. Today, the regular capacity of San Vittore is 748 people, but the actual number of inmates is 1,113 (ibidem). Overcrowding makes living conditions in prison possibly

even more inhumane. Currently, the number of foreigners detained is 734 (ibidem), making it a 66,4% out of the total number of inmates, according to the *XXI Report* by Antigone Onlus (2025). The population of inmates is currently changing with the changing nature of contemporary society, demonstrating both how migration patterns characterize contemporary society and how Italian and European countries' policies impact criminalization. These aspects influence the prison system itself, but also the stakeholders' approach, and the way everyday activities are conducted. Whether involving security maintenance, healthcare, or educational projects, everyone is constantly working in a sort of emergency mode, developing a situated but vertical kind of knowledge which is difficult to share and infrastructure. This evidence comes from the work we design researchers are doing with *StoryLab*, a participatory storytelling workshop that explores the factual and imaginary worlds of those detained in the Young Adults unit, as a collection of fragments of personal stories in the form of images and words (Ciancia & Piredda, 2024; Panepinto, 2024; Tassinari *et al*., 2024; Chiaravalloti, 2025; Ligi & Panepinto, 2025). Designing at and with San Vittore aims at understanding how the different components of the system interact, reproducing power dynamics (see Chapter 7); how connections between different stakeholders can be facilitated, and how we may infrastructure generative relations over time. Moreover, designing within San Vittore aims at making the city around and the civil society at large change the imagery about prison, shifting from the polarity of «us and them» to the multiverse nuances of the political matters about «us», and promoting relationships of interdependence (Escobar, 2018) and care.

## 5.3 Off Campus San Vittore: A Presidium of Civil Society

Off Campus San Vittore (OC San Vittore), inaugurated in October 2022, exemplifies a pioneering approach in participatory design and social innovation within the prison context. Rooted in longstanding collaborations with national, regional, and local institutions – such as the Garante nazionale delle persone detenute (*National Guarantor*

*for Detainees*), the Dipartimento dell'Amministrazione Penitenziaria (*Department of Penitentiary Administration*), and Milan's municipal authorities –, this initiative is driven by Laboratorio Carcere at Politecnico di Milano. Since 2014, the multidisciplinary research team has engaged in research and design activities aimed at reimagining prison spaces and their inhabitation (Department of Architecture and Urban Studies), evolving to include co-design and storytelling projects since 2020 (*Imagis Lab*, Department of Design ) that foster new narratives around incarceration.

Located within the first wing of San Vittore's Panopticon, OC San Vittore (Figure 1) occupies former cells shared with the university partners Bocconi and Bicocca leading the Legal Clinic – students and professors of the School of Law are providing a listening and support service on legal issues, and with volunteers and associations. Open three days a week, it offers the opportunity to meet and connect with many actors, potential agents of change, compare experiences and exchange advice. This way, OC San Vittore serves as a physical and symbolic bridge between prison and society. Its strategic location inside the prison facilitates spontaneous interactions with diverse stakeholders – prison staff, volunteers, legal professionals, and inmates – creating a fertile ground for dialogue, mutual learning, and social transformation (see Chapters 7 and 11). In this setting, we have been able to listen to the context and share knowledge in


**Figure 1.**
**The space of Off Campus San Vittore.**

a spontaneous or less structured way, not only bringing our skills as design researchers and academics into the prison walls, but also stripping ourselves of all the roles or expectations, just listening with an open-minded attitude, making clear to everybody that we were there to learn. This was necessary precisely because of the institutional nature of OC: most stakeholders were wary and feared further top-down interference in their everyday work, such as annoying requests potentially stressful for the prison system. In this context, our colleagues from the Architecture Department have been quickly recognized as the problem-solvers, the ones who can renew spaces. With this kind of expectations, of designers being necessarily the problem solvers, there has been initially some confusion about what designers deal with and it took time – some projects and activities – to demonstrate how we can help also beyond a solutionist approach, and what we can share beyond and instead of traditional educational and training courses.

As highlighted in the following chapters, San Vittore Situated Vocabulary (SV) plays a central role in this process of manifesting our potential role in the prison context. By positioning itself as a presidium of the civil society embedded within the prison, and despite its current lack of fundings, OC San Vittore – unlike most third sector projects – benefits from a long-term presence, unlike what usually afflicts third sector projects. It simultaneously enacts both roles of observatory and bridge, challenging traditional boundaries to promote dialogue and collaboration and therefore dismantling the inside-outside divide. This model highlights the evolving role of universities as «civic institutions» or «just anchors» (Harris & Holley, 2016; Ehlenz, 2018), capable of fostering local social justice, civic engagement, and sustainable urban development through participatory practices that embed research within community contexts (see Chapter 12).

## 5.4 Against the Segregation of Bodies and the Universalism of Knowledge

**Our bodies are steeped in class connotations, and the bodies of people without capital are worth less. That is why they can dis-**

**mantle our bodies, buy and sell them, imprison them and then let them go. And all this matters little to them. (Hunter, 2020)**

Giacinto Siciliano, former Director of San Vittore prison, emphasizes the crucial role that universities can play in bridging the gap between the prison system and the wider community. He advocates for bringing a design-oriented mindset into the prison environment, describing OC San Vittore as a space that can «connect the city of Milan to the prison and vice versa». This connection, he suggests, is essential for fostering understanding, empathy, and social cohesion. During the inauguration of the *ReverseLab* space, the pilot project lead by Politecnico di Milano (DAStU and Department of Design), in collaboration with PAC – Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea Milano, Forme Tentative and Philo – Pratiche filosofiche, he highlighted how such initiatives can serve as a vital link, promoting dialogue and mutual influence between the prison community and the city outside. Similarly, Mauro Palma, who served as the National Guarantor for the Rights of Prisoners from 2016 to 2024, underscored the importance of safeguarding fundamental human rights, specifically, the «right to the sky», symbolizing the freedom to look up, dream, and aspire beyond confinement. He pointed out that art, creativity, and design are powerful tools in nurturing this right, offering inmates a means to envision a future beyond their immediate circumstances.

Despite this encouraging perspective, critical reflections are certainly needed on the potential risks and limitations of integrating university knowledge within the prison context. Since universities are not only places where critical thinking is cultivated but also public institutions and authorities, when they become an integral part of the prison institution as a whole, it is necessary to ask ourselves how to avoid reinforcing biopolitical control and power dynamics (Foucault, 2015). From a Foucauldian standpoint, there is concern that such involvement could inadvertently perpetuate systems of surveillance and normalization, rather than fostering genuine emancipation. Lacan's (1981) analysis further complicates this picture by associating segregation with the universalizing tendencies of institutional knowledge – whether psychiatric, psychological, or academic – that tend to assimilate individual differences into bureaucratic discourses aligned with

capitalist interests. He argues that the social contract and the notion of universal rights are rooted in rationality, which inherently excludes those deemed irrational or insane, thereby reinforcing exclusion and marginalization (van der Plas *et al*., 2022).

On the contrary, drawing inspiration from Ivan Illich's (2010) critique of formal education, we might advocate for a «deschooling» approach – one that recognizes education as a social institution that often fosters dependence and limits personal growth within rigid structures. Instead, education should be conceived as a process that empowers individuals to pursue knowledge autonomously, on their own terms, fostering continuous, self-directed learning. To him, the most transformative form of education is the one that equips individuals with the tools to understand and shape their own lives and communities, rather than relying solely on institutional curricula. Even in this context, conviviality (Illich, 2013) could represent a paradox, nevertheless, drawing on Illich, one can state that it can also become a guiding principle – opposing industrialization and standardization – by emphasizing the creation of tools and environments that enable personal agency, social participation, and community empowerment. This perspective advocates for a shift from top-down control towards a more participatory approach to learning and development within the prison setting, aligning with broader goals of social justice and transformative education.

Despite and because of our academic role, actors already active in San Vittore at first considered us as aliens who arrived to make everything even more complicated. Building trust has been a slow work of attention, relation, and negotiation (see Chapter 11). Being in-field researchers within OC San Vittore implies listening, observation and knowledge exchange with the volunteers and associations – leading projects such as the recycling workshop, gardening, art-therapy and the rap music workshop – who have developed deep knowledge over the years, persevering, and inventing ways to carry out micro-actions of care with an impact on people who were lucky enough to intercept these occasions.

Expressive languages allow individuals to find their own personal form of translation and transformation of internal and social tensions and conflicts. These spontaneous productions, or those stimulat-

ed by therapeutic activities, are relegated to forms of irregular art, confined as «art of the insane» to specific sections. A new disciplinary statute places all artistic practices, including those of some authors traditionally considered within the realm of *Art Brut*, as part of contemporary art history.

The worlds of signs created by these forms of creative dissociation have therapeutic value, and in this perspective, they can be paradoxical carriers of self-healing. «Irritated art» (Valentino, 2017) bears witness to that creative world that manifests itself in extreme situations of coercion – prisons, mental institutions, nursing homes, etc. – becoming self-care, strength to continue living, imagination to endure. These creative gestures, «irritated» forms of expression – that is, «born of irritation», as the word immediately suggests, but also, delving deeper into the etymology of the term, «outside of ritual» – arise to transport those who create them, for the time it takes to create them, to a symbolic elsewhere that becomes a space of freedom and new identity. It alerts us to what happens within us when the inner vastness that each of us carries within ourselves is comprehended. We can then refer to the notion of micro-utopias, as articulated by Nicolas Bourriaud *et al.* (2002): it refers to small-scale, localized, and often ephemeral spaces or practices that embody ideals of social, cultural, and political transformation. Unlike grand, overarching utopian visions that aim for comprehensive societal overhaul, micro-utopias focus on creating immediate, tangible experiences of alternative realities within everyday contexts. They serve as experimental sites where new social relations, aesthetic practices, and modes of coexistence can be explored and tested, often challenging dominant paradigms.

In the realm of art and design, micro-utopias function as radical strategies that subvert normative structures by fostering participatory, inclusive, and transformative experiences. They operate through practices that emphasize immediacy, intimacy, and the potential for change at a personal or community level in ways that challenge existing power dynamics.

By focusing on micro-utopias, radical art and design challenge the notion that meaningful change must be grand or revolutionary in scope. Instead, they highlight the power of small, intentional acts,

creating spaces of hope, solidarity, and experimentation that can ripple outward to influence broader societal structures. This perspective aligns with the ideas of *everyday resistance* and *small wins* as vital components of social justice movements.

Micro-utopias may serve as vital conceptual and practical tools within radical art and design, fostering localized experiments that challenge normative paradigms and open spaces for alternative ways of living, relating, and imagining. They exemplify how small-scale, participatory practices can embody radical potentialities.

In the context of social justice and abolitionist movements, these approaches can go hand in hand. *StoryLab* and San Vittore SV embody *design agonism* (Tassinari *et al*., 2024; Chiaravalloti, 2025) by encouraging dialogue among diverse actors – prisoners, designers, activists, and the community –, acknowledging their differences and fostering a shared commitment to social transformation. This aligns with Mouffe's (2007) idea that democracy is sustained through agonistic engagement, where conflicts are managed constructively rather than suppressed.

The idea that marginal spaces are sites of resistance (hooks, 1984) reclaims to pay attention to the expressive forms and the narratives produced from the margins and to favor non-extractive design (Udoewa, 2022). What is rough is often considered apolitical or, at most, pre-political (Hunter, 2020). Instead, who, like the inmates, are at the margin of society, take care of each other in their own way: «We didn't use words like *resistance* or *revolution*. This doesn't mean we didn't understand what was happening around us».

Continuous negotiation among activists, designers, and communities allows for the development of experimental practices of transformative justice, which are not focused on responding to immediate needs but on contributing to structural change, recognizing that individuals living in marginalized spaces, such as inmates and the prison's stakeholders, possess unique situated knowledges capable of illuminating the contradictions and complexities of the human experience (hooks, 1984; Haraway, 2016).

Our radical and activist approach in design for social innovation is therefore based on valuing subjective narratives and creating partic-

ipatory practices that challenge oppressive structures. The relationship between the *oppressor* and the *oppressed* (Freire, 2017) is not merely one of power; it is also one of identity, where the oppressed must navigate the complexities of self-definition in a world that seeks to define them. Above all, politics cannot exist if the oppressed ones do not recognise the conditions, they need to emancipate themselves; they share their history of oppression and the ways in which they have tried to free themselves (Tassinari *et al*., 2024). The structure of the prison system is the result of a complex interplay of forces, and it is essential to analyze how various social groups negotiate their own interests within this framework of power (see Chapter 7).

The stakeholders there behave like monads: they often do not network and there are only sporadic moments of interactions, with more or less informal ways of confrontation between some of them. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for any potentially transformative political action. Within San Vittore prison, being *offcampusers* (see Chapter 2) means entering a closed and otherwise inaccessible place, exposing oneself to stories of trauma and the unpredictability of relationships with others. Embeddedness within the specific con-


Figure 2.
The words selected by the inmates participating to the San Vittore Situated Vocabulary.

text serves the «irritational» (Valentino, 2017) practices as means of illuminating human dignity. The practical knowledge of *offcampusers* is continuously generated in relational contexts, with the intention of resonating (Ingold, 2004) with the prison environment and the expert protection of the other actors involved, meaning them expert of specific competences but most important expert of the carceral system that «twists» you (Curcio *et al*., 1990).

## 5.5 San Vittore Situated Vocabulary: Deconstructing and Infrastructuring Relations through Meanings

The meetings dedicated to San Vittore SV with prison police officers, educators, volunteers, and healthcare workers took place in the OC room, that felt like a different space and time, a «state of exception» (Agamben, 2012), resisting to the biopolitics and the suspended space and time generally characterising the carceral spaces. Through the San Vittore SV, design introduces cuts and punctuation changes in the discourse of carceral power structures, creating space for new discourses that emerge as otherwise impossible dialogues among the actors within the prison. The various contributions collected in this book focus on the process and development of the San Vittore SV, offering different perspectives and discussing the various aspects that have characterized it (see Chapters 6-11). In addition to explaining how it has also proven to be a practice of investigation and a research infrastructure, in this chapter we address the vocabulary as an unconventional relational device, a disruptive and un-institutional enactment of utopia. Each actor and participant, both within and beyond their role, redefines there their own positionality not just on the base of concepts, premises, and postulates that design as a discipline brings into the prison – but rather because the San Vittore SV provides a condition that enables the disarticulation of existing knowledge and fosters the new re-articulation of alternative forms of knowledges. This is achieved through discourse-making, starting

from the introduction of a cut that suspends well established relational dynamics, leaving room for conflict and for the act of speaking out this same conflict.

For this reason, the San Vittore SV does not have a single, defined output; it does not become an object consolidated in a single form that each participant must conform to. Instead, it is a form of knowledge transmitted in an incomplete way, full of gaps (hesitations, defaults, failures), leaving room for conflict. In its discourse, the cut is produced by enacting self-expression: each actor is able to articulate their own knowledge and understanding of the world, of the prison, and of the social relations therein including the gaps in knowledge – what each subject removes, hides, or suffers as a void expressed through the act of speech. The San Vittore SV creates conditions for these discourses to be expressed. By articulating them into impossible dialogues, it interrupts and inserts a cut into the process of naturalizing biopolitics and concealing social antagonism. Its goal is therefore to generate meanings, by engaging with the act of listening to discourses as they unfold. In this sense, it represents the outcome of an interagentivity (Ingold, 2004), which is a common action in a common environment, including to meet, observe and cooperate between different actors, bearers of their own situated knowledge, in concrete events and situations.

In collecting and recording the speeches of different actors – who, starting from the same initial terms and pairs of opposites, use different languages and overlap the same words to articulate their meanings with nuance –, the aim here is not to fix or catalog what is instead volatile and intricate. Instead, words serve as a way to access diverse experiences, remaining open to others, both within as well as outside the prison walls. It involves recording misunderstandings, errors, overlaps, gaps in sense, and articulating impossible dialogues between actors and positions that are never meant to meet or confront each other. It is a debate about the cultural and hegemonic meaning of a term, what it signifies for a community, comparison between various communities, and the confrontation with alterity and marginality.

## 5.6 The Conflict and the Narrative-based Design Approach

Friction, ambiguity, and conflict are essential components of sense-making, rather than as obstacles to be quickly resolved by technical fixes (Fuad-Luke, 2009). In this context, sense-making is not a neutral aggregation of data into solutions: designing aims not to resolve, but to make sense of – embracing critical, pluriverse and transactional perspectives.

As a context, the prison system reflects the key issues in an increasingly polarized society. Starting from polarities, San Vittore SV highlights the tensions and potentialities to be addressed by a social conversation. It enacts impossible dialogues starting from the prison and aims at eliciting generative relations with various actors along the path of spreading the conversation.

From a scientific and academic perspective, we address conflict through a narrative lens, treating social conflict as a form of narrative conflict at the core of our work. Inspired by Jerome S. Bruner (1990), we depart here from the idea that narrative structure is inherent in the same social interaction, even before words are spoken. This means that storytelling is embedded in how we relate to others and make sense of our own experiences. Furthermore, drawing on Hannah Arendt's (2017) framework, we acknowledge that human identity unfolds through action and speech. Personal identities are relational and narrative, forged through networks of relationships.

Thanks to our embeddedness and in-field research practice, we are currently listening to and collect fragments of stories (Venditti *et al*., 2017; Ciancia *et al*., 2021; Piredda, 2021; Piredda & Ciancia, 2022) from various testimonies and agents of the prison context and community. Those fragments of life, memories, and desires, allow us to reconstruct a rich mosaic of micro-narratives (Venditti *et al*., 2017). In this space of sharing and listening, each phrase and quote becomes a precious fragment to complete the bigger narrative, revealing the complexity of the human experience. Personal narratives intertwine here with collective ones, celebrating diversity, inclusion, and creativity. San Vittore SV invites everyone to recognize the importance of their own voice in the larger chorus, encouraging a continuous

exploration of self and others, on a journey to discover the infinite facets of human existence. Inmates' narratives as well as their bodies reveal the carceral biopolitical power dynamics. Those are manifested for instance by the bodily brutalization through internalized control mechanisms (e.g., self-punishment, self-harm) and through social hierarchies based on race, gender, and class, reinforcing intersectional inequalities. In these contexts of deprivation and of silencing, personal stories become the first step for prisoners to reposition themselves.

Other stakeholders are also affected in various ways by the biopolitical power of prison and by the dynamics of *oppressed* and *oppressors* (Freire, 2017). The police officers themselves, for example, claim to have found in San Vittore SV the only (legitimate) opportunity to feel listened and valued. Encouraging autobiographical storytelling is crucial, as it shapes identity. As Bruner (1992) notes, storytelling interprets what we have done, why we did it, and how we see ourselves and the world. The *hero's journey*, as Campbell (2003) describes, shows conflict as a catalyst for growth: desires, trials, confrontations, and obstacles – internal and external – each facet of conflict contributing to change one's position throughout the arc of transformation, while the story unfolds.

Methodologically, words function as a pedagogical instrument within a framework of informal, collective knowledge production. Participants – whether foreign-born or Italian – speak up and actively contribute to cultivating a collective discourse. Accordingly, it is essential to identify mediation tools that support togetherness across diverse groups. For instance, textual cards, in particular, prove strategically effective in directing each participant's attention and intellect toward constructing, elaborating, and sustaining a shared purpose capable of dissolving mistrust typical of dualistic and hostile relations that prevail today (Benjamin, 2019). Through this process, participants can reframe their own experiences, recognize their own agency, and assume responsibility for their past and future. Building on these premises, Saidiya Hartman's (2021) concept of c*ritical fabulation* emphasizes that borders – whether physical, social, or narrative – are not fixed lines but dynamic edges or buffer zones. These spaces enable open inquiry, dialogue, and the reimagining of stories. In storytell-

ing, this means creating spaces where conflicting perspectives can coexist, be examined, and woven into a richer, more nuanced story-world. *Critical fabulation* – the reconstruction of narratives beyond strict historical fact – serves as a potent means to generate counter-narratives that restore the voices of the *oppressed* (Freire, 2017). It posits that borders are not merely dividing lines but can function as edges or buffers–zones where open inquiry and exchange occur. John Bruce (2022) characterizes these spaces as «in-between» zones where dialogue and understanding can flourish. Reflecting on what aspects of life hold meaning, we actually activate shared processes of sense-making, recognizing that diversity entails a multiplicity of meanings accessible from multiple perspectives. Moving beyond simple oppositions, borders can also be edges and buffer zones – spaces in-between – where open investigations and exchanges take place. Reflecting on meaningful elements of life catalyzes the construction of shared meaning, and diversity is expressed as a plurality of meanings comprehensible to various stakeholders. We shift here from polarities to other possible relationships and subtleties of what lies in-between (Tassinari & Staszowski, 2020). In aesthetic and political terms, the vocabulary accompanying the project forms a new lexicon

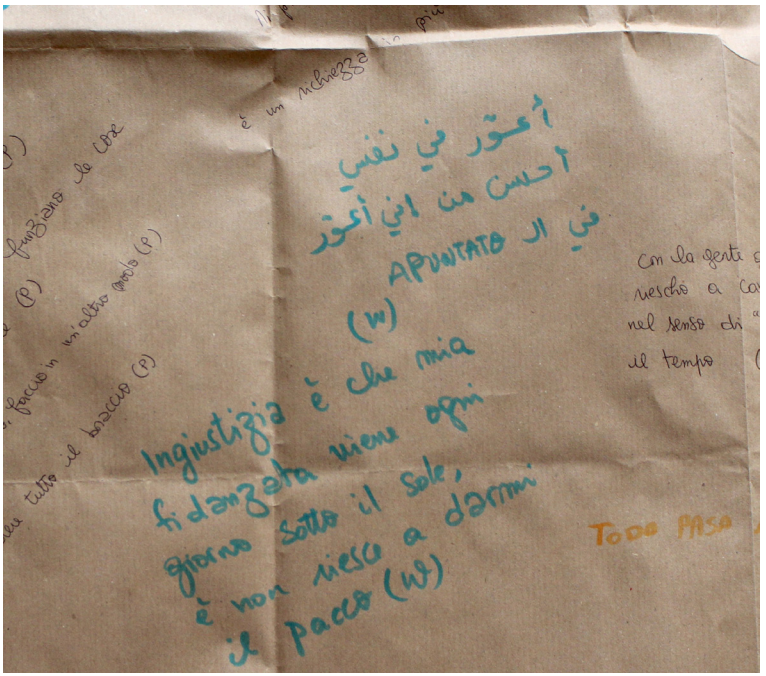


**Figure 3.**
**The notes in Italian and Arabic language collected during the meetings with the inmates.**

that mobilizes responsibility and action among the actors involved. In this sense, participants become part of a process in which roles are frequently exchanged: researchers learn from the participants, and through fieldwork, the university decouples from its traditional authority by entering the prison space (Illich, 2010). This underpins the adoption of *words* as tools for action and investigation. The San Vittore SV aims to harness this revolutionary potential of meanings that emerge from the margins.

## 5.7 The Conflict in the Activists' and the Radical Design's Perspective

Angela Davis (2022) questions the effectiveness and necessity of the carceral system, highlighting how recidivism rates and detention conditions often reflect structural failures rather than effective rehabilitative functions. In Italy, data from 2021 show that 38% of detainees are in prison for the first time, while 51% have already experienced at least one previous detention, and 11% at least five (Antigone, 2025). These numbers suggest that the penal system, rather than rehabilitating, often reproduces cycles of marginalization and discrimination, fueling Davis' radical critique: prisons are obsolete and must be abolished.

From a design perspective, this critique translates into a radical and activist approach that opposes traditional punitive solutions and promotes transformative justice and accountability practices. The abolitionist feminist perspective recognizes that the contradictions between immediate needs and demands for structural change are opportunities for growth and collective action. For example, campaigns reclaiming the closing of prisons can be carried out while simultaneously experimenting with practices of social reintegration and rehabilitation within existing structures, such as workshops and educational programs. This approach is based on a radical ecosystem of practices, often supported by unpaid work, aimed at creating tools for social and transformative justice.

As already mentioned, Chantal Mouffe (2000) argues that democracy is fundamentally agonistic, meaning it thrives on the contestation of ideas and the acknowledgment of deep, persistent

differences. Instead of seeking consensus at all costs, agonism encourages the recognition of adversaries as legitimate opponents with whom dialogue is possible, fostering a vibrant democratic space where conflicts are managed rather than suppressed. Applying this to design, *design agonism* (Mouffe, 2013) involves creating spaces and practices that embrace conflict, disagreement, and contestation as vital to social transformation. It promotes a pluralistic approach where diverse voices – especially marginalized ones – are actively engaged in shaping solutions, acknowledging that social change often arises from ongoing struggles rather than smooth consensus.

In contrast, Carl DiSalvo's *adversarial design* (2012) emphasizes designing artifacts and processes that challenge existing power structures by provoking debate, discomfort, and critical reflection. Adversarial design intentionally introduces tension and opposition into the design process, aiming to reveal contradictions and stimulate critical engagement. While both approaches value conflict as a catalyst for change, adversarial design tends to focus on the creation of provocative artifacts that serve as conversation starters or catalysts for social critique, often within specific contexts or campaigns.

The key difference here lies in their scope and philosophical grounding: design agonism is rooted in Mouffe's broader political theory, advocating for a continuous, democratic engagement with difference, where conflict is seen as productive and necessary for a healthy democracy. It emphasizes the importance of ongoing, participatory dialogue among diverse stakeholders, recognizing that social struggles are inherent to democratic life. Adversarial design, on the other hand, is more focused on the tactical use of design artifacts to provoke debate and challenge power relations, often within specific campaigns or projects.

## 5.8 San Vittore SV: Embedding Seeds of Transformation in Biopolitical Power

**I'm used to seeing people dealing with legality and illegality and always only with injustice. It's as if the deprivation of freedom, in theory, also deprived you of responsibility. Fun and joy die in**

**here. (Quotes from the conversations of San Vittore SV around the words *Justice/Injustice*, *Responsability*, *Fun/Boredom*, *Life/Death*)**

Given the asymmetries of power, status, and control that structure the carceral environment, we can state here that relationships in prison cannot ever be fully egalitarian. Yet, this constraint does not preclude the possibility of constructive conflict, which can act as a catalyst for transformation. Conflict, when acknowledged and designed for, can instead illuminate systemic injustices, stimulate reflexivity among participants, and catalyze collective re-imagining of social arrangements. This perspective aligns with a view of design as a situated, generative practice rather than a technocratic fix: a practice that seeks to respond to political ecologies and social injustices inherent in institutions like prisons, embedding seeds of transformation in biopolitical power. Those seeds here are the meanings planted by designing and flourishing into entanglements between margins and society.

From a Lacanian angle (van der Plas, 2022), meaning is not a mere attribute of individual psychology but a social achievement that renders life shareable across subjects. For Lacan, the intersubjective field – mediated by language, desire, and the symbolic order – renders a life legible to others and provides a framework in which individuals can feel recognized and related to others. As such, it represents a political framework for denaturalizing and revealing the fundamental antagonism that runs through society and that capitalism conceals (Ibidem). In a prison setting, where recognition can be precarious and voices systematically marginalized, constructing meaningful, negotiable meanings becomes a political act of accommodation and dignity. This reading foregrounds how design processes might cultivate shared meanings that enable participants to articulate agency within constraints, while attending to the affective dimensions of belonging and estrangement.

Design becomes here a situated, generative practice when it actively engages political ecologies, networks of power, resource flows, surveillance modalities, and institutional rules that shape everyday life. Rather than seeking to *solve* problems through technocratic

answers, in this framework design aims to intervene in the relations, affordances, and narratives that sustain injustices. It foregrounds co-creation with participants, critical reflection on institutional mechanisms, and the cultivation of alternative imaginaries that resist reductive solutions. In this sense, design functions here as a mode of inquiry that reveals how policy, pedagogy, and space layout mutually constitute inequities, while offering avenues for reconfiguring these dynamics toward greater dignity and accountability.

To conclude, prison can serve as a magnifying lens, intensifying the visibility of design's limits and possibilities. The carceral context magnifies how quickly well-intentioned interventions can reproduce dependence, invisibilize violence, or overlook structural determinants of harm. This heightened sensitivity makes evident the need to reassess design beyond solutionism – the conviction that every problem has a technical fix. A non-solutionist design stance attends to the politics of care, and the entanglements of meanings, recognizing that lasting change often emerges from iterative, relational processes rather than one-off, expert-led deployments.

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# 6. Leveraging Storytelling for Meaning-making

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## 6.1 Introduction

For several years, the *Imagis Lab* research group at the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, has investigated the role of narrative in design processes (Bertolotti *et al*., 2015, 2016; Piredda *et al*., 2015; Tassinari *et al*., 2017; Venditti, 2017; Venditti *et al*., 2017), working in collaboration with academic institutions, professionals from various disciplines, citizens, public administrations, private companies, researchers, and independent organizations. In light of our primary research and didactic activities, we continue to address the power of stories (Roche & Sadowsky, 2003) to challenge public opinion (Winskell & Enger, 2014) and inform the creation of new narratives through design. Applying this to the prison context, specifically our work within Off Campus San Vittore, allows us to exploit the role of narrative and its societal connections within marginal contexts. We explore how the tensions and contradictions at the core of the human experience – our simultaneous need for individuality and belonging – can become fertile ground for generating new kinds of stories. Narrative,

in this context, is not simply a way to reflect reality but a way to actively shape it. Through an inclusive and participatory narrative-based design approach, we begin to see how the personal conflicts are not obstacles to be resolved, but raw materials to be worked with. In our practice, the narrative becomes both method and outcome – a framework through which people can recognize themselves, challenge assumptions, and imagine possibilities beyond current constraints.
To achieve this, the San Vittore *Situated Vocabulary* was born as an adaptation of the Nolo Situated Vocabulary experience (Tassinari *et al*., 2023; Tassinari & Vergani, 2023) conducted at Off Campus Nolo. Its specific goal is to build a shared vocabulary among the main actors of the San Vittore population: correctional officers, inmates, operators, and volunteers.

### 6.1.1 Narrative-based Design within the Wall

This chapter aims to identify the problematic nodes that emerge in adapting the Situated Vocabulary to the specifics of the San Vittore context and to explore the role of storytelling and transformative narratives in *meaning-making* processes.
In particular, the work explores how narrative can serve as a tool for valuing diversity, fostering social inclusion in marginalized contexts (Piredda, 2021; Piredda *et al*., 2023), and supporting dialogue among diverse stakeholders (Anzoise *et al*., 2014; Ciancia *et al*., 2014; Ciancia & Piredda, 2022). The chapter's scientific contribution lies in the experimentation of collaborative storytelling practices to support transformation processes, where the construction and reconstruction of individual and collective identities address contemporary social and societal challenges. This study applies such an approach to individuals at the margins (hooks, 1984, 1989, 1994), not to alter their behaviour, but to create space for them to imagine and reimagine themselves through narrative construction. Rather than imposing external hegemonic narratives, the method invites participants to draw on the stories already embedded in their lived experiences. As Jerome S. Bruner observed, «Narrative structure is even inherent in the praxis of social interaction before it achieves linguistic expression» (1990, p. 77). In this sense, the act of narrative-making starts with the ways individuals relate to themselves and others. Building on this idea,

the narrative approach offers opportunities to surface alternative perspectives, possibilities, and identities often obscured by dominant social or institutional frames of reference.

Within Off Campus San Vittore (hereafter OC San Vittore), we adopted a strategic use of narrative and storytelling as complementary tools: on the one hand, as instruments within co-design processes, they support the identification of needs, resources, and possibilities within the prison context; on the other, they function as meaning-making devices that help generate new knowledge about spaces of detention and foster reciprocal connections between the prison and the city. Through an action-research approach, OC San Vittore leverages design as a driver of systemic change, challenging a historically reactive and emergency-driven framework while catalyzing *impossible dialogues* that foster engagement, self-expression, and collaboration among the diverse communities within the prison.

This perspective became particularly meaningful to me when I began to interpret our activities inside the prison ward through the lens of Erving Goffman (1956), who describes social life as a series of performances. In this framework, I see our role as occupying the space between otherwise impossible interactions – not due to physical separation but because of the underlying power dynamics that produce asymmetrical relationships between people (see Chapter 7).

Given such premises, we can consider the different internal communities – detainees, volunteers, social and health operators, and correctional officers – as performers, the outside society as the audience, and ourselves as *service specialists*, borrowing Goffman's term. As Goffman explains, a service specialist gains access to the backstage of the performance, becoming privy to its secrets without participating in its delivery or sharing the risks and rewards of being on stage. This role requires a strong ethical responsibility, as the knowledge we gain is often deeply personal or structurally sensitive.

During the vocabulary sessions, participants engaged with us in ways that allowed their perspectives to emerge. Acting as mediators, we gathered these different voices to produce narrative artefacts, carrying reflections and lived experiences beyond the prison walls and into the public sphere.

## 6.2 The San Vittore Situated Vocabulary

The San Vittore Situated Vocabulary started in July 2023 as a pilot activity that took place over two days with inmates from the Young Adults (YA) ward. Participants were identified from those already involved in *StoryLab* activities – the permanent collaborative story-telling workshop at the YA ward – and others recommended by ward educators based on relational and language criteria. Special attention was given to forming small groups and pairs for in-depth discussions on the meanings of selected words.

Starting with four keywords identified by the participants and their various meanings, the Vocabulary aims to fuel conversations about the needs and potentialities of San Vittore prison and explore new transformative actions. This process involves six steps:

1. Identification of keywords: through meetings with different groups, keywords are identified.
2. Discussion and comparison: in a series of small group meetings, participants from different clusters explore the different meanings of the selected words.
3. Collection and synthesis of meanings: researchers collect, compare, and analyse the various points of view and meanings, which are then synthesized into communicative artefacts, one per keyword.
4. Comparison with experts: these communicative artefacts serve as the basis for meetings with experts from different fields (philosophy, art, science, etc.).
5. Confrontation with the outside world: the collected words and contributions are shared with the outside world. Neighbourhood residents are invited to express their views on the words and their meanings, which will be shared in public spaces.
6. Collecting, synthesizing, and sharing: the contributions collected from the outside world will be shared with a broader part of the prison population.

The development of reflections and philosophical discussions with the residents of the YA ward began with the identified four terms. 26 detained people, 14 correctional officers, 18 operators (including

educators and healthcare staff), and 7 volunteers participated in this project, enhancing Vocabulary and promoting future beneficial interactions with the outside world.

### 6.2.1 The Context: Reading San Vittore Prison as a Social Transition

To reflect on the role of storytelling within the Vocabulary activity, it was beneficial to re-examine the application context through the anthropological lens. Prisons are closed environments designed to confine individuals, physically and socially isolated from society. In the case of San Vittore prison, it functions as a *remand prison* (*Casa circondariale*) – a type of facility primarily designated for individuals awaiting trial or serving short-term sentences. Specifically, it houses those serving sentences of less than five years, including those with a remaining sentence of less than five years (Ministero Della Giustizia – Istituti Penitenziari, n.d.). This distinguishes it from a *penitentiary* (*Casa di reclusione*), which is intended for individuals serving long-term sentences following final conviction. As a remand prison, San Vittore focuses on temporary detention rather than long-term rehabilitation. This status has significant implications for any participatory or narrative-based work within the facility. The population is highly dynamic, with a rapid turnover that makes it difficult to plan long-term engagement processes. The transient nature of detention in a remand prison means that individuals may leave the facility unexpectedly – due to release, transfer to another prison, or a change in custodial status such as being granted house arrest. As a result, narrative practices within San Vittore must rely on flexible, modular approaches that can adapt to uncertainty and make space for meaningful expression even within short or interrupted periods of participation.

This raises the question: how do prisons and their populations relate to society? If we conceptualize the prison as a transition space, its structure and purpose align with Arnold van Gennep's notion of the *rite of passage* (1960). A rite of passage is a ceremony or ritual marking «a person moves from one place in society to another» (p. 13), often involving a significant change in social status. Gennep continued underlying how the very man's life appears to consist of a series of stages

with comparable beginnings and ends because transitions between groups and social situations are perceived as inherent to life itself (p. 3).

Today, the term is widely used in anthropology and has also found prominence in popular culture and literature across many contemporary languages, thanks to the revised version of the concept proposed by Victor Turner (1977). According to Arnold van Gennep (1960), rites of passage have three phases: separation, liminality and incorporation. During the separation phase, people leave their current state and prepare to move from one place or social status to another. The second stage is called transitional (liminal) and is identified as the in-between betwixt the first and third phases: one has left one place or status but has not yet entered or entered the next. Turner described this phase as «[...] a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states» (Turner, 1974, p. 57). Finally, in the incorporation phase, the transition has taken place, and the individual assumes a new identity or status, reintegrating into society (Turner, 1977). Van Gennep further refined this framework by categorizing the associated ceremonies: *preliminal rites* for the separation phase, *liminal* (or *threshold*) rites for the transitional phase, and *postliminal* rites for incorporation into the new state (van Gennep, p. 21).

The process of entering and leaving prison can be studied within the framework of these stages, resulting in the following:

- Separation: entry into prison marks the separation phase and the detachment from society. As van Gennep points out, the passage from one social position to another is underscored by a territorial passage: «This identification explains why the passage from one group to another is so often ritually-expressed by passage under a portal; or by an *opening of the doors* [...]. In fact, the spatial separation of distinct groups is an aspect of social organization» (van Gennep, 1960, p. 192).
- Liminality: the second phase represents the in-between state between the initial separation and the third phase. In this context, the prison functions as a liminal space – a suspended period that forces its inhabitants to exist on the peripheral edges of the social structure (Turner, 1977, p. 145). If, accord-

ing to Turner, liminality is understood both as phase and state disengaged from normal social modes and actions, it can also serve as a time for examining and revisiting core values and axioms of the culture in which it takes place (p. 167). During this stage, we activated the San Vittore SV, a dialogic tool that uses narrative to investigate the *social drama* of prison life, including its inherent power dynamics (see Chapter 7).

- Incorporation: represents the moment people are released from prison and reintegrate into society, reassuming their previous identity or embracing a new one.

### 6.2.2 Meaning-making in the Marge

These reflections allow us to conceptualize the time and space of prison through the concept of liminality:

- Liminality in time is understood as the period (weeks, months, or years) that people spend in prison (Thomassen, 2009).
- Liminality of beings refers to the various minority groups that inhabit the prison and can be considered liminal. This includes not only illegal immigrants but also the specific situation of detainees, charged but still awaiting trial. These people exist «betwixt and between home and host, part of society, but sometimes never fully integrated» (p. 19).
- Liminality in place understood the prison as a space of social transition.

The San Vittore SV activity was conducted within the prison, which is understood as a liminal space. Started in July 2023 as a pilot project, the activity spanned two days and involved inmates from the Young Adults (YA) ward.

The choice to begin with this group was deliberate, as these inmates, moving in the intermediate space of the prison, «are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial» (Turner, 1977, p. 95).

The prison, conceived as a liminal space, serves as a fertile ground for creating myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and values (Turner, 1974, p. 60). These cultural products can be produced through participatory processes that generate new meanings, simultaneously

affecting people on multiple psychobiological levels. Moreover, such outputs are not merely abstract classifications since they can inspire men to act and think (Turner, 1977, pp. 128–129).

The first phase – *Identification of Keywords* – was conducted in a plenary session held in the library of the Young Adults (YA) ward, with the participation of 15 inmates. After introducing the Vocabulary activity to the participants, the session moved into a discussion and translation phase, during which keywords were translated into Arabic and English, facilitated by the researchers and the same inmates.

After the collaborative discussion, participants voted to select the most relevant words. The resulting words included: *mother*, *father*, *god*, *fun/boredom*, *justice/injustice*, *life/death*, and *responsibility*.

It became evident that the initial three words – *mother*, *father*, and *god* – had profound meaning for each participant when it came time to refine the chosen words further. However, their unanimity in importance ran the risk of making conversations less lively. The inclusion of *god*, in particular, echoed Turner's emphasis on the importance of religion for human social and psychic structures.

This insight was shared with the group, and a young inmate serving as a *peer supporter* persuaded the others to set aside *mother*, *father*, and *god*. These words, however, were symbolically displayed on the library walls to acknowledge their importance. The group ultimately agreed to focus on the word *responsibility* for deeper discussion.

The morning session ended with identifying four words (or pairs of terms) to explore in the second phase: *fun/boredom*, *justice/injustice*, *life/death*, and *responsibility*.

After a discussion with the Department's educators about the results of the first phase, the afternoon session began with small group meetings, marking the start of the second phase – *Discussion and Comparison* – which continued into the following day. The relational dynamics among participants played a significant role in the discussions: some individuals openly acknowledged struggles with anger when in group settings, while others conducted the conversation almost entirely in Arabic, with the help of the Arabic-speaking researcher. One group consisted of four participants of Italian origin, three of whom were adults with prior prison experience. The most contentious issue turned out to be the idea of justice/injustice. The

adult inmates provided a unique viewpoint into the evolution of the prison system, offering a unique perspective on how societal diversity impacts both prison and broader society. One participant remarked, «It used to be that in prison there were criminals; now they put the starving in there» while another stated, «Today, the police don't make arrests – they trawl». Statements that resonate with Turner's observations on the role of novices in the liminal space of rituals, suggesting parallels between them undergoing a period of isolation and the detained people: «The novices are, in fact, temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them, since they have no rights over others. [...] They are dead to the social world, but alive to the asocial world» (p. 59).

The pilot activity, initially conducted with inmates from the YA ward in prototype form, resumed in September 2023 with additional user groups, including operators and correctional officers, to proceed with the next stages of the process (see Chapter 9).

## 6.3 Conclusion: Unveiling the Social Drama through the Power of Narrative

Thus, the prison is conceptualized as a liminal context, a border zone in which critical reflection on socio-cultural elements can be activated. It serves as both a space and a time where social dramas (Turner, 1986) unfold, engaging the various social groups inhabiting the prison: the detained individuals, correctional officers, educational and healthcare staff, and volunteers.

This environment forms the backdrop for the San Vittore SV activity, which functions as a dialogue device utilizing storytelling to reveal and understand social dramas (Figure 1).

These «dramas of living», as Burke (1945) terms them, emerge in groups of people who share values and interests (Turner, 1980, p. 149), with complex dynamics that can have a transformative impact on society (Cottle, 2008).

In the first two phases of the activity – *Identification of Keywords* and *Discussion and Comparison* – storytelling facilitates the emergence of words significant to participants, imbuing them with meaning

derived from group discussions and the negotiation of meanings. According to Scholes (1980, p. 207), «A word in any language carries with it a semantic field of potential meanings which is partly governed by a social code and partly individualized by the unique features of whoever utters or interprets the word». This underscores the importance of the narrative dimension established through dialogue with participants: through storytelling and the act of narrating, participants shape these words (or pairs of words), offering them more precise definitions (p. 207).

Moreover, storytelling plays a key role as a reflective activity, capable of:

- Assisting in the construction of self-identity and understanding oneself in relation to others (Glover, 2004).
- Providing meaning to what is being narrated, even reinterpreting past events or situations.
- Rearticulating values and goals that may conflict but gain cultural meaning through the narrative structure (Turner, 1980, p. 168).

In this regard, storytelling can be understood as a social practice, both as a mode of telling and as a method of knowing (Richardson, 1990).

As we move to phase three – *Collection and Synthesis of Meanings* –, the creation of communicative artifacts leads to cultural performances. According to Barbara Myerhoff (1980, p. 7) «cultural

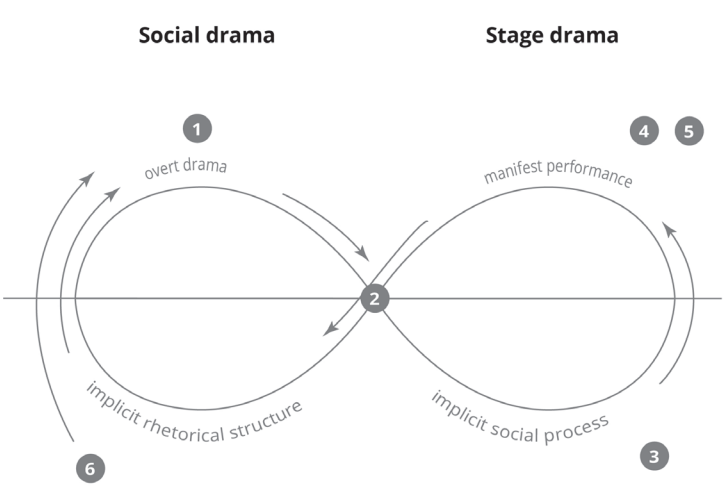


Figure 1.
Description of the San Vittore Situated Vocabulary stages, aligned with Turner's model of social drama.

performances are reflective in the sense of sharing ourselves to ourselves. They are also capable of being reflexive, arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves. As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self-aware, conscious of our consciousness».

In steps four and five – *Comparison with Experts* and *Confrontation with the Outside World* – performance is manifest through storytelling, making the internal processes that remain invisible to the outside world explicit. As Glover (2004, p. 63) states, «narratives shared among a group of people help us come to understand the *communities* (however defined) to which individuals belong». By interpreting the terms within and beyond the different groups involved, we can gain insights into the collective meanings and identities of these groups (inmates, officers, staff). In this way, the vocabulary device and narrative act as tools to vicariously bridge social groups that share the same physical space but do not typically communicate with one another.

The final step – *Collecting*, *Synthesizing, and Sharing* – aims to facilitate internal discussions regarding what has been gathered from external stakeholders, enabling the circulation of new meanings. This process can thereby modify social dramas, positively influencing rhetorical structures.

In conclusion, the result is restoring voice to disempowered and marginalized individuals, challenging hegemonic narratives. The outcome is the ability to assign meaning to ongoing social dramas by activating processes of self-understanding (Turner, 1980) and dialogue that would otherwise be impossible through narrative processes, storytelling and cultural performances.

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# 7. Power Mapping to Bring Out Possible Interdependencies in San Vittore Prison

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## 7.1 Introduction

Since early 2023, by regularly entering San Vittore with colleagues from Off Campus, I began to observe and interrogate the prison not only as a closed space, but also as a critical node within a fragmented system. In Italy, the prison system constitutes a complex network of institutions and relationships, whose structure is rooted in constitutional principles, particularly article 27 of the Italian Constitution, which states that punishments must respect human dignity and aim at the rehabilitation of the convicted person.

Formally, the prison falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, but the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education also operate within it, responsible for ensuring detainees' fundamental rights to healthcare and education, as guaranteed by articles 32 and 34 of the Constitution, respectively; in addition, the Ministry of the Interior oversees the Penitentiary Police responsible for security.

Continuous observation from within has clearly revealed that the logic guiding these actors often diverges. The result is not an inte-

grated form of governance, but rather a forced coexistence, marked by interdependencies, frictions, conflicts, and institutional ambiguities. For instance, I have witnessed how security protocols may delay or impede access to medical care or hinder participation in educational programs.

In this intricate relational system, power dynamics play a central role in understanding the research context in which the Situated Vocabulary (SV) project has developed. As Foucault (1975) emphasized in *Discipline and Punish*, prisons are not merely places of confinement, but disciplinary devices where power is exercised through daily routines, social interactions, and institutional structures.

San Vittore in Milan embodies this systemic complexity and its historical contradictions. Built around 1879 according to the Bentham's panopticon model, it currently serves as a detention facility holding individuals awaiting trial – thus legally presumed innocent – or convicted persons with sentences of under five years. This dual function, its central location in Milan, and its public notoriety place San Vittore at the heart of both the judicial system and the public debate on prison reform. Studying San Vittore from the inside thus provides valuable insights into power dynamics and collaboration modes in carceral environments. Its role as a remand prison, hosting a heterogeneous and constantly changing population, makes it an emblematic case for investigating the intersection of formal policies and informal practices.Regular presence in this environment – I went twice a week over the past two years – has made it evident how the public dimension of the institution significantly influences its functioning and, consequently, the lives of those who are incarcerated or work there.

This chapter then presents a first attempt to map the relationships and dynamics between actors operating inside the prison, laying the groundwork for the San Vittore SV project.

## 7.2 Methodological Positioning and Research Objectives

The historical evolution of San Vittore reflects broader changes in the prison system and societal attitudes toward punishment and

rehabilitation. Originally designed according to 19th century principles of prison architecture, the institution has progressively integrated educational and rehabilitative programs. However, it has not overcome the structural issues that hinder its effectiveness. While a wide range of professionals operate within its walls daily – beyond penitentiary police officers, legal-pedagogical staff, educators, healthcare workers, and teachers, this also includes mediators, volunteers, activists, and representatives of the third sector – systemic problems such as overcrowding, lack of space and resources, understaffing, and the transitory nature of its population exacerbate the challenges in fulfilling its institutional missions: reeducation, healthcare, and security.

The experience of OC San Vittore is positioned precisely within this space of tension, serving as a privileged observation point. Located at a crossroads between different detention areas, it allowed us to observe how power dynamics operate not only through vertical hierarchies but also via informal networks, mediation processes, and strategic alliances. At the same time, through action-research practices and continuous engagement with diverse stakeholders, it provided an opportunity to experience these dynamics directly.

As Donna Haraway (1988) notes, objective knowledge is always a partial, situated, embodied vision. Regularly entering the prison has meant, for me, becoming aware that my presence, my listening, and even this act of writing are themselves political gestures, charged with epistemological and methodological implications. I also realized that my positionality – as a white woman researcher from one of Milan's most prestigious universities, moving within an institutional space marked by profound inequalities, rigidity, and marginalization – is never fixed, but a mobile condition, continuously renegotiated over time and space, in relation to the individuals involved and the power dynamics at play.

This chapter presents a preliminary examination of the internal power dynamics at San Vittore, the outcome of a mapping effort conducted in collaboration with colleagues as part of our daily practice in prison. This work, complex and challenging in this context, is far from being concluded with this initial research phase. It has, however, led to the identification of a series of key terms that served as a starting point for selecting, discussing, and collaboratively collecting

shared meanings. Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and continuous ethnographic engagement, we sought to identify and problematize the hierarchies, interdependencies, and friction zones that pervade prison life. Following Spradley's (1980) ethnographic principles and embracing Foucault's (1975) relational conception of power, we immersed ourselves in the prison's everyday practices to capture their nuances. Semi-structured interviews with inmates, penitentiary staff, educators, and healthcare workers enriched the study by offering qualitative insights into the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of the various actors. In line with Geertz's (1973) notion of thick description, the ethnographic immersion aimed to uncover not only practices but also the meanings attributed to them by actors. A shared research diary accompanied the entire process, enhancing the analysis with researchers' reflections and ensuring positional awareness. Reflexivity became a crucial part of this ethnographic practice, providing an understanding of the researcher's influence on the field and interpretation.

The approach, also inspired by Manzini's (2015) principles of design for social innovation, forms the foundation of the San Vittore SV.

Far from offering an exhaustive analysis or a static representation of power relations, this ongoing mapping serves to open spaces of understanding, reveal existing fractures, and, above all, lay the groundwork for more conscious research practices and the co-construction of a shared vocabulary. Such a vocabulary seeks to foster mutual recognition, allow for the expression of dissent, and potentially generate new forms of correspondence and understanding.

## 7.3 Mapping of Power Dynamics and Stakeholder Identification

Within the complex system of roles and relationships that shapes a constellation of formal and informal powers, the power mapping conducted at San Vittore – which informed the SV project – enabled the identification of key actors, hierarchical structures, transversal networks, and systemic tensions. This highlighted the interdependence between security, care, education, and control.

Among the system's central figures stands the Director, who occupies the top of the hierarchical structure and holds overall responsibility for the institution. Reporting to the Department of Penitentiary Administration (DAP), the Director ensures compliance with institutional policies and serves as the primary liaison with judicial authorities, local institutions, and civil society organizations. Alongside the Commander of the Penitentiary Police, the Coordinator of Educational Services, and the Head of Healthcare Services, the Director guides a core governance body that mediates between central regulations and everyday complexity.

The Penitentiary Police, with its hierarchical structure, exercises regulatory power on a daily basis, overseeing security, movement, and discipline. Its authority to impose disciplinary sanctions reinforces its formal power and often creates tension in relations with inmates. The officers' constant presence in the institution makes them both privileged observers and essential interlocutors. While their structure reinforces vertical dynamics, their frequent interactions with educators, healthcare workers, and inmates also introduce horizontal influences.

The educational team, led by the coordinator and composed of legal-pedagogical officers, network agents, and educators, is responsible for promoting inmates' rehabilitation and social reintegration through treatment strategies and educational, cultural, and recreational programs. By collaborating with both internal actors, such as management, police, healthcare services, and external actors, including supervisory judges, social workers, and communities, they often serve as mediators between inmates and the prison institution. Although their formal authority is limited, they can exert a strong influence over inmates' paths.

Another key figure is the healthcare staff, coordinated by the Head of Healthcare Services, which provides medical, psychiatric, and psychological assistance. Although formally autonomous from the penitentiary administration – as they report to the Local Health Authority (ASST) –, they rely on the prison for logistics and access. Along with this tension between professional autonomy and institutional constraints, healthcare professionals frequently have direct contact with inmates, allowing them to identify issues that might otherwise remain hidden.

Lastly, inmates constitute the largest and most socially heterogeneous group. Though formally powerless, they exert informal influence through internal hierarchies and collective behaviors. Their relationships with custodial staff are varied: ranging from cooperative to conflictual, depending on individual circumstances and institutional conditions. Inequalities and sharp power asymmetries continually shape these interactions. Within the Vocabulary project, inmates became central actors, with the opportunity to choose the words to focus on for the collection of meanings.

As Goffman (1961) theorized in his study of total institutions, prison represents a space where the management of the self is constantly negotiated between submission and resistance. The dynamics between staff, inmates, and third-party actors at San Vittore confirm this continuous renegotiation of roles and identities in a space marked by high normative density.

This mapping process and the associated reflections led to the selection of actors to be involved in the San Vittore SV, which aims to build bridges between groups with different roles, priorities, and levels of power – fostering dialogue and systemic change through shared and participatory practices.

Based on their systemic relevance and with the goal of ensuring as heterogeneous a representation of perspectives as possible, involvement was tailored to each group: more direct with educators and external operators, more gradual with the Penitentiary Police and healthcare staff, for whom internal ambassadors were engaged to mediate trust and access. The collaboration with Young Adult detainees, already initiated through the *StoryLab* workshop, provided a solid foundation for building relationships of trust and co-producing meaning.

In summary, the mapping revealed that in San Vittore power dynamics are distributed across formal and informal structures, reflecting both hierarchical authority and networked influence:

- Hierarchical power: the Director, holding the overarching authority, is helped by the Penitentiary Police in defining the institution's operational boundaries and access thresholds. The decision-making process is structured but often slowed by bureaucratic constraints and limited resources.

- Informal influences: educators and healthcare workers build alliances based on proximity and mutual recognition. They wield informal power through advocacy, trust-building, and collaboration, which often transcends their formal roles.
- Parallel governance among inmates: informal leadership networks operate as micro-systems of power, influencing internal dynamics and mediating interactions with staff. These structures may complement or challenge staff authority, adding complexity to institutional governance. Recognizing and critically engaging with them is crucial to operating consciously within this system.

## 7.4 Insights

Through countless informal conversations, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, a stark discrepancy emerged between institutional narratives and the lived perceptions of both inmates and officers. For the former, the rehabilitative purpose of incarceration is often seen as an empty rhetoric, invalidated by exclusionary practices: delays in accessing healthcare and activities, lack of transparency in selection criteria, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Many inmates expressed a sense of powerlessness in influencing their pathways – even in contexts where the law provides for their participation like the choice of activities for example that are often chosen by educators for them.

On the other hand, officers reported persistent operational difficulties like chronic understaffing and expressed feelings of being unprepared to handle the complexity of their role, which continually exposes them to the human suffering inherent in incarceration, often exacerbated by psychiatric disorders. Many officers voiced a profound distrust in the prison system, from which they feel abandoned.

This discrepancy underscores the pressing need to reevaluate the concept of justice in a more inclusive sense – one that incorporates the perspectives of those who have firsthand experience with the prison system, as argued by Smith *et al.* (2005). The profound psychological and relational impacts of incarceration on both inmates

and staff have been extensively documented (Liebling & Maruna, 2013), resonating with the tensions observed in San Vittore. Structural issues, such as overcrowding, exacerbate these tensions, as San Vittore's current rate is 225% (Associazione Antigone, 2024a), and resource scarcity, which are emblematic of broader systemic problems in the Italian penal system (Lombardo & Fossati, 2016).

Participant observation also revealed tensions stemming from the divergent mandates of the ministries involved. The security needs enforced by the Penitentiary Police may clash with the principles of confidentiality and accessibility that underpin healthcare, or with the rehabilitative logic of incarceration. Recurring episodes, such as delays in escorting detainees to medical appointments, court hearings, or school activities, often due to understaffing or security constraints, erode trust and reinforce perceptions of systemic inefficiency.

This lack of coordination between institutional mandates highlights the challenges of implementing integrated governance models within prisons – an issue well-documented in the cross-sector collaboration literature (Bryson *et al*., 2011). These findings align with the analysis by Bruce (2021), who emphasizes the importance of more effective inter-institutional coordination to reduce operational friction and enhance the efficacy of treatment pathways.

Ultimately, the research highlighted the importance of informal networks in disseminating information, resolving conflicts, and aligning needs with available resources. Inmates with recognized roles – such as peer supporters or work-assigned prisoners (*lavoranti*) – often become access points or operational interfaces, fulfilling an ambivalent function: on one hand, they may reinforce internal hierarchies within the inmate population; on the other, they play a crucial role in facilitating communication with staff and conveying useful information.

Although these networks are not free from ambiguity – as the interests at play may diverge from those of the institution –, recognizing and engaging with them consciously can enhance the effectiveness of interventions, especially within a framework of shared responsibility and relational justice.

It is worth mentioning that OC San Vittore represents a unique case within the Italian prison system, as it functions as both an obser-

vatory and an interface through which the university, an independent institution external to the carceral apparatus, engages directly with the detention environment. This very presence constitutes a rupture in the established order of San Vittore, challenging the normative separation between academic inquiry and institutional confinement.

The insights gained through the complete immersion underscore the importance of adopting a more integrative and collaborative approach to prison management. Addressing the tensions between security, healthcare, and education requires creating spaces for dialogue and coordination among ministries, institutional staff, and inmates. By capturing the lived experiences of stakeholders and illuminating the nuances of institutional dynamics, this work provides a powerful tool for reimagining the carceral system. This approach not only exposes the shortcomings of current practice, but also reveals avenues for meaningful and sustainable reform.

## 7.5 Identification of Keywords and Thematic Pairs

The observation and mapping work also served as fertile ground for the emergence of a series of keywords that encapsulate the complexity of experiences and systemic challenges within San Vittore prison. These terms and binomials were adopted as a starting point for developing the SV, reflecting the tensions, aspirations, and interpersonal dynamics that shape everyday life in prison. Following Chantal Mouffe (2000), the goal is not to resolve conflicts through consensual synthesis, but to recognize dissent as the foundation of democratic politics. Even within San Vittore, creating spaces for mutual listening between institutional actors and detainees means accepting antagonism as a precondition for any possible transformation.

Among the many words pairs such as *Justice/Injustice* exposes the gap between normative frameworks and subjective perceptions of fairness; *Freedom/Constraint* speaks to the ongoing tension between the aspiration for autonomy and the reality of incarceration, where body and time are regulated. Words like *Hope/Despair* tackle existential dimensions, while *Trust/Mistrust* or *Empathy/Hostility* reveal the

fragility of relationships between the institution and individuals. Terms like *Project* and *Desire* express agency – the ability to choose, act, and make a difference – in a context where every action is regulated; even voicing a desire represents a minimal yet powerful form of self-determination. The word *Responsibility* in this framework is not solely legal, but relational: it implies being seen, being heard, and being-with. Finally, radical pairs such as *Life/Death* open a space for reflecting on the very meaning of living in prison – not just as biological survival, but as social, emotional, and relational existence.

This linguistic framework is not limited to describing existing criticalities but opens possibilities for systemic change. Situating these words within the context of power dynamics allows them to function as transformative tools. The shared lexicon thus becomes a means to decipher relationships among the various prison actors and to question institutional mechanisms that hinder change.

## 7.6 Conclusions

Ethnographic immersion in daily routines and the field work allowed us to grasp dimensions of prison life that would otherwise remain invisible, providing a situated understanding of the relationships among inmates, staff, and other stakeholders. This approach enables an exploration of the discrepancies between official narratives and subjective perceptions, shedding light not only on tensions but also on potential spaces for meaningful reform. As Haraway (1988) argues, every act of knowledge production is a political positioning that involves the body, the institution, and the context. This implies that ethnographic research within San Vittore is never neutral; it is embedded in the fabric of power, and we, as designers, must be conscious of this while actively participating in its (de)construction.

This initial phase of research produced three primary outcomes. First, it documented the existence of a system of complex interdependencies among different actor groups, in which inmates, prison officers, educators, healthcare workers, and management develop reciprocal adaptation strategies that often bypass formal procedures. Second, it demonstrated that building trust in high-density

institutional contexts requires ongoing negotiation and the ability to navigate structural ambiguities. Third, it highlighted the transformative potential of collaborative practices that, while not altering formal hierarchies, open spaces for mutual recognition.

These findings suggest that prison can be understood not only as a control device, but also as a relational space, a place for the production of situated knowledge and innovative practices. The San Vittore Vocabulary project thus positions itself as a tool that can contribute to making total institutions more porous, fostering processes of institutional reflexivity and the shared construction of meaning. It is proposed as a replicable model to promote dialogue and shared understanding even in the most complex contexts, opening promising perspectives for future explorations of participatory methodologies in prison environments. As bell hooks (1994) also emphasized, deconstructing the structures of power that sustain oppression is not merely an analytical exercise, but a necessary act to imagine alternative forms of relationships. In this sense, the SV project seeks to create a discursive space where marginalized subjectivities can redefine their existential conditions.

In this process, I found myself confronting not only the opacity of institutional structures but also my position within them. Visiting San Vittore twice a week for over two years meant exposing myself to a space dense with frictions and contradictions, but also with micro-openings and unexpected relationships. This bodily and symbolic crossing allowed me to understand that every gesture – from observation to writing – is never neutral, but always situated, responsible, and potentially transformative. In a place where the possibility of speech is often denied or surveilled, contributing to the construction of a shared vocabulary has come to represent, for me, a political act: an attempt to restore voice, to name injustice, and, perhaps, to imagine other forms of co-existence.

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# 8. Intersections of Agency, Translations, and Meanings

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## 8.1 Introduction

The carceral context comprises complex power dynamics, making it a challenging, albeit stimulating, environment for developing a participatory design activity. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the complexities inherent to the various stages of the San Vittore SV. Starting from its theoretical and ethical framing, it explores the complexities of participatory design in a carceral context, focusing on how power dynamics and the ethical challenges of translation shape this process and how the San Vittore SV can be a tool for better understanding this challenging, slightly contested context.

### 8.1.1 Narrative-based Design within the Wall

It seems essential here to begin from a shared understanding of the carceral institution as a space at society's margins. To quote bell hooks, it is conversely at the margins but also outside civil society: «To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body» (hooks, 1984). Although prison, as an institution, is an expression of

a country's government, those who inhabit it are part of the *margins*: they are outside of the main body both materially and socially. On a material level, as prisons are typically surrounded by walls, they are separated and isolated from the urban fabric. On a social and philosophical one, those who work and especially those who inhabit these facilities live in a *state of exception* (Agamben, 2003). Imprisonment as a punitive method subjects the detained to a pervasive power that controls their bodies and their bodies' expressions. This *biopolitical power* (Foucault, 1990) determines an overall lack of agency for the detained person, as the body becomes a representation of the crime and an expression of the punishment (Foucault, 1995). In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1995) provides a historical overview of the evolution of the penal systems of Western civilization in the modern age, coming to a close with the invention of prison. This development opens the door to *disciplinary societies* as part of a more extensive *carceral system* that extends beyond the physical institution of the prison and represents a pervasive mechanism of social control embedded in the modern Panopticon (Bentham & Božovič, 1995; Foucault, 1995) society. According to him, those who enter societal contracts, such as the military and, by extension, correctional law enforcement, are subjugated to a disciplinary society. In this sense, the duality of oppressors-oppressed (Freire, 2017) is produced by the exact societal mechanisms. Fostering a productive dialogue between these two antagonistic extremes – in this case, between correctional officers and detainees – would mean enacting an agonistic (Mouffe, 2013) exploration of the in-between of human beings (Arendt, 1958). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt attributes paramount importance to speech and action to reveal an individual's identity. While physical appearance is immediately apparent, human identity unfolds through the union of acting and speaking.

> **In acting and speaking, men show who they really are, reveal actively their unique personal identities, and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of who in contradistinction to what somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcom-**

> **ings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does. (Ibidem)**

This identity unfolds when one is with others. The sphere of human affairs is therefore to be sought in the interweaving of interpersonal relationships. Every personal manifestation of identity is enacted in an already-existing web of human relationships that influence but also will be influenced by it.

### 8.1.2 Situated Vocabulary in the Space of Marginality

Arendt proceeds to identify two figures, the *benefactor* and the *criminal*, who both have to conceal themselves, albeit for different reasons. Arendt argues that «both are lonely figures, the one being for, the other against, all men» (Arendt, 1958). These characters «remain outside the pale of human intercourse» and are, therefore, «marginal figures who usually enter the historical scene in times of corruption, disintegration, and political bankruptcy». Although it could be argued that Arendt intends marginality with a different connotation, it is relevant here to introduce hooks' (1989) characterization of the margin as a site of resistance and generation of counter-hegemonic discourse. Her *lonely* criminal entering the *historical* scene is producing an act of resistance, as he defies his own marginality while operating within its space.

By characterising the discourse that takes place within marginality as counter-hegemonic, the San Vittore SV can be read as a tool in service of this resistance. As it encourages the *lonely* criminal to disclose their own identity through speech, entering the *historical scene*. As an infrastructuring (Björgvinsson *et al*., 2010; Tassinari & Vergani, 2023) activity, it involves and puts into relation – infrastructures – the different actors within the space of prison: detained people, penitentiary police agents, and other workers or volunteers. These actors have not only different roles but also different and, in some cases, contrasting perspectives and queries with regard to the prison context. The San Vittore SV collects and engages with these different voices, pushing them in the same historical scene, towards an agonistic (Mouffe, 2013) approach.

As the San Vittore SV voices the identities of those who have a first-hand experience of the context and their perspective on the carceral institution through a search for meaning, this chapter grapples with the ethical inquiries that should be considered when putting into practice an infrastructuring activity such as the Situated Vocabulary in a context such as San Vittore. As the San Vittore SV is an infrastructuring, participative design activity, confronting the designers-researchers involved with the inquiries mentioned above proved pivotal in fostering a better, more ethical design practice and investigating how certain aspects, specifically concerning translation, can strain the experience's participative ethos.

## 8.2 About the San Vittore SV Iteration

This section provides an overview of San Vittore, where the San Vittore SV project takes place. It outlines the demographic makeup of its detainee population, particularly the Young Adult sector, and its realities. It particularly highlights the linguistic diversity typical of the context, including the prevalence of Arabic-speaking detainees and the challenges of linguistic diversity. Most of the team that took part in the San Vittore SV has been working in Off Campus San Vittore since October 2022 and conducting activities within the Young Adult sector of the prison for more than a year. As already highlighted, a substantial portion of the ward is composed of people from foreign countries, particularly from Arab-speaking countries, mainly Morocco and Egypt. As difficult as it is to obtain an accurate figure, as the sector's population varies daily, it is possible to conjecture, based on direct observation of the researchers, that this number hovers around and often exceeds 50% of the total population of the sector. This distribution is also reflected by the composition of the initial group of detained individuals that participated in the making of the SV.

We will now focus on addressing how, in the process of making the SV, translations, agency, and meanings intersect. In detail, I will discuss here the impact of language barriers on migrant detainees, the emergence of carceral lexicons, and the ethical considerations of

translation throughout the project. By linking translation to power dynamics and identity construction, this section deepens the theoretical understanding of the challenges we faced (and are still currently facing) in this context.

### 8.2.1 Translation in the Plurilingual Carceral Landscape

When we refer to detained people whose first language is not Italian, we are talking, in most cases, about migrant identities. A lack of fluency in the vehicular language or *lingua franca*, in this case, Italian, aggravates the difficulties the detained person encounters (Associazione Antigone, 2019). As «the condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being» (Cronin, 2006), the migrant identity is further marginalized as the lack of resources for translation (Associazione Antigone, 2019) actively obstructs their ability to express and advocate for themselves. The plurilingual carceral landscape responds to this need to communicate with the birth of alternative languages. Carceral communities, not unlike all closed communities, develop self-referential, transversal languages (Marchetti *et al*., 2024). In Italian prisons, these incorporate some words from different foreign languages alongside others coming from domestic dialects. As language aids in making sense of things, and making sense of the self produced identity (Spivak, 2021), this plurilingual landscape reflects on prison as a space where meanings can be plural and fragmented, as well as the identities living within the carceral walls.

### 8.2.2 Translations, Agency, and Meanings

Therefore, participating in the San Vittore SV means coming into contact and actively working with this plurality of languages, meanings, and identities. When holding, moderating, and facilitating the conversations and later reworking the content collected, we had to deal with the responsibilities of acting as translators. While translation opens up the possibility of dialogue across difference (Cronin, 2006), which is undoubtedly among the aims of the San Vittore SV, partaking in such activity is political (Spivak, 2021). «If eloquence is related to the exercise of power» (Cronin, 2006), assuming this role implies partaking in an activity related to power.

Here, I intend translation as contingent to power dynamics in the sense that, by translating somebody else's words, we operate directly on the meaning they intended to produce. Understanding agency as *intentional states* (Bruner, 1990), translation is therefore intertwined with personal agency and power over meaning. The topic of agency is powerfully relevant in the San Vittore SV, both in a potentially positive manner, as translation allows to bridge a gap and facilitates communication among individuals, as well as in a potentially negative one, as if done without care, it risks misrepresenting the original message. But agency is also at the core of the San Vittore SV, as the SV is a quest for meaning, and «reaching for meaning», as posed by Brockmeier (2009), «might be the ultimate form of human agency.»

This search for meaning is tied to the notion of the dichotomy *pouvoir/savoir* (power/knowledge) presented by Foucault (1995), according to which power and knowledge «directly imply one another» as they produce each other. On the topic, Spivak (2021) argues that *pouvoir/savoir* «is the shared skill which allows us to make (common) sense of things». I argue that this *making sense* is not a far concept from Brockmeier's (2009) *reaching for meaning* and is therefore a practice of agency. Meaning-making in the context of marginalisation becomes, therefore, a fundamental practice of self-determination for the oppressed (Freire, 2017).

## 8.3 Phases

Moving from the discussion of the ethical implications of the intersection between translations, agency, and meaning, this section delves into the practical implementation of the SV to provide an overview of how these issues influenced and informed our work, broken down into four phases. While the former two steps are carried out with the active participation of the actors, the latter two are solely our responsibility as designers. The involvement of the different stakeholders varies in each of these steps, as does our own roles in the research team. The four phases are:

1. identification of the words;
2. interviews/conversations to discuss the meaning of the selected words;
3. reworking of the material collected in the interview phases;
4. production of the vocabulary;
5. next steps.

Each phase highlights the roles of the designers and participants and illustrates how ethical considerations and translation challenges emerge in this PD practice. Here, the San Vittore SV configures itself as an arena for participation (Gartner & Wagner, 1996), where stakeholders collaborate, negotiate, and contribute to the design process.

### 8.3.1 Identification of the Words

The first group of participants was presented with a set of words and word dichotomies that they could expand on with their suggestions. Among these, they chose the final four that would make up the basis of the SV. This step took place in July 2023 and involved a group of 20 detained individuals from the Young Adult section. In this phase, we mainly acted in the discussion as facilitators and moderators. Translation self-evidently plays a fundamental role here as out of the 20 detained people who took part in the activity, 14 spoke Arabic as their mother tongue and needed help with translation to different degrees. As the words and word dichotomies were presented in Italian, we were aware of the necessity of making them understandable to those who took part in the activity and who, for the most part, were not fluent speakers. A participatory translation approach was chosen rather than translating the words in advance. This process was partly facilitated by secondary languages (especially French and Spanish), known to both the detained people and the designers-researchers. Still, it was mainly possible thanks to the contribution of one of the team members, a native Arabic speaker (see Chapter 10). Enacting a sort of *participatory translation* meant that each word was not merely presented but also discussed.

### 8.3.2 Interviews/conversations

In this ongoing second phase, the participants were asked to discuss the meaning of the words selected. These conversations involved detained people, penitentiary police agents, and operators (health-care workers, educators, volunteers, etc.). Each session was recorded and held individually or in small groups (1-3 people) of individuals in the same category (see Chapters 6 and 7). Here, the designers took the roles of moderators in the arenas of participation (Gartner & Wagner, 1996). Regardless of the category to which the interlocutor belongs, these conversations have been punctuated with a lexicon belonging to that transversal language (Marchetti *et al*., 2024) native to the carceral setting, containing words that often refer directly to experiences in this context. This was the case, especially for the conversation with Arabic-speaking detainees who strongly relied on the transversal language if the exchange wasn't in Arabic, together with the same dynamics of *participatory translation* mentioned in the previous phase.

### 8.3.3 Reworking

The interviews are then written down and reworked to extract and organize the definitions and meanings attributed to the words. This is the first instance in which we work directly on the material without the presence or feedback from the stakeholders. Translation is always necessary, but here it lacks the contribution of those involved in the process. What happens in this phase is strictly tied to the objective of divulging the results of the San Vittore SV. Thus, while it is evident that designers-researchers must undertake a *language-to-language* translation, they must also understand how to enact a *language-to-traversal-language* transposition, which is cultural and contextual. The question then is how to make the collected material intelligible to those who do not have direct experience of the prison context and, therefore, do not possess a certain kind of vocabulary and might not necessarily grasp what dynamics it reflects. While the misuse of a word or a verb tense reflects something of the identity of the speaker – as it pertains to education levels, language barriers or even mood at the time of speaking – it can also hinder the effectiveness or intelligibility of the message. In one instance, for example,

an Egyptian participant from the Young Adult ward used the word *salutare* (to greet) instead of the word *insultare* (to insult) when recalling some racist remarks he was subjected to. On the one hand, the error reflected the difficulties of communicating in a language that is drastically different from his mother tongue, but it also risked drastically changing the meaning of the episode he was recalling. While the approach to these sorts of cases might seem straightforward, as the intended meaning risked being compromised, determining where to draw the line is complex. As translators and communicators, we wield the power of eloquence (Cronin, 2006) in the socio-cultural relation between languages and between translator and translated voice in the culture of imperialism (Spivak, 2021). This means that the choice of what to translate and how to approach this translation is political, balancing between facilitating understanding and overwriting meaning.

### 8.3.4 Production of the Vocabulary and Other Outputs

In these final phases, the final product or products will be developed. The making of the Vocabulary is still in the early stages, currently taking the intermediate form of *instant books* (see Chapter 9). While in the vocabulary production, stakeholders are expected to remain uninvolved, particularly during the design stage, other sorts of outputs might be more participative, as was the case with the installation designed as part of the *For Love of the World* festival in Delft in 2025 (see Chapter 12). In all iterations, it is essential to understand how and to what extent the multilingual atmosphere of San Vittore prison will be integrated into the SV.

## 8.4 Conclusions

### 8.4.1 Fuzziness at the Intersection

The problems the designer encounters within a PD process at the intersection of agency, translation, and meaning are «fuzzy problems» (Wagner, 1993). It might be tempting to consider the designer researcher as a neutral figure, but as we move along the lines of ethics, it is hard to define rigorously when these issues arise and what they could point towards from a strictly design perspective as it can be

argued that the value system they hold inevitably shapes the process. While the designer's role in this context is itself a fuzzy problem, it is, nonetheless, a role of responsibility towards the other, and, in the case of San Vittore SV, the marginalised ones.

### 8.4.2 Translating and Participation

An unequivocally critical point in the process is that none of us are professional translators, nor are we familiar with the non-vehicular languages – especially Arabic – spoken in the carceral context, with the exception of one member of the team. While this issue must be addressed, I would like to touch upon the distinctive practice that emerged from this gap.

In discussing the practical phases of the San Vittore SV, I already mentioned the employment of a participatory translation. This approach was necessary as the Arabic language is not a monolith: each Arabic-speaking country has a dialect that differs from Modern Standard Arabic (Kwaik *et al*., 2018). Therefore, having a univocal translation of the words – even by resorting to an Arabic speaker to act as translator – is not always possible. On a broader level, I think that engaging with translation as a PD practice can play a fundamental role in exploring meanings and meaning-making, as it allows the discussion about the different nuances of meanings that might not be carried along with a direct act of translation.

This discussion didn't only take place between us and the participants, but also among the participants themselves, as they tried to reach a consensus on translations and definitions of the words. Moving within a collective search for meanings means moving in the *in-between* (Arendt, 1958), where singular identities unfold in relation to other identities. Translation plays a crucial role in this space a crucial role, making understanding and being understood possible. Translation sustains and might even contribute to creating this in-betweenness.

No choice that can be made in the field of translation is neutral, for translation is itself, as we have seen, a political act. In dealing with this process, therefore, different levels of ethical complexity have emerged, as each choice evaluated carries with it a certain problematic nature. This continual problematization does not seem to be

resolvable in a clear-cut manner and is therefore frustrating in the design process. I have found this frustration to be fruitful, however, in that it accustomed myself as a designer to having a critical eye with respect to her own role, inclinations, and the impact of her choices. Problematization becomes a method, in the sense that it becomes a process that informs the designer's choices in marginal contexts.

While hooks (1989) invites us to «enter that space», Spivak suggests that, when taking on the responsibility of translation, it would be ideal to «have graduated into speaking, by choice or preference, of intimate matters» (Spivak, 2021) in the language of the original. The San Vittore SV is intrinsically a tool for exploring meaning and language, a process that unfolds through the search for the vocabulary necessary to speak about *intimate matters* – a key step toward entering the margin and engaging in the shared language of resistance.

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# 9. Translating the Research into a Communication Tool

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## 9.1 Introduction

San Vittore SV originates from the experience of the NoLo SV, where community engagement revealed diverse perspectives to better understand the situated context (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023). Similarly, this project used a shared vocabulary to explore the unique and often hidden realities of life in San Vittore Prison. The initiative sought to gather viewpoints from diverse groups: inmates serving sentences or awaiting trial, operators providing them support, and prison officers ensuring safety within the institution.

## 9.2. San Vittore Vocabulary: Process and Purpose

The project aims to spark dialogue among these groups by focusing on selected keywords, encouraging reflection on the marginal and extraordinary circumstances of prison life. The process began with

discussions among young inmates in the Young Adults department, leading to the selection of four foundational keywords. These words formed the basis for further input from prison operators and officers, who could add terms reflecting the institution's complexities.

The collected insights were then analysed and synthesized into the Vocabulary, a tool designed to foster mutual understanding and identify actionable improvements for the prison environment. Beyond its internal utility, the SV also serves as a bridge to external communities, inviting experts and neighbourhood residents to engage in discussions about prison life and its societal implications.

The SV does not claim to hold definitive truths but serves as a grassroots tool for collecting diverse opinions that challenge conventional perceptions and open possibilities for change. It is both a reflection of life within San Vittore and a call to integrate external insights, fostering a more inclusive and informed dialogue about incarceration. Through its collaborative approach, the project captures the complexity of prison life, offering a foundation for meaningful conversations that bridge the gap between prison and society. San Vittore SV also aims to create a shared understanding that transcends walls, helping reimagine prison as an integral part of the community rather than a secluded institution.

Words are central to the SV and essential to stimulate meaningful dialogue. That is why, in collaboration with young inmates, an initial list of around 20 terms was refined through discussion and voting. The final selection included four focal terms or binomials: *Responsibility*, *Fun/Boredom*, *Life/Death*, and *Justice/Injustice*. These terms were deliberately chosen for their potential to provoke diverse and contrasting perspectives. For instance, *Mother* – a term with universally positive connotations – as excluded in favour of words that could generate richer, more complex discussions. Many of the selected words are made up of binomials, but this does not mean that they represent two distant realities that are the opposite of each other; on the contrary, it often emerges during the interviews how thin the line between them is and how they are often two sides of the same coin (see Chapter 7). In fact, one aim of the research is precisely to investigate and get to know all the meanings that lie between one word and the other by reasoning about them together.

## 9.3 Insights from Conversations

Interviews conducted at San Vittore offered a multifaceted view of prison life, uncovering systemic challenges and the nuanced experiences of those familiar with this institution. Recurring themes included the need for better coordination among prison staff and broader societal mechanisms that perpetuate inequality, leading to incarceration among vulnerable populations, particularly youth.

Participants reflected on the core terms and introduced 42 additional words over time (as of March 7, 2024), categorised and linked to direct quotes. In order to organise the researcher's team analysis, the insights were grouped into critical issues, proposed improvements, and emblematic phrases. Moreover, a thematic table was created to juxtapose inmates' perspectives with those of operators and officers, highlighting the varied yet interconnected experiences within the prison. The moments of conversation gave rise to several reflections, which can be summarised by the following issues, addressing the keywords finally chosen for the SV.

For instance, the word *Responsibility* is seen as both accountability for past actions and familial duties, especially among foreign-born youth who face economic pressures (Tararà, 2013). While prison programs aim to foster personal growth, institutional limitations and staff shortages hinder rehabilitation efforts (Giordano, 2013; Miravalle & Scandurra, 2023). Officers, on their side, carry significant responsibilities for inmate welfare and safety under considerable stress (Campobasso, 2019). The word *Boredom* is a double-edged sword: it fosters aggression but also provides space for introspection. Meanwhile, the word *Fun* is often stigmatised, seen in public outrage over inmate access to entertainment like PlayStations (Pederiva, 2024). Systemic flaws, such as limited resources, restrict meaningful engagement (Miravalle & Scandurra, 2023), while for officers, humour serves as a survival mechanism in the demanding prison environment.

Prison also prompted reflection on life and mortality, often shaped by religious beliefs and resilience (Rigon, 2014). Some inmates maintain hope for a better future, while others fall into despair, particularly due to societal stigma after release (Srdjevic, 2022). Suicide rates in prison are higher than the general population, impacting both inmates

and workers (Miravalle & Scandurra, 2023), that is why officers stress the importance of fostering hope for life beyond incarceration.

Lastly, prison is often seen as *unjust*, due to overcrowding, poor conditions, judicial delays and systemic inequalities, especially for vulnerable groups like foreigners and those affected by mental disorders (Durante, 2023; Miravalle & Scandurra, 2023). Officers also face injustice, such as inadequate protection, very stressful working conditions and exhausting shifts. Despite flaws, educational and recreational programs provide bubbles of fairness and hope within incarceration.

San Vittore SV was born with the idea of collecting meanings, and recording words in use like all vocabularies, adapting to the changing context. What was conceived as a project in itself became more a research method adopted to get to know a reality closely through the voice of those who are part of it. In line with this openness to listening, therefore, within the project it was decided to ask the participants in the interviews to add in case a few words that they felt were essential to describe life in San Vittore, and the following lines will summarise some of the main points that emerged.

Interviews highlighted the difficult working conditions of penitentiary officers, who balance responsibility with humanity and detachment. Inside the facility, challenges include overcrowding, chaos, exclusion, racism, and power hierarchies (see Chapter 7). The project also revealed that young inmates are often fragile, entering prison seeking status or escape from boredom, only to face fear and self-destructive behaviours. Limited education and cognitive abilities hinder their adjustment. Themes in interviews included respect, rule adherence, health disparities, and critiques of therapy. Time in prison is seen as both a waiting period and an opportunity for self-improvement while silence, spirituality, and choice emerged as resilience tools.

Participants advocated for values like trust, humanity, and equality, urging more opportunities to nurture young inmates' creativity and responsibility. Security was criticised by both inmates and officers, with concerns about inadequate protection for staff. Finally, the isolated nature of prison life perpetuates public misunderstandings, highlighting the need for greater transparency to improve prison conditions.

## 9.4 Words and Power Relations

Working on a project framed as a vocabulary highlights the profound significance of words (see Chapter 8), a realisation that became increasingly evident throughout the workshop. Communication, crucial in a relationship-dense environment like prison, often fails to build bridges and instead exacerbates isolation. The prison context, shaped by an influx of inmates from diverse linguistic backgrounds, has seen the Italian language enriched by idioms and dialects from other cultures (Paone & Vignali, 2021).

However, this linguistic evolution has not been matched by institutional adaptations ensuring equal rights for non-Italian-speaking inmates. European and national laws require that accused individuals be informed of their rights in a language they understand and be provided with an interpreter (Gazzetta Ufficiale dell'Unione Europea, 2012); yet, communication gaps persist. A survey conducted by Associazione Antigone in 2019 of 98 facilities revealed that only 39 had translated the Charter of Prisoners' Rights into common foreign languages (Paone & Vignali, 2021).

While insufficient attention is given to non-Italian languages, prisons impose their own peculiar vocabulary. To newcomers, this prison-specific language – filled with diminutives like *domandina* or *spesino* – seems paradoxical and inappropriate. These terms infantilise and disempower inmates, isolating them linguistically from the outside world. Instead of fostering reintegration, this practice alienates prisoners from societal norms, further marginalising them upon release (Consolo, 2017). The dignity of individuals is undermined by the terms used to define their prison roles – *scopini*, *scrivani*, and *spesini* –, highlighting their low status and meagre wages (Gallo, 2016). These are not existing Italian words but distorted ones, coined to underline the negative and diminutive representation of the people they are addressed to. In the prison context, *scopini* refers to inmates assigned to cleaning duties, *scrivani* to those responsible for filling out administrative requests, and *spesini* to those who collect purchase orders from fellow prisoners. Although a 2017 Circular from the Department of Prison Administration encouraged abandoning denigrating language, little has changed seven years later (Paone & Vigna-

li, 2021). Within prisons, asymmetrical power dynamics force inmates into infantilising dependency, compelling them to seek permission for trivial tasks. This reinforces submission and hinders personal autonomy, an outcome no adult should endure (Mauri, 2018/2019).

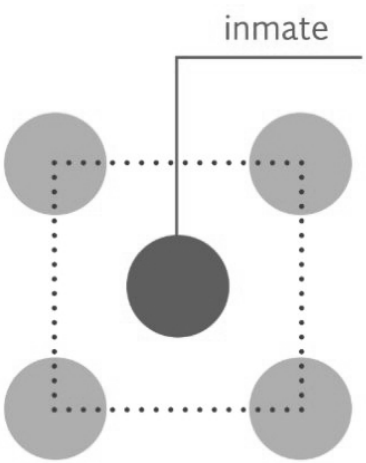
## 9.5 Five Dots Tattoo: The Concept Arises in the Young Adult Department

The concept I decided to develop for my contribution to the Vocabulary draws inspiration from an observation made during a meeting with inmates involved in the SV project. The focus was on a simple tattoo, the five dots tattoo, frequently seen in prisons. The tattoo, likely created with improvised tools and ink, consists of four dots arranged in a square with a fifth dot in the centre. Typically located on the hand between the thumb and forefinger, its meaning varies across cultural contexts.

Some interpretations trace its origins to the 1920s in Great Britain, where it symbolised affiliation with a criminal gang called the Forty Thieves (Hurst, 2019). In Vietnamese culture instead, it represents a circle of friends offering protection (CBSA, 2008), while other meanings include «I alone against the world» (CBSA, 2008), a decorative motif (Alker & Shoemaker, 2022), or a representation of Christ's five wounds in Catholic traditions (Oliveira, 2021).

However, as shared by a guest from the Young Adults department, the tattoo holds a unique prison-related metaphor: the four outer dots symbolise the walls of a cell, while the central dot represents the incarcerated individual (Figure 1). This stark imagery encapsulates the isolating experience of imprisonment, where reintegration into society often seems an abstract or secondary goal.

Given the participatory nature of the Vocabulary project, the tattoo's resonance among inmates makes it a significant point of reflection. While the tattoo's imagery emphasises confinement, this project seeks to reshape its narrative. Instead of viewing prison as a rigidly enclosed space, it encourages imagining the institution as interconnected with the external world, fostering societal awareness of its presence and role (Di Franco, 2018).



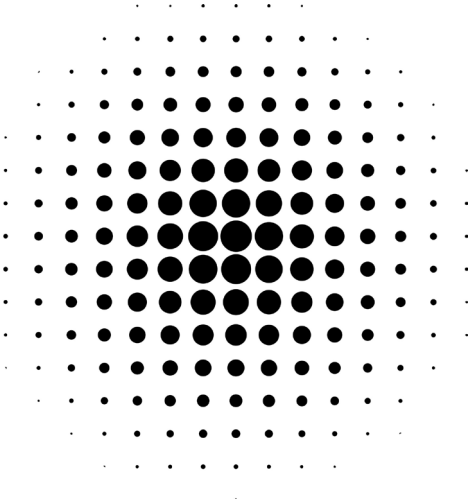



Figure 1.
On the left: Illustration representing the meaning of the five dots tattoo in prison.

Figure 2.
On the right: Graphic adaptation of the five dots tattoo.

This reinterpretation challenges the solitary narrative implied by the tattoo. Firstly, prisoners are rarely alone due to chronic overcrowding – Italy's 2023 prison crowding rate stands at 119% (Miravalle & Scandurra, 2023) – except in solitary confinement. Secondly, incarceration often involves support from professionals, including educators, mediators, psychologists, and teachers, who work to guide inmates toward reintegration. These collaborations underscore the potential for connection and growth, contrasting sharply with the isolation suggested by the tattoo.

The transition from imprisonment to freedom also deserves a reframing: rather than perceiving release as a sudden rupture, it should be seen as a gradual process. This path enables individuals to rebuild their lives step by step, bridging their experiences inside with the possibilities outside.

To reflect these ideas, the tattoo's design has been graphically adapted: instead of five static dots, many dots radiate outward from a central point, diminishing in size until they fade away. This revised symbol suggests a supportive network surrounding the prisoner and a fluid, progressive boundary between the prison and the outside world (Figure 2).

This reinterpretation forms the basis of a visual system characterised by mezzotints and black-and-white contrasts. These textures not only outline Vocabulary words but also evoke the nuanced nature of their meanings: as conversations with inmates progressed, words

revealed to be never fixed but open to different interpretations, embracing complexity. In this visual language, the interplay of black and white symbolises the spectrum of perspectives, rejecting absolutes and embracing ambiguity.

Through this reimagined symbol and its integration into the SV project, the tattoo evolves from a marker of isolation into a representation of connection, transformation, and a more humane vision of incarceration.

## 9.6 San Vittore SV As a Communication Tool

The San Vittore SV project serves as both a research tool and a means to understand and hopefully transform the prison experience. Its core aim is to facilitate dialogue between inmates, staff, and officers, enabling reflections gathered during the project to resonate within the prison and the broader community in a process which fosters transparency, understanding, and eventual systemic improvements.
As part of the project, participants' reflections were compiled into *instant books*, an intermediate publication intended to share insights while awaiting the complete SV's final edition, as the one developed for the *Delft's Love for the Word* festival and its ongoing re-iterations, for instance in the same carceral context of San Vittore. These


**Figure 3.**
**Photo of the front cover of the instant book.**

booklets are designed for practicality, simplicity, and expandability, ensuring that additional content can be incorporated as the project progresses.

Each instant book is structured as an A5 booklet, assembled using standard materials such as photocopied A4 sheets cut in half and bound with metal rings. It includes:

1. Cover page: features the project's title, a brief description, and a QR code linking to the Prison Workshop's Instagram profile (Figure 3).
2. Introductory page: acts as a reading guide, explaining the booklet's creation and purpose.
3. Content pages: each page analyses a specific word, juxtaposing research team insights with anonymized direct quotes from participants (Figure 4).
4. Four concept pages: double-page spreads explore the starting terms – *Responsibility*, *Fun/Boredom*, *Life/Death*, and *Justice/Injustice* – featuring key quotes and thematic word maps (Figure 5).

The instant books dismantle traditional research hierarchies by embedding participant voices in the analysis, fostering empathy and shared understanding. An alphabetical index on the booklet's outer edge hints at the format of a Vocabulary and allows easy navigation and accessibility.

Following this initial phase, the project envisions further iterations of vocabulary making processes – for instance, in the context of the *Delft's Love for the World* festival (see Chapter 11) – while promoting community dialogue and collaboration with experts to create shared insights into incarceration. A dedicated communication strategy for


Figure 4.
Content pages exploring the word *Indifference*.

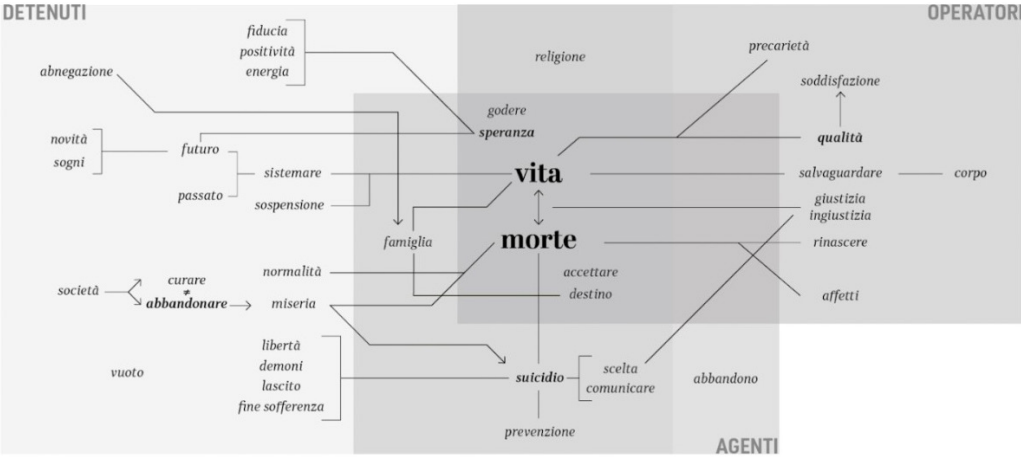



Figure 5.
Thematic word map about life and death.

the Instagram account @laboratoriocarcere supports these goals, offering concise updates that mirror the SV's themes. Posts introduce reflections on specific words, announce events, and promote conferences and discussions. Additionally, a flexible poster design is proposed for placement around the San Vittore district and on prison grounds to further enhance public awareness.

## 9.7 Reflections and Challenges

Feedback from participants – including inmates, officers, and staff – has largely been positive, with many appreciating the open-dialogue format. One inmate remarked: «We were missing this space here», while an officer commented: «For once, someone is listening to us!». These interactions allowed participants to express themselves freely, fostering a sense of being heard. However, some voiced scepticism about the project's tangible outcomes, with one stating: «I've been told that too many times already; I don't believe it anymore». Researchers encountered challenges such as the demanding schedules of prison staff and initial perceptions of the project as overly academic. Managing expectations proved essential, as unmet promises could erode trust.

Despite these obstacles, the SV methodology effectively encouraged dialogue, enabling participants to share candid insights about living and working in San Vittore prison. The project's participatory

approach, integrated within the Off Campus San Vittore initiative, has also served as a valuable tool for Politecnico di Milano, fostering public engagement with academic research. By building empathy and highlighting the shared humanity of participants, the SV has become a catalyst for social innovation. As one participant reflected, the project allows individuals to «get out of the cold guidelines of the prison and build bonds of empathy and friendship, dense with emotion and humanity».

In conclusion, the San Vittore SV is not only a mechanism for documenting prison life but also a catalyst for social innovation, networking, and dialogue. It highlights the profound need to be heard on all sides, fostering relationships that have the potential to redefine perceptions and inspire meaningful change.

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PART 4

# Conclusions

# 10. Situated Vocabularies and the Shifting Role of Designers

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## 10.1 Introduction

I joined the Situated Vocabularies (SV) project in spring 2023, through Off Campus Nolo (OC Nolo), and later participated in the workshops and interviews in Off Campus San Vittore (OC San Vittore). This was part of my internship with the Polimi DESIS Lab, where SV was first developed and prototyped. As the only Arabic-speaking and non-European member of the team, I found myself holding space for criticality – sometimes awkwardly, sometimes urgently. I have always been wary of design for social innovation, particularly when it is presented as universally applicable, and replicable (Jégou & Manzini, 2008). My education in Tunisia taught me to question imported solutions, to avoid the illusion that one method can work across all contexts. But theory alone doesn't prepare you for practice. Sometimes my own criticality became immobilising. How do you move forward when you're afraid of reproducing harm?

> **Design needs to contribute to create conditions that dampen our compulsion to think and act like modern individuals in favor of an ethics of autonomous inter-existence, albeit without negating our capacity to operate in modern worlds at the same time – this, too, might be a question of survival. (Escobar, 2018)**

My design education began in Tunisia with a first lesson in History of Art that set the tone for what was to come. I remember clearly the professor announcing, with a mix of sadness and determination, that although the Arab world was rich in artistic heritage, we would only study European art. That moment imprinted something deep in me: the awareness of how pervasive Eurocentrism was in our curricula, our aesthetics, and our design thinking. It was always evident to me that design, as taught and practiced in Tunisia, was marginalised. Maybe this was due to the practice itself, being a recent practice that embodies colonialism and neocolonialism: the discipline often lacked legitimacy, seen as either a decorative pursuit or a tool of the elite. This is a reality common to many nations in the Arab world, as captured in Danah Abdulla's (2025) *Design Otherwise: Transforming Design Education in the Arab Region*. In her reflections, Abdulla articulates the broader exhaustion with Eurocentric frameworks and the desire for something more grounded, more situated, more plural.

Decoloniality, as theorised by scholars like Escobar, is not just about rejecting the dominant narrative, it is about constructing an *otherwise*. For me it is evident that we should pursue a decolonisation of design, and other practices. And yet, I sometimes hesitate to use the word like Abdulla, I fear it is becoming diluted, a trend, a buzzword. Today, the term populates academic conferences or even militant actions. SV, for me, became more than a methodology. It became a space to rehearse this discomfort. It allowed me to practice design as an act not just of making, but of unmaking, of unlearning and re-learning. It offered a plural, critical, situated lens through which to reimagine what design can do, and what kind of designer I could become. This chapter unfolds within what I have come to understand as an ongoing personal ontological shift in design. I have long advocated for a decolonised design practice, one informed by and responsive to the specific *milieu* in which it operates. Yet I have come to realise

that such a shift is easier to believe in than to embody. I have always been drawn to and critical about the doing good movement in design (social design, design activism, humanitarian design, etc.), initiated by Papanek (1971) in his book *Design for the real world*. This has been triggered and highlighted especially during my education in Tunisia, where a professor would always warn us to not import concepts from other places, to not take ideas as they are. Design in Tunisia is still a relatively recent practice, and in order to look for case studies or best practices, we would always turn outside, to the western world more particularly. In this sense, SV was an opportunity to practice and examine design that wants to be participatory and inclusive, from a critical lens. Such reflection also resonates with Abdulla's (2014) warning that social design, when built on universalizing assumptions, risks reproducing forms of neo-colonialism or imperialism. My intuitive positioning has been validated and fueled by conversations among scholars advocating for a critical approach to participation. In the words of Cleaver (2001), «participation has become an act of faith [...], something we believe in and rarely question». Miessen (2010) argues that in absence of critical interrogation, the term could become more or less meaningless.

## 10.2 Contexts of Implementation: Nolo and San Vittore

SV is deeply contextual. It is not a formula to be applied uniformly across spaces. Rather, it is an invitation to tune in, to the histories, relationships, and tensions that shape a place. In both Nolo and San Vittore, the Off Campus (OC) helped setting the infrastructure for further research activities to develop and take place. In Nolo, thanks to its presence over the years, it has been easy to connect and engage with various local actors and inhabitants of the area. For instance, in OC San Vittore, the research team started engaging with the inmates through storytelling workshops, which made them become familiar with the research team and the scope of activities they engage with. These preparatory activities were vital. They established familiarity and trust, softening the boundaries between researcher and participant.

Evidently, each site demanded a different posture from us. Its theoretical background – rooted in *democracy*, the *power of words* and *situatedness* (Arendt, 1958; Haraway, 2016) – laid as a background for its implementation, and allowed some decision making along the way, to critically examine the design choices. In Nolo, the approach has followed a particular set of methods in order to bring together *voices* and define collective meanings leading to design interventions through the formulation of scenarios and speculations. In San Vittore, the process was more delicate due to the intrinsic context itself, a prison. Conversation unfolded in a structured setting with restricted movement, and yet the process was more open to the nuances between the words, and the multiplicity of points of view. We were aware there of our role as facilitators coming from the outside into a contested, tense situation, and as the process unfolded, it helped deepen our awareness and understanding, pushing us to rethink SV's processes and goals.

The methodology had to shift accordingly. SV reminded us that while we may arrive with a framework, the context could push back. Participation is not something we *enable* or *facilitate*, it is something we negotiate. We are not *giving voice* but rather *opening space* to have similarities and oppositions emerge.

One of the aims was to produce knowledge that could support or enable further decision making or design interventions. The kind of knowledge produced here can be clearly expressed by whoever produces it, discussed by anyone who is interested, applied by other designers, and it must become the starting point that allows other researchers to produce further knowledge (Manzini, 2009). In Nolo's context, the specific knowledge produced here has been shaped through scenarios (Fassi *et al*., 2021) and shared and built-on in the format of podcasts first and then recently seminars (see Chapters 3 and 11).The scenarios were imagining a framework for future applications or interventions, based on the learnings acquired so far. The podcasts and seminars on the other hand were a way to disseminate the knowledge and keep it dynamic, allowing other people to participate in the conversations. In San Vittore instead, the purpose of the knowledge collected and produced was more systemic, allowing us to understand a closed system with its hidden and unspoken rules, and

consequently serving as an infrastructure for further relations and interventions.

Another outcome of SV is not only the vocabulary as a physical object, or the co-design sessions, but all the infrastructure and social relations established all along the way including all of the social interactions – formal or informal – together with the social sphere related to the design activities and the design process. These backstage processes (Dindler & Iversen, 2014) have served as foundational elements to foster trust, form relationships, and understand context-specific dynamics. SV brings these backstage processes to the frontstage, making social relations in specific contexts both a resource as well as a precondition for designing (Mulgan, 2007). These activities underscore that knowledge – both the tacit as well as the explicit one – emerges not only from structured sessions but also from spontaneous and relational exchanges. It would l be too simplifying or even naive to exclude here all the conversations that take place outside of the planned activities, as it is key moments during which we go through the interviews collected, reinterpret it into knowledge, either actionable knowledge (Manzini, 2009), explicitly in Nolo's case, or revealing tacit knowledge that can be holistic, non-verbal, non-linear and intuitive (Akama & Prendiville, 2016) especially in San Vittore's case.

This comes as a consequence of the dis-articulation and re-articulation (Mouffe, 2007) of different points of view illuminating unexpected similarities and revealing possible divergences to co-design a cultural discourse on the neighbourhood developed by the same neighbourhood (Vergani *et al*., 2022). Drawing on Mulgan's insights (2007), it highlights how social interactions – when explicitly addressed – can become transformative.

While we entered both contexts with intentions of *doing good*, we realized the complexities of how contexts react back to us. Involving people means engaging with their stories and relationships, elements we often cannot foresee. Design can construct moments of interaction but has limited control over their experience. These interactions are ultimately constructed by participants, who co-create meaning through co-experiences (Battarbee, 2003; Ivey & Sanders, 2006).

## 10.3 Participation: Friction, Expectation, Vulnerability

Participation is often celebrated in design, but SV highlights its complexities. When participation is externally initiated or misaligned with community priorities, it risks becoming coercive. Participation, especially when unsolicited, risks being imposed. When not initiated by the community, participatory approaches can backfire, leading to resistance or instrumentalization. These dilemmas are not unique to SV but reflect broader concerns in participatory design. This became particularly evident in the way vocabulary resonated, or didn't, with different people. When attempting to engage with a community, usually left unnoticed, for either language barriers or built in assumptions, we are necessarily engaging with discomfort, as each disruption can be uncomfortable and unsettling. In Nolo, this became clear when I attempted to engage with Arabic-speaking mothers, a community often left out of previous design activities. When I was planning the co-design sessions for the work *Change*, the question posed – *What does change mean to you?* – felt irrelevant, even intrusive. I felt uncomfortable asking it, and they seemed uncomfortable answering. But instead of dismissing that discomfort, I tried to stay with it. It taught me that discomfort is data. It signals a misalignment between method and context. This also made me think: who am I to decide if what's being shared is *relevant* or *on-topic*? What is my role here? Am I a mediator? A translator? And perhaps most importantly, am I needed? What happens when a context is closed and inaccessible? Should we push further or rethink our design purposes?

Still, moments of resonance emerged. Some women took the opportunity to speak about inflation, racism, and the shifting perceptions of Arab migrants in Italy. These conversations weren't always neat or aligned with design objectives. But they were real. They reminded me that participation cannot be scripted. Words carry weight, history, politics. In San Vittore, terms like *Justice* and *Hope* revealed layers of trauma and personal injustice. Language in SV is not neutral; it is loaded, political, and shaped by lived realities. This sensitivity to words extends to design itself. Are we asking the right questions? Are we imposing vocabularies and values that do not resonate with the

people we engage? These moments reveal how SV can function as a form of critique, a process not only of co-design but of unlearning, reflection, and renegotiation.

Indeed, the prevalence of participatory design raises important concerns. Is participation always something that communities want? Or are we imposing our own values, cloaked in good intentions? Defining the kind of participation that is appropriate should be a shared process, not predetermined or externally imposed. Even when our motives are inclusive and collaborative, we must remain sensitive to the possibility of rejection or misalignment with the community's real, present needs.

## 10.4 The Designer's Role: A shifting Ontology

SV operates in a mindset and framework different from the problem solving approach. SV as a design practice aims to be a place of inquiry and exchange, of collective definitions of meanings and vocabularies that are situated, context-based. Throughout this, we are embracing the unknown, offering to deal with emotions and personal stories in a space that could be uncomfortable. The SV project exposed the limitations of my own design training. Participatory design – particularly in contested or vulnerable contexts – demands skills we are rarely taught, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, ethical reflexivity. In San Vittore, I often felt unprepared. In Nolo, I felt misplaced. And across both, I had to confront the possibility that participation might not be desired, or that it might be shaped by expectations I could not meet.

This led me to reconsider the figure of the designer, not as an expert, but as a relational being. In SV, we played many roles: researchers, facilitators, community members, mediators, translators. Our role is to enable dialogue, scaffold meaningful connections, and remain open to complexity and critique.

Fassi and Vergani (2022) first called the expert taking part of OC – where SV was experimented – as *offcampuser* (see Chapters 2 and 12). The *offcampuser* can be a professor, a researcher, a student, an

intern, a volunteer. The title gives behind layers of complex roles that are connected, sometimes performed all at once, sometimes only one or two of them. The figure of *offcampuser* is a highly complex and «multi-layered» figure (Grassi, 2023), exercising at the same time the role of university researchers, planners, urban workers, active citizens, inhabitants among inhabitants, mediators and facilitators of change processes. The degree of organizational complexity and the required skills (communication, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, time management, and so on) define a *hybrid* and *layered professional figure* combining different fields of knowledge and practices. Depending on the context, the project, the value created and the priorities set, the *offcampusers* find themselves switching and shifting between different roles, sometimes intentionally, sometimes automatically. In this sense, SV is not neutral. We are positioned, by our background, our language, our institutional affiliations. We cannot pretend otherwise.

Design must move beyond objectivity. It must embrace subjectivity and partiality, not as flaws, but as conditions of practice. We must resist the heroic narrative of the designer as problem solver and embrace the quieter, messier role of listener and connector. As Abdulla (2025) reminds us, design is a socio-technical practice, but also a narrative one. It is about re-narrating our relationships to each other and the world. This orientation calls for what Akama and Light (2018) describe as «situated readiness»: a relational and ethical attentiveness to the context, openness to uncertainty and responsiveness to evolving circumstances. Such readiness reframes design not as mastery but an ongoing negotiation with complex social and material worlds. This makes me wonder, what skill sets do designers need? What would a revised curriculum or design education look like? How can design education provide people with the opportunity to contemplate their environments, to be critically aware of the issues, and in mobilising them to work towards changing these realities (Kassab, 2010)?

In Nolo, the outcomes were visible: scenarios, exhibitions, public dialogues. In San Vittore, the impact was more ambient: small shifts in perception, brief moments of trust, the beginnings of something not yet defined. These are not *solutions*, but generative beginnings, seeds of possibilities. SV does not seek to fix or resolve, it seeks to

open. It offers what Fry (2007) calls a «redirective practice», a way of reorienting design toward inquiry, rather than resolution, requiring designers to acknowledge the material and immaterial consequences of their practices and the implications on the different worlds. It urges us to understand our sense of responsibility to the world, the purpose of design and a sense of ethics.

SV operates in a mindset and framework different from problem-solving approaches. It seeks not quick fixes but a reorientation of meaning-making and collective interpretation. Findeli (2001) states that design as a problem-defining activity «involves an awareness of a number of aspects, such as the origin and the destination of their projects», which SV demonstrated the almost impossibility to foresee the outcomes of the design activities. SV is not about producing vocabularies, it is about co-producing meaning. The Vocabulary tool is designed to surface tensions, not resolve them. It allows for disarticulation and re-articulation of meaning (Mouffe, 2007). It is structured yet porous, anchored yet adaptive. It is, in essence, a relational infrastructure – a space where different ontologies can meet, clash, or coexist (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023).

Designers often enter communities as perceived experts, but SV challenges this positionality. Inspired by Haraway's (1988) concept of *situated knowledge* and Escobar's (2018) *pluriversal design*, SV invites a turn toward vulnerability and partiality. We are always positioned, culturally, socially, institutionally, and our presence shapes what can and cannot be said. In San Vittore, our outsider status was apparent. In Nolo, it was subtler. But in both cases, we had to critically assess our assumptions and motivations. Were we designing with communities or for ourselves? Were we collecting data to validate our frameworks or to genuinely enable new imaginaries? This questioning extended to our internal team. SV brought together designers with varied levels of experience, from interns to professors. These differences in practice, perspective, and power shaped the process, generating internal dialogues and discomfort. These were not failures but moments of learning and growth, pushing us to reimagine collaboration. Through engaging with situated forms of knowledge, especially in complex environments like prisons or multicultural urban neighbourhoods such as Nolo, we begin to unlearn universalist or pa-

triarchal perspectives. Perhaps, SV does not succeed in conventional design terms. It foregrounds complexity, fragility, and discomfort. It asks designers to unlearn what they know, to listen rather than lead, and to design not for transformation but for opening. Emphasizing the value of knowledge and perceptions of marginalized groups, people with migratory backgrounds, inmates, or more-than-human agents, SV helps establish a counter-narrative, resisting stigma and stereotypes. Perhaps, SV was more useful to us, the design team, than to the community itself. Perhaps the true goal was not to create shared vocabularies, but to confront our own assumptions, biases, and narratives, and understand how they shape our practice. The SV can be a turning point, a transitional platform, a design exercise through which we unpack biases, reflect, critique, and move toward a decolonized approach to design.

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# 11. Prototyping Situated Tools: The Role of Situated Vocabularies in Context

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## 11.1 Situating the Research

My engagement with the Situated Vocabularies (SV) project began in 2020, during my Master's thesis in *Interior and Spatial Design* – a research that gradually evolved into an investigation of proximity and public spaces in the Nolo neighborhood. The first word explored by the Nolo SV was, in fact, *Public Space*. I came across the project – I was gently guided into it – at one of its early stages, when the list of words that would build the Vocabulary had already been defined by participants and the overall process was just beginning to take shape. At the time, I considered it mainly as a participatory method: a way to collect insights that could be translated into spatial design proposals, approaching that from a solution-oriented perspective. I followed the early development of the Nolo SV and then, after graduation, stepped away for a while. I returned a few years later thanks to a post-graduate research fellowship that brought me back into the project: the Nolo SV was entering its final phases, and a new opportunity was emerg-

ing within the San Vittore prison. This project and the approach I had learned through it, led me to choose to start my PhD research.

Looking back, I realise how profoundly this experience immersed me in the perspective of situated (Haraway, 1988) research from the very beginning. I began my path in the world of academic research with this project, which definitely shaped my understanding of both research and critical thinking. This became strikingly clear during the first steps of my PhD, where the question of scalability in research emerged as a prerequisite for relevance. But is it possible to scale situated research, aiming for universality? Can a process embedded in a specific social, spatial, and relational fabric ever be replicated without flattening its complexity? These were some of the epistemic short-circuits I encountered as I approached academia for the first time from a grounded, context-based, and partial perspective.

This trajectory has shaped my understanding of participatory design as a relational practice of commitment, care (de la Bellacasa, 2017), and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

In this chapter, I trace how the SV project unfolded in the two Off Campus (OC) contexts, reflecting on the different methods and tools that emerged, the frictions encountered and the possibilities that opened up by attuning to the specificities of each context. My aim here is not to present a replicable model or a copy-paste method, but rather to reflect on how such process should remain open-ended, responsive to context time and contingencies, and even embrace failure – highlighting how designing from the margins requires slowness, relational sensitivity, and the capacity to hold tensions without the ambition of resolving them.

This chapter focuses on how the SV projects unfolded within the two different situated contexts, OC Nolo and OC San Vittore, examining how methodological choices and tools were shaped and reconfigured in response to each context. Through this comparison, I reflect on how SV acted as an agonistic (Mouffe, 2013) device and supported the emergence of plural forms of participation. Reflecting on the dynamics emerging in the Nolo neighborhood and San Vittore prison through the project deepens how participatory situated design approaches can create inclusive frameworks that facilitate dialogue, collaboration and mutual learning.

## 11.2 Situated Vocabularies: Attuning to the Contexts

Both SVs started during the early opening phase of the OCs where they developed, progressively evolving with the OC itself. However, the two contexts present different conditions and relational dynamics that influenced both the methods and the tools used. Nolo SV was launched in 2020, together with the opening of OC Nolo (OCN). It benefited from strong ties with the local community already established in previous years, through a series of design studios and workshops in which students actively involved inhabitants (Fassi & Vergani, 2022; Tassinari *et al*., 2024). Through the OC project and the commitment to a constant physical presence in the neighborhood, actions and initiatives already activated in Nolo have been concretized. In this effort, NSV has been supported by a solid network that facilitated its launch, particularly through the collaboration with *Radio Nolo*, a community-based local radio housed within OCN's spaces.

San Vittore SV was launched in 2023, during the initial phase of OC San Vittore . The research group started to work in the prison a few months before, with the *StoryLab* project, the weekly participatory storytelling workshop held within the Young Adult section (Tassinari *et al*., 2024) (see Chapters 6-10). While in Nolo the OC initiative reactivated an unused space in the municipal market, returning it to the local community by sharing it with associations and local actors, in San Vittore the renovation involved spaces that were already in use, primarily by volunteers. This created a challenging entry point for our presence as researchers. As external, entering a highly regulated institution, we initially struggled to understand the implicit context rules and unspoken hierarchies of prison life. At the same time, the assignment of a space previously used by volunteers initially generated a sense of resistance among some of them. Over time, rather than trying to solve tensions, we gradually began to recognise it as a possibility and this became a condition from which new relational configurations could emerge. Mutual misunderstandings become an occasion for dialogue and unexpected collaborations.

These contextual differences profoundly shaped the SV. This is fundamental to understanding how the research became embedded

in these two contexts, increasingly attuning to them. The process required attention and commitment to caring for relationships, allowing both SV to situate themselves simultaneously with the process of recognizing the role of OC in each context.

The SV projects crystallize the process of participatory action design (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Fassi & Vergani, 2023) by consolidating the approach in the two OCs in giving specific attention to marginalized fringes in the processes. The SV became a «collaborative platform» (Huybrechts *et al*., 2022; Tassinari & Vergani, 2023), an agonistic space in which to dis-articulate and re-articulate (Mouffe, 2013) points of view and co-create a cultural discourse on the contexts. The key purpose there was to amplify the voices of the unrepresented communities, fostering a collective awareness of interconnections between the involved actors to identify areas of common interest (Arendt, 1958; Tassinari & Staszowski, 2020), from which possibly transformative actions can emerge.

The approach involved the creation of specific, tailor-made tools and outputs, able to adapt to the specificities and objectives of each situated context. In Nolo, activities are gradually integrated into an already responsive environment, taking advantage of established relationships and communication tools accessible to a wider audience. In San Vittore, on the other hand, more attention was needed for mediation and listening processes to build trust among local actors. Tools and outputs have been defined and modified to address emerging needs and to contribute to the co-creation of more inclusive dynamics.

## 11.3 Prototyping the Tools

### 11.3.1 The Nolo Situated Vocabulary

As previously mentioned, the choice of the Nolo SV keywords has been carried out through a series of participatory workshops involving some active members of *Radio Nolo*. Participants were asked to identify the most commonly used words in the neighborhood to describe its ongoing transformations, as well as some of the more debated and polarizing terms. After a couple of months, nine keywords were iden-

tified: *Public Space*, *Degradation*, *Common Good*, *Sense of Belonging*, *Memory*, *Change*, *Fun*, *Commitment*, and *Nolo* (Tassinari *et al*., 2023). Each word has been analyzed and explored individually, with a dedicated time of about 3-4 moths.

The exploration of their meanings has been conducted by means of co-design sessions, structured with tools created specifically according to each word, the chosen analysis method, and the target public. Conversely, the meanings have been gathered through interviews, social media calls through OC's Instagram pages and the Nolo Social District Facebook group – a highly active online neighborhood community space, and informal exchanges within the OCN space.

Each word has been explored in depth with representatives of a specific community within the neighborhood, with a focus on engaging the un(der)heard voices of who, for various reasons, struggle to or simply cannot (as in the case of non human voices) be included in traditional participatory processes (Fassi & Vergani, 2023). This approach aimed to equalize those power relations (Greenbaum & Loi, 2012; Luck, 2018) that inevitably take place in a complex relational system like Nolo, shaped by a confluence of overlapping geographies (Fassi *et al*., 2021), where diverse spatial, social and cultural identities coexist (Tassinari *et al*., 2024).

The Nolo SV aimed to include not only human voices, such as communities with migratory backgrounds, the elderly, children, teenagers, and citizens with physical or cognitive impairment, but also more-than-human perspectives, such as those of the plants inhabiting the neighborhood (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023). Each co-design session took place in a different location within the neighborhood, chosen as the optimal place to interact with that specific public. To expand the reflections on certain issues and to integrate the non-human voices, we turned to external experts as representatives (Latour, 2018), engaging the perspectives of linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, writers, artists, environmental activists, botanists, zoologists, geologists, and microbiologists (Tassinari *et al*., 2023).

The variety of methods employed and the plurality of voices involved inevitably produced different project outputs for each word, such as in the case of the activation of a *Collaborative Pact* for the reactivation of a contested place within the neighborhood (Tassinari

& Vergani, 2023). The data collected have been carefully analyzed and clustered over time, resulting in various SV formats. The first format envisioned has been a physical and textual artifact, reminding the aesthetics of a traditional dictionary, consisting of several booklets, each dedicated to a word and containing the different situated meanings.

Afterward, other types of formats have been explored, including a podcast – developed in collaboration with *Radio Nolo* – and an exhibition (see Chapter 3). SV's aim to stimulate reflections and discussions led to the choice of an open format that, in different ways, could reach different publics by encouraging new conversations and perspectives.

### 11.3.2 The San Vittore Situated Vocabulary

In San Vittore, the SV keywords choice has been made by inmates from the Young Adult section, where we had previously established a presence as researchers through the ongoing *StoryLab* project. Through dedicated focus groups, we proposed a pool of words, and participants have been encouraged to either select from these or suggest additional terms. This process evolved into a collective decision-making and negotiation exercise, developed throughout a series of sessions. Initially, words such as *God*, *Mom* and *Dad* were included but together, researchers and participants decided to exclude these three terms. The reason for this design choice has to do with the fact that, while deeply meaningful to the inmates, these words were supposedly less effective in fostering broader discussion on complex issues with other groups involved in the project.

The final selected words are *Life/Death*, *Justice/Injustice*, *Fun/Boredom*, and *Responsibility*. Three out of four of the words are antonyms – a choice aimed at focusing the exploration on what lies in-between opposing concepts rather than reinforcing polarized absolutes. This approach allowed for a deeper investigation of connections, differences, tensions and overlaps in how those concepts are experienced and articulated within the prison context. Throughout the process, additional significant words emerged, some of which recurred across different groups, reinforcing the interconnections.

While in Nolo SV each word had been explored individually over time, in San Vittore SV we chose to investigate all four words simultaneously. This decision stemmed from a reflection on the experience

in Nolo: rather than replicating the structure, we aimed to refine and adapt the Vocabulary tool to the specificity of the prison context. Coming from the Nolo experience, I initially expected the process to unfold with a similar rhythm: one word at a time, gradually opening spaces of dialogue and envisioning new project possibilities. However, San Vittore context – with its instability of participants, the unpredictability of timing and the fragility of the relationships – revealed immediately the need for a different approach. It became clear that the Vocabulary could not be considered as a format to be applied, but as a method to be constantly reimagined in response to the context. The choice to work with all four words simultaneously enabled more transversal dialogues, encouraging participants to explore connections between meanings and to position their narratives in relation to one another. This not only enriched the overall analysis but also revealed deeper interconnections that would have likely remained hidden within a sequential structure.

The process involved representatives from all the communities inhabiting the context: inmates, police officers, educators, sanitary operators, and volunteers. The interviews, which have been the primary method of data collection, took place in a specific location within the prison, carefully chosen as the most suitable place to foster open dialogue with the respective participant groups. Inmates were met in the section's library, operators, and volunteers in the OC San Vittore, while police officers were provided with a dedicated space outside the detention area to avoid internal friction (see Chapters 5-10). This flexible approach encouraged spontaneity in the dialogue, allowing participants to express themselves with their language and modes of communication, providing qualitative data that incorporated individual perspectives. In detail, each session has been organized with small groups (5-10 participants for inmates, 1-3 for operators and police officers) and employed specific prompts. The interviews often unfolded as deep dialogues, revealing intimate and profound reflections as fragments of collective consciousness and shared concerns. Through their words, some participants found an opportunity to be heard and rediscover their own agency within the context (Tassinari *et al*., 2024).

Our role as researchers often spontaneously shifted to that of mediators, representing the perspectives of voices already collected,

thus generating indirect, otherwise impossible dialogues among the participants. This made it possible to give value to individual experiences within the context and, at the same time, to foster shared collective reflections.

All the meanings emerging during the interviews have been collected and clustered to shape a first touchpoint for internal feedback: an instant book (see Chapter 9) collecting the situated meanings aimed at sparking collective discussions. This tool not only aims to document the process but also provides participants with a tangible result, recognizing the importance of each voice.

Building on this internal phase, the San Vittore SV project had the opportunity, in March 2025, to participate at the international festival *For Love of the World. Philosophy, Technology and Art Festival* in Delft (TU Delft, Netherlands), which brings together philosophy, art, science and technology to explore questions of language and power.

For this occasion, we translated the situated meanings collected through interviews in San Vittore prison into a large-scale installation (Figure 1). This event created a space for resonance: for the first time, voices from within the prison were brought into dialogue with an external and international audience. Visitors were invited to contribute with their own thoughts about the San Vittore words through postcards, establishing a first step towards expanding the Vocabulary across contexts and positionalities.


Figure 1.
San Vittore Situated Vocabulary at *For Love of The World. Philosophy, technology and art* festival, March 29, 2025, Theatre de Veste, Delft. Credits: De Schaapjesfabriek.

The San Vittore SV process is still ongoing. Rather than closing the process, the Delft experience marked a threshold: an opening that allowed the voices from inside to circulate outward, and new perspectives to return inward. It has been an attempt to keep the conversation unfinished, to practice restitution without closure, and to imagine how Situated Vocabularies might continue evolving across spaces, times, and publics. Future steps aim to reconnect these dialogues with the city of Milan, potentially through public seminars and collective reflections within San Vittore prison.

The situated meanings that compose the San Vittore SV revealed the matrices of power (Focault, 2015) that shape prison life (see Chapter 7) along with the tensions, ambiguities, and negotiations embedded in everyday experiences. They also reflect the unstable and evolving nature of language – how meaning shifts depending on who speaks, from where, and under what conditions. Within the complexity of San Vittore context – as higly polarized and marked by a hierarchical structure that tends to reinforce pre-existing intersectional power dynamics – many voices often struggle to be heard, including those of prison officers whose concerns in public discourse are often subordinated to those of the inmates, making their involvement particularly challenging. The SV process has to adapt to these complex dynamics to respect the delicate internal balances. However, in some moments, the lack of a deep understanding of its internal tensions risked breaking the collaborative relationships. The project, as well as the OC action, introduces elements of friction, challenging the rigid structures of the prison system and allowing new possibilities to emerge. Challenges encountered and unexpected situations, together with long-term commitment and a constant presence within the context, allow for a gradual shift in the boundaries, creating the condition for the development of new opportunities.

Each event generated meaningful discussions in the physical space, fostering open exchanges of ideas in a positive atmosphere despite the divisive nature of the topics. This series inaugurated the *I giovedì di Off Campus Nolo* (*Off Campus Nolo Thursdays*) format and, following the first four sessions dedicated to the Nolo SV project, it has been extended to propose new interactions and knowledge exchanges between the local community and the living lab. Even

beyond the formal conclusion of the Nolo SV, the project continues to carry its legacy, keeping alive questions, relationships and reflections it generated. It is crucial to return to the neighborhood the reflections emerged, and include dissemination in the process (Fassi *et al*., 2019) to co-create a shared situated discourse capable of addressing issues inevitable within complex contexts, not necessarily providing practical solutions but aiming to open new discussions and generate awareness (Manzini, 2015).

## 11.4 Wrapping Up Nolo and San Vittore Situated Vocabularies: From Data to Outputs

Each conversation that shaped the SVs becomes a design opportunity to envision new shared ways of reimagining society. In Nolo, the diverse contributions collected were developed into scenarios, aimed at triggering transformative actions within the neighborhood. Key concepts emerged during the co-design sessions were crystalized into design-oriented «scenarios» (Jégou & Manzini, 2008). Envisioning future transformative actions is a delicate process. The scenarios must reflect the community while respecting individual voices to encourage a collaborative and shared transformation for a more inclusive, sustainable, innovative, and resilient future (Manzini, 2015). Scenarios emerging in Nolo have been conceived as spatial solutions, services, or events (Fassi *et al*., 2023), as well as regenerative care processes (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tassinari *et al*., 2023). These outputs represented more than an abstract exercise in co-envisioning the future: they became practical tools to stimulate imagination and dialogue, opening conversations about the neighborhood's potential. They have been effective in promoting collaboration among local actors, leading communities in transformative projects and encouraging proactive engagement. These scenarios crystallized inputs and provocations, offering OCN and the local community actionable directions. Some of them gradually became tangible opportunities, materializing into transformative processes and activating coalitions (Tomitsch *et*

*al*., 2021) of situated subjects, enhancing citizens' role in co-design processes (Fassi *et al*., 2023) and contributing to their empowerment (Tassinari *et*. *al*, 2023).

In San Vittore, it became evident that a solution-oriented approach could not fully address the complexity of the contest. Internal issues intersected with social and political challenges, making it clear that the role of the researcher-designer could not be facilitating solutions. As a result, the focus of the SV there shifted toward creating dialogic spaces to explore the political and transformative potential of words (Tassinari & Staszoswki, 2020), aimed to foster collective understanding. Interviews and focus groups conducted became the tool not to envision collective futures but to understand the system and open critical collective reflection on complex issues. This shift in San Vittore approach, deeply influences the way we returned to Nolo where transversal issues, repeatedly emerged during the process, became the starting point for a series of open seminars. Those conversations, rather than being instrumentalized to achieve design outcomes, became spaces for listening and attunement, allowing us to work in the contest in a more «idiotic» (Stengers, 2010) and open way, resisting rushing to closure, slowing down processes and embracing complexity.

The seminars have been designed to turn, once again, the OCN physical space into an agonistic arena that invites different perspectives to interact, compare, and even clash (Figure 2). The series included four events, each dedicated to a specific polarizing issue:


**Figure 2.**
**Off Campus Nolo Thursdays, seminar series – April 11, 2024:** ***Strumenti e modalità della partecipazione. Come impegnarsi per il bene comune* (*Tools and modalities of participation: how to engage for the common good*).**

participation, neighborhood transformation, the use of public space, and multi-species space. For each one, three speakers were invited to enrich the discussion in an open dialogue with local citizens, representing diverse forms of expertise – from academia, civil society, and professional practice. Rather than defining fixed positions, the aim was to create room for disagreement and unexpected resonance. The SV affirmed its open and evolving nature and it remained porous and «idiotic» (Stengers, 2010), capable of unsettling established categories and fostering encounters. The Nolo SV continued, through the seminars events, to shift and be reshaped by the voices it gathered and the tension it exposed.

## 11.5 Processes and Results: Critical Considerations

The two processes are closely interconnected; they developed in two different and physically separate contexts, but the development of one has built on the other and vice versa. Having worked across both contexts, I gradually became a hinge between the two processes, trying to carry learnings, doubts, and intuitions from one into the other. Working between Nolo and San Vittore meant acknowledging similarities but also their deep asymmetries, not only in terms of access and relational structures, but also in the kind of expectations and agency the project could afford to the different communities involved. While in Nolo the SV could grow in continuity with an open, trust-based setting – not without obstacles – in San Vittore it was even more evident the need to slow down, to adapt, to work within the constraints of a system that is structured to resist dialogue. The Vocabulary, in this sense, became a practice of attention, in which the process must be constantly questioned and renegotiated through experience.

Both the experiences of Nolo SV and San Vittore SV have led to several critical reflections on the methodology adopted and the role of the project in the two situated contexts. Since the beginning, SV has proved to be an effective platform for understanding both spatial and social features of the context, from the perspective of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Our daily presence on-site, together with

the participatory approach implemented through SV, allowed for building relationships of trust with the local community. This proves pivotal in addressing the complexity of marginal contexts, often marked by fragmented and fallacious planning (Cognetti, 2023). Besides, SV can also be considered a strategy for attuning to a new context, integrating into already existing dynamics, and co-defining the role and objectives with local stakeholders. Understanding and respecting the concerns embedded in the context while identifying matters of exclusion and polarization among community members has been fundamental to engaging silent and silenced voices and ontologically diverse publics, consolidating in this direction a more inclusive participatory approach.

Aimed at empowering local communities, the process highlighted the potential of SV as a tool to facilitate dialogue among voices that otherwise would not have the opportunity to confront certain complex issues. In Nolo, this resulted in open new spaces for public debate, evidenced for instance by social media engagement and the seminar format. In San Vittore, *impossible dialogues* emerged, such as those between inmates and prison officers, facilitated by researchers acting as mediators during interviews. Those conversations are deemed impossible because, despite daily sharing the same physical space and institutional dynamics, such exchanges rarerly happens spontaneously. Structural power asymmetries, shaped by the oppressor/oppressed roles (Freire, 2000), inhibit the possibility of horizontal and open communication.

In both cases, SVs proved very effective in revealing shared meanings and bringing together points of view into a collective and agonistic discourse. This way, it opened spaces for shared understanding, generating a common language without forcing consensus. This process created and materialized political spaces to foster discourse and action in a dissensual and yet generative way (Mouffe, 2013). It transformed the physical spaces where the process took place into a physical *agorà* (Arendt, 1958; Huybrechts *et al*., 2018), a platform to identify, question and contest shared interests. This occurred within the OCs and spontaneously extended beyond their physical boundaries, creating diffused *agorà*s across the territory. By aiming to include

unheard and marginalized voices, SV successfully succeeded to establish close and proximity relationships with local communities.

Although Nolo SV adopted a more interventionist approach – aiming to enact processes of tangible transformation throughout the neighbourhood – while San Vittore SV rather focused on the immateriality of generating impossible dialogues re-humanizing all actors involved beyond a dialectics of oppressor/oppressed (Freire, 2000), what emerged strongly in both cases is that SV serves as a means to support the emergence of meaningful relationships. More than the project outcome, the process of (co)designing a SV is key to its impact. Its potential lies in the same dialogue it fosters: understanding each other, finding a common language, and building ongoing and trusting relationships. This enables researchers to attune to the context but also enables local communities involved to finally be heard and recognized. It performs an infrastructuring work (Björgvinsson *et al*., 2012; Karasti, 2014; Luck, 2018) that gains its effectiveness through a slow, time-rooted process, evolving alongside the context itself. The SV process facilitated collaborations and alliances based on mutual trust, both between the context and the research team as well as among participants themselves. It strategically identified connections, laying the groundwork for social innovation processes (Mulgan *et al*., 2007). By activating situated and shared forms of knowledge, without the ambition to design or control the transformative opportunity that may emerge over time, it enabled us to explore a different sense of designing, alongside with its (cosmo)political implications.

## 11.6 Conclusion

The SV project is still ongoing and does not aim for a fixed conclusion. Rather, it calls for openings. What has emerged across the two contexts and especially through recent experiences of open conversation in the Nolo seminar series and in the San Vittore exhibition in Delft, is not a method to be formalized or replicated, but a constellation of situated practices that are inherently open and deeply relational. Both Vocabularies are embedded in the places where they emerged and are shaped by those who inhabit them, by their frictions,

temporalities and dynamics of power. SV is not a tool that can be extracted, scaled and applied elsewhere, and is not even about solving problems. For me, it has been a way of learning to «stay with the trouble» (Haraway, 2016) – embracing conflicts, uncertainty, failure and discomfort not as obstacles but as conditions of possibilities. SV invites an idiotic (Stengers, 2010) approach, understood as open-ended, that does not push for instrumental outcomes and instead asks us to slow down. Slowing down means adapting the research temporalities to the rhythm of the context, taking time to listen and to attune in order to be able to envision transformations that start from the relationship. SV recognises the partiality of the researcher's positions, resists extractive logics and the pressure to generalize. It is a choral process, shaped by multiple voices, each carrying a different positionality, language and power.

Working in-between the two contexts made me more aware of my own positionality, both as a researcher and a practitioner. It meant reciprocally bringing from one context to another not only experiences, intrinsically connecting both vocabularies, but also doubts and relational responsibilities. It meant embracing the friction between institutional demands and the context's fragility, but also learning to work at different speeds: slowing down when necessary, holding spaces for care, and accepting that sometimes results are not visible, or even required. SV is not a prototype of participatory design research, it's an invitation to rethink the politics and intentions of designing itself: not as a search for solution, but a commitment to remain entangled, accountable and responsive to context whe inhabit with our practices and then, eventually, lead towards co-created and collectively shared solutions. SV calls for a radical reimagination of design participatory research as a relational and reciprocal practice – a political act that can open space for new forms of situated knowledge to emerge.

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# 12. Off Campus: A Multi-level Platform for Responsible Research

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## 12.1 Universities in the City

Universities have long been regarded as centers of knowledge production-learning and innovation testing, but their role now extends beyond the traditional academic scope. Increasingly, they are recognized as «civic universities» (Goddard, 2018), key players in the relationship with the city in which they are based. As «civic universities», institutions like Politecnico di Milano are reflecting on their role in the cities they inhabit, focusing on their local impact (Goddard & Vallance, 2014). Among other locally-embedded institutions, universities play a role of *anchor institution* generating externalities and relationships that can anchor wider activity within the locality. These include intelligence sharing, community work and widening participation schemes for local students. The anchor metaphor well represents universities' grounding in their home city where they have investments in buildings and facilities as well as a strong historical identification with the place (Harris & Holley, 2016).

Based on the *anchor* metaphor some authors proposed to critically explore how universities can play engaged roles in their areas, introducing the concept of *just anchors*, which are institutions with strategies to achieve local social, economic and epistemic justice goals through collaboration in networks of other anchors and knowledge co-production with citizens (O'Farrell *et al*., 2022). Describing *anchor institutions*, universities contribute positively to their communities by sharing knowledge, engaging in local initiatives, and providing programs to enhance access for local students. Their resilience to institutional failure further enhances their capacity as stable, enduring contributors to local dynamics.

This broader function includes addressing community challenges, promoting civic engagement, and advancing sustainable development. A notable example of this approach is the Off Campus (OC) project, an initiative promoted by Politecnico di Milano aimed at strengthening the university's presence in the city of Milan, focusing on addressing social challenges, fostering openness and proximity to territories and communities, and embracing social responsibility. It aims to extend the university's influence beyond its physical campus by creating a dynamic interface between academia and the surrounding community. Through activities located within local neighbourhoods, the project seeks to establish a mutually beneficial relationship where both the university and the community gain from shared strengths and insights. Social responsibility within universities involves a commitment to addressing community needs and contributing to the public good. This can take various forms, including research targeting societal issues, educational programs fostering civic engagement, and partnerships that support local communities. By leveraging their resources, expertise, and innovation, universities can tackle pressing challenges such as inequality, environmental sustainability, and urban development. With their vast resources and innovative capacity, universities are uniquely positioned to drive positive change, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and real-world solutions. This dual role positions them as both knowledge producers and active participants in shaping inclusive, resilient urban futures. Their involvement often brings attention to overlooked

issues, mobilizes resources, and fosters collaborations that address the complex dynamics of urban life.

In recent years, universities have placed greater emphasis on engaging with marginalized neighbourhoods. This engagement is described through various terms such as «university social responsibility» (Chile *et al*., 2015), the «third mission» (Laredo, 2007), and «research outreach», all emphasizing the university's role in empowering citizens to tackle urban challenges. This approach moves beyond traditional views that prioritize technical expertise, acknowledging the importance of local knowledge and lived experiences (Benneworth, 2013).

The OC initiative embodies this approach, bridging academic research with local communities. By embedding activities in neighbourhoods, the project ensures that research remains academically robust and directly relevant to the communities it serves.

## 12.2 Off Campus Program: Four Working Fields

OC is intended as a network of local *living labs* based in the peripheral, often marginalised areas of the city (Aernouts *et al*., 2023), where students and university staff can develop responsible research and innovative learning initiatives as well as live projects that support local operators and communities in the transformation of their own living contexts. Moreover, the initiative aims to encourage local communities to lead or be engaged in educational and cultural activities together with university staff and students.

OC operates through the establishment and management of four physical spaces located in different neighbourhoods across the city, where the university engages in processes of localized social innovation. OC spaces serve as hubs of proximity, employing a situated approach, an immersive presence in the contexts, and a commitment to sustained university action over time. These spaces function as open laboratories for co-research and co-design, closely tied to the territories and involving a broad network of actors. They foster project platforms and collaborations with external organizations and networks,

including public institutions, foundations, businesses, other universities, schools, and local entities, adopting a long-term perspective. The activities involve faculty members, researchers, students, and local stakeholders and are organized around four key areas:

- Responsible research focused on inclusive knowledge co-production processes, particularly in marginalized contexts. OC spaces are designed as open, public places where knowledge produced by the university is made more visible, accessible, and usable.
- Innovative teaching centered on situated, immersive learning and action-learning approaches, where working in real-world contexts becomes a means of developing new competencies.
- Co-design activities with local organizations to implement interventions that positively impact communities and directly support local actors and groups.
- Service activation for citizens and the promotion of accessible cultural and educational offerings aimed at local communities.

Regarding responsible research the OC initiative represents a flagship project for the university in terms of knowledge valorization, particularly within the thematic areas of public goods production and management, public engagement, and sustainability, including environmental inclusion and reducing inequalities. The initiative is based on a vision of a university that is closer and more integrated with the territories, where this immersive dimension enables innovative forms of university-community collaboration in knowledge production, fostering reciprocity and mutual learning. The physical presence of OC spaces in neighbourhoods is a unique feature of the initiative, embodying proximity as a commitment to understanding and listening more closely to places, social realities, and their needs.

Teaching is based on the development of new abilities, fostering active and critical intelligence able to face the complexity of urban events and to promote a new civil growth. For disciplines *in the field* of applied sciences like Architecture, Design and Planning, direct interaction with practices is a fundamental tool; it allows the development of reflective knowledge, a necessary component of a good technical competence (Balducci & Bertolini, 2007). Moreover, the development of in the field projects offers the opportunity to deal with critical urban

learning (Cognetti & De Carli, 2024) preparing students to better understand the design process and contexts in which they operate. Students are exposed to the complexities of urban life, gaining skills that extend beyond the classroom and prepare them for meaningful professional and civic engagement.

This matters in the perspective of creating new areas of expertise and new competent profiles, and being able to use contemporary technical competences, soft skills and sensitivity to act effectively in the complexity of the city. These skills are complementary to the competences acquired in the standard courses and become increasingly necessary to face complex and multiple urban needs (Gronsky & Pigg, 2000). That means to foster both the professional growth and civil growth – political, cultural, social – of students as experts and citizens of the world.

Through the OC programme the University gains opportunities to experiment with and innovate its methods and tools in both research and teaching. At the same time, it reflects on its social utility and its contribution to social change. The activities and projects developed over the years have brought about profound transformations in the diverse OC action contexts. These include tangible changes resulting from territorial and spatial development projects, as well as intangible social, cultural, and organizational transformations, such as building knowledge and skills, reducing inequalities, and increasing access to rights. Thanks to the variety of stakeholders interacting with OC spaces, these hubs are multi-level learning environments where different forms of knowledge converge. They promote an education model rooted in people, their abilities and awareness, and their roles in society. Besides, they are contexts for fostering citizenship education, with a particular focus on younger generations and on training more responsible and aware professionals and citizens.

## 12.3 In the Neighbourhoods

Under the *umbrella* of Polisocial Programme (Cognetti *et al*., 2018), the OC program was launched in 2018 with an initial phase of designing the initiative, followed by the start of four distinct spaces across

the city through an incremental process of opening. Today OC is one of the priority actions outlined in the *2023–2025 Strategic Plan* and the *Sustainability Strategic Plan* of the Politecnico di Milano, a document that defines the University's development policies. These plans identify strengthening the relationship with the territory and its institutions through the OC program as a key objective of social responsibility.

The first space, opened in 2019, is located in San Siro, a large public housing neighborhood characterized by cultural diversity (50% of residents are of foreign origin) and significant social vulnerabilities, including degraded housing conditions. The area is home to many active local organizations working to improve residents' quality of life. The opening of OC San Siro involved revitalizing a street-level unit within a publicly owned building as part of a collaboration agreement with *ALER Milano* (the Lombardy Regional Housing Agency) and the Lombardy Region. The space is open five days a week.

The second space, opened in September 2020, is situated within a municipal market in the eastern part of the city, between the Nolo (North of Loreto) neighborhood and Via Padova. This area is currently undergoing urban transformations, positioning OC as a privileged observatory for urban change, addressing paradigmatic challenges of contemporary cities, such as the potential transition of inclusive spaces into exclusive ones. The opening of OC Nolo involved the redesign and renovation by the university of two long-unused stalls within the municipal market under a collaboration agreement with the Municipality of Milan. The space is open four days a week.

The third space, opened in October 2022, is located within the Casa Circondariale Francesco Di Cataldo (San Vittore Prison) in Milan and is designed as a tool for generating new knowledge about spaces of incarceration and fostering reciprocal connections between prisons and the city. The opening of OC San Vittore was made possible through a framework agreement between the Department of Penitentiary Administration – Regional Office for Lombardy, the National Ombudsman for the Rights of Persons Deprived of Liberty, and Politecnico di Milano –, alongside a collaboration agreement with the Francesco Di Cataldo. The initiative involved repurposing two cells within the first detention wing, where the OC now operates.

The fourth space, opened at the end of 2022, is located at the boundary between the city's urban fabric and the South Agricultural Park, in Cascina Nosedo. This *fringe* area features significant urban presences and serves as a site for various projects exploring the relationship between the city and the peri-urban context from a perspective of circularity and resource recycling. The space's opening was made possible through a collaboration agreement with the Municipality of Milan. OC Cascina Nosedo operates within a publicly owned section of the farmhouse and is open four days a week.

These four diverse territorial contexts are characterized by a high degree of complexity. They are multi-problematic and marginalized areas where the presence of OC spaces reflects a commitment to co-constructing research and initiatives with communities and territories. The goal is to address structural disparities, tackle inequalities, and identify tangible opportunities for change. The needs and demands emerging from these territories are varied and multifaceted (access to material goods and services; lack of educational and cultural opportunities; demand for quality urban spaces; and innovation in intervention policies, among others). These challenges constitute the primary social issues tackled through the OC program (Fassi & Vergani, 2024).

The program involves multidisciplinary teams within the University; 8 Departments of Politecnico di Milano are actively engaged in various roles, including over 80 faculty members, researchers, research fellows, and doctoral students from diverse disciplines (Architecture, Design, Engineering). More than 2,000 students have participated in various activities through coursework, thesis projects, and internships since the establishment of the program. Over the years, numerous partnerships and collaborations of varying types have been established, reflecting the degree of involvement of different stakeholders in the program's activities and initiatives. The program serves as a key platform for collaboration with other universities, such as Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca and Università Bocconi Milano and is founded on a broad alliance with the third sector and businesses. Collaboration agreements have been signed with organizations and associations.

## 12.4 Designing with Communities

The principle of designing *with* communities rather than for them is central to the OC. The connector with as opposed to for denotes a focus on engagements where residents and actors play an active role. This participatory paradigm is characterised by reciprocity and co-production, it emphasizes involving citizens in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices and needs are integral to the outcomes (Fassi & Manzini, 2021). By fostering strong relationships with local actors – including residents, businesses, and community organizations –, the OC program demonstrates the transformative potential of collaborative design. By shifting from top-down to bottom-up processes, OC empowers marginalized groups and fosters inclusivity. This approach enriches design outcomes, making them more reflective of the community's aspirations and challenges. The collaborative model not only empowers local actors but also enhances the educational experience of students, who gain real-world insights and apply their knowledge in impactful ways.

The activities undertaken reveal a strong thematic characterization, shaped by the specific contexts and challenges of each OC site, and provide a basis for advancing knowledge and practice in several key areas. One prominent focus is on spatial and service design, where efforts center on enhancing proximity, slow mobility, and the quality of public space. Researchers explore how design can create stronger connections between people, places, and services, fostering more accessible and inclusive urban environments. Slow mobility, such as walking and cycling, emerges as a crucial dimension in reducing environmental impact and improving the liveability of neighbourhoods. Public spaces are reimagined and revitalized as inclusive, participatory environments that support diverse forms of social interaction and shared use.

Another significant area of investigation relates to reuse and circularity, which addresses sustainability and the circular economy with a focus on food systems and resource cycles. The program adopts a more-than-human approach, considering the roles of non-human actors like plants, animals, and ecosystems in designing sustainable practices. Water cycle management, the reuse of materials, and

the development of circular models are central to these activities, emphasizing the minimization of waste and the promotion of resource efficiency. Additionally, the program seeks to strengthen local food systems through urban agriculture and by recovering unsold or expired food from central stores and the central fruit and vegetable market of the Municipality of Milan.

A third thematic strand is the exploration of living on the margins, which addresses inequalities, marginalization, and access to urban resources. This area of research focuses on understanding and overcoming barriers that prevent equitable participation and accessibility in urban life. It considers the role of housing and social justice policies in fostering community well-being and examines how environmental resources and local landscapes can be preserved and enhanced through sustainable practices. The relationship between marginal contexts and the city is another critical aspect, where projects aim to reduce stigmatization and explore pathways for a just integration. The program also engages with marginalized communities, working to address systemic challenges and empower vulnerable populations by fostering resilience and inclusion.

Through these activities, the OC program demonstrates how research and education can be closely integrated with the needs of local communities, enabling the university to act as a catalyst for proximity innovation and systemic change. This context-sensitive, multidisciplinary approach not only generates new knowledge but also creates meaningful opportunities for mutual learning and co-creation, illustrating the potential for universities to transform their roles in society.

## 12.5 Hybrid Roles, Responsible Knowledge Creation and Criticalities

At the core of the OC initiative stands the *offcampuser* (Fassi & Vergani, 2022, 2023), a unique figure who bridges academic research, territorial engagement, and local project development (see Chapter 2). *Offcampusers* bring their expertise to marginalized urban areas, acting as mediators between community needs and local administra-

tive policies. They are not only researchers and designers but they play different roles, also facilitators, activists, and attentive listeners dedicated to addressing social dynamics.

*Offcampuser* is a hybrid figure: in addition to fulfilling the role of researcher, and thus the bearer of technical and scientific knowledge, and the role of mediator and facilitator of processes and projects, he/she/they assumes the role of inhabitant among the inhabitants, participating first-hand in the dynamics, difficulties and course of events in the community life. This innovative and atypical role poses major challenges to the university. OC offers insights and experiments in this direction, for example on: questioning hierarchies through the horizontal exchange of knowledge and skills among peers; acting responsibly in space as a form of research and engagement with the city; *making space* for discomfort, going beyond established ways of thinking and embracing diversity as a value; cultivating the collective dimension of small everyday actions as different forms of deep learning that derive from direct action (De Carli & Caistor-Arendar, 2021).

A distinctive feature of OC is its ability to co-produce situated and responsible knowledge (Cognetti, 2021, 2023). This platform facilitates continuous exchange between the university's diverse competencies while extending its reach beyond a single institution. By fostering collaboration among multiple universities in Milan, OC amplifies its impact, creating synergies through shared projects and activities that address the unique needs of different contexts. This trans-institutional approach enriches the initiative's knowledge base and extends its sphere of influence. The program is further defined by its commitment to action-research, a dynamic and hands-on methodology that allows for experimentation and cross-disciplinary contamination. This approach empowers offcampusers to imagine and implement innovative ways of fostering dialogue, initiating projects, and communicating with local communities in accessible, non-academic terms.

The OC experience is particularly valuable because of its situated nature, its horizontal and multidisciplinary structures, and its sensitivity to the needs of marginalized communities. By maintaining a constant presence in the areas they serve, *offcampusers* develop a deep understanding of local realities, enabling them to assess impacts in

the short term and adapt projects to strengthen outcomes over time. The multidisciplinary composition of OC teams fosters rich interactions among individuals with diverse expertise, facilitating continuous learning and expanding research networks. The horizontal role of the *offcampuser* also accelerates the development of essential soft skills, such as communication, collaboration, and adaptability. Furthermore, the sensitivity required to operate in urban contexts deeply affected by marginalization ensures that *offcampusers* build trust with local communities. They maintain a consistent presence, cultivating relationships of care and developing a critical perspective that challenges market-driven logics.

## 12.6 Conclusions

The OC program exemplifies a bold and transformative approach to university engagement, positioning academic institutions as active participants in fostering equitable and inclusive urban development. By establishing localized spaces for co-research, co-design, and community interaction, OC demonstrates the potential of situated practices to address complex urban challenges while strengthening ties between academia and society.

At the heart of this model lies a hybrid and multidisciplinary approach, embodied by the *offcampuser* figure, who bridges research, facilitation, and local engagement. This innovative role not only enhances the university's capacity to generate context-sensitive and responsible knowledge but also positions it as a catalyst for systemic change and proximity innovation. The four interrelated working fields of OC – responsible research, innovative teaching, co-design with local organizations, and service activation for citizens – form a cohesive framework for creating tangible and intangible transformations. These efforts contribute to social inclusion, reduce inequalities, and support sustainable practices, while also offering students unique learning opportunities that prepare them for civic and professional roles. However, despite its strengths, the OC model faces significant challenges. The diversity of institutions, associations, and citizens involved often complicates project management, as organizational

needs are delayed by varying levels of decision-making among stakeholders. The slow pace of academic processes sometimes clashes with the dynamic demands of fieldwork, creating inefficiencies and a sense of fragmentation.

Additionally, the hybrid nature of OC work complicates career progression and recognition within academic structures, while limited access to consistent funding perpetuates a sense of precariousness, especially given the need to maintain a physical presence in OC spaces. Despite these hurdles, OC remains a valuable model for how universities can act as catalysts for social innovation, bridging the gap between theory and practice in the pursuit of more equitable and inclusive urban futures.

The challenges and successes of OC underscore the importance of collaborative design and action-research methodologies in fostering trust, reciprocity, and mutual learning within diverse urban contexts. By embracing participatory paradigms and leveraging trans-institutional partnerships, the program extends its impact beyond academia, addressing pressing urban issues and cultivating resilient, inclusive, and sustainable futures. Ultimately, OC highlights the need for universities to rethink their missions, aligning research and teaching practices with social responsibility to contribute meaningfully to the public good. This model challenges conventional academic paradigms by demonstrating how universities can become active agents in shaping urban ecosystems, advancing justice, and promoting a vision of urban life that is both inclusive and sustainable.

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tory storytelling workshop, and has contributed to action-research projects such as *ReverseLab*, *Methexis*, and *Vocabolario San Vittore*. As a practitioner, she realizes installations and interactive works with the collective Tokonoma, and she experiments with live cinema with the Film-Live Association. She is a lecturer at Civica Scuola di Cinema Luchino Visconti in Multimedia Design and Interactive Storytelling.

**Maria Maramotti:** PhD candidate in *Design* at Politecnico di Milano. Her research investigates the relationship between power dynamics and participatory processes in marginal contexts, with a focus on prison as a paradigmatic case of a forced institutional environment. Building on critical and feminist design theories, she explores how power relations act as a situated, relational, and political practice. She is part of Polimi DESIS Lab and collaborates with the interdepartmental *Laboratorio Carcere*.

**Elettra Panepinto:** Graduated in *Communication Design* from the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano. She is especially interested in the social applications of design and the world of research. Since June 2023, she has worked in Off Campus San Vittore, participating in research activities with the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano. Within this context, she is particularly involved in *StoryLab*, a permanent participatory storytelling workshop for detainees, and in *Vocabolario di San Vittore*, an infrastructuring activity aimed to build a shared situated vocabulary. This experience informed her research thesis, focusing on humanitarian communication in the context of incarceration, surrounding the representation of detainees as subjects of humanitarian attention and delving into the themes of biopolitics and agency.

**Francesca Piredda:** PhD, member of *Imagis Lab* and collaborator of the DESIS International Network. Her research and publications address brand communication, audiovisual language, participatory video, digital media and storytelling. Committed to the transformative power of stories, she leads projects and courses on community TV, social media, content strategy, worldbuilding and storytelling for both brand communication and social inclusion. Her work explores ac-

tion-research and participatory design through narrative-driven and co-design methods. In 2017 she received the *XXV ADI Compasso d'Oro Award*. She is Scientific Director of the Masters in *Brand Communication*, *Design the Digital Strategy*, and *Art Direction & Copywriting* at POLI.design, Politecnico di Milano.

**Virginia Tassinari:** Her research explores how philosophy can enrich contemporary design discourse. After many years as lecturer and researcher at Politecnico di Milano (IT) and LUCA School of Arts (BE), she is now Assistant Professor at TU Delft (NL). She is also visiting scholar at Parsons, The New School (USA), visiting lecturer at Université de Nîmes (FR), and design researcher at Pantopicon (BE). A member of the DESIS Network's International Coordination Committee, she co-initiated the *DESIS Philosophy Talks* with Ezio Manzini. Her recent books include *Designing in Dark Times* (Bloomsbury, 2020, winner of *Compasso d'Oro 2022*) and *Reframing the Politics of Design* (Public Space, 2022). Her next publication, *(Designing) Beyond the Modern* (Bloomsbury), with co-author Eduardo Staszowski, is forthcoming in 2026.

**Francesco Vergani:** PhD in *Design*, he is a Post-Doc Research Fellow at the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, within the Polimi DESIS Lab, part of the international DESIS Network. His research focuses on spatial and service design for social innovation, exploring how situated human and more-than-human communities shape public spaces. Since 2024, he has been Adjunct Professor at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, where he teaches *multispecies* and *more-than-human Design*, fostering participatory approaches inclusive of other lifeforms. In 2022, he joined Parsons School of Design (NYC) as visiting scholar and teaching assistant. He also co-coordinates Off Campus Nolo, a neighbourhood living lab within the Polisocial programme of Politecnico di Milano.

The book explores the *Situated Vocabulary*, a participatory design research project aimed at co-designing vocabularies of shared meanings to feed conversations between situated communities and prompt transformative actions for their future.
Drawing inspiration from the vocabulary artifact and rooted in Hannah Arendt's definition of democracy, the project explores the transformative power of words to highlight both convergences and potential divergences, and the possible nuances of meanings in-between. Its objective is to disarticulate and potentially rearticulate different perspectives within a specific context, collaboratively gathering meanings from the diverse set of actors and stakeholders residing in it. The project presented in the book is framed in two different experimentations within the city of Milan and developed in the urban living labs of Off Campus. Off Campus, an initiative by Politecnico di Milano, aims to make the university's presence in the city more tangible, fostering researchers' responsibility, attentiveness to social challenges, and closeness to the community. By exploring case studies in the Nolo neighborhood and San Vittore prison (Milan, Italy), the book questions how designing for participation can embrace other worldviews, attempting to identify the radical interdependence deeply connecting them.

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