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PARTICIPATORY REACTIVATION OF PUBLIC SPACE: BRIDGING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INNOVATIVE LEARNING. A CASE STUDY IN MILAN'S NOLO NEIGHBORHOOD

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Abstract

This paper reflects on how the transformative potential of public spaces can catalyze collaboration between universities and peripheral contexts. Starting from the role of reactivated disused urban spaces towards fostering social innovation in neighborhood as well as new forms of experimental learning for university students, it presents the ongoing case study of an interstitial space regenerated by a research team to become a meeting ground between students and the local community.

Off Campus Nolo (OCN) is one of four Off Campus spaces of the Politecnico di Milano, an initiative promoted by the Social Responsibility Projects Service that aims to bring teaching and research into direct contact with marginalized territories. OCN is in the Nolo neighborhood of Milan, a dynamic, responsive, and contradictory area, and is part of its Municipal covered Market. There we developed "OUT. Il Cortile Sociale" (OUT): an interstitial space reactivated through a collaborative effort between the university, the municipality administration and local associations. Despite its transformative potential, the Municipal Market courtyard was a disused space, serving as a garbage collection area. In 2023 OCN and the Polimi DESIS Lab research team supported its regeneration and reactivation, guiding three local associations in signing a "Patto di Collaborazione" (Collaboration Pact) with the Municipality to take care of the space over time. After a light spatial renovation, OUT was inaugurated and local associations, in synergy with OCN, took charge of animating it with social, artistic, and cultural activities. Today OUT is an accessible public space with a flexible layout capable of hosting various types of activities and local events.

The paper presents the methodology applied in the courtyard reactivation and the actors involved, subsequently delving into the activities that generated interactions between Politecnico di Milano students and the local community. In particular, the study focuses on three key activities conducted in this space, which differ in the level of informal involvement of students and local actors:

- 1 The "Designing in a Multispecies World" Design Course (Politecnico di Milano, School of Design, A.Y. 2023-2024): the courtyard, together with OCN, became the headquarter for multidisciplinary students exploring the neighborhood and presenting to local community their projects.
- 2 The "Ab-OUT green" event during Milano Green Week 2023: a co-design and participatory setup action for greenery within the courtyard that involved neighborhood residents to foster a sense of stewardship and responsibility towards the courtyard, with a formative moment that involved residents, Politecnico students, and local schools.
- 3 A meeting with the "Service Design Drink Milan" community, where the courtyard became an opportunity to weave new relationships by exchanging experiences and knowledge.

Analyzing these activities, the paper highlights the added value of such hybrid experiences in accessible public spaces, which connect academic learning with community engagement. Additionally, the role of OCN in conducting responsible research and innovative teaching, returning a social public space to the local community and experimenting with new methods of engagement and learning for students, is discussed. The findings suggest that spaces like OUT. Il Cortile Sociale can enhance educational outcomes, promote inclusivity and strengthen university-community ties.

Keywords: University-community collaboration, public spaces reactivation, participatory design process, experiential learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

Acting on public space is the first fundamental step in promoting social cohesion and generating transformative social innovation [1]. In recent years, it has become clear that unused or abandoned interstitial spaces offer a valuable opportunity to develop participatory processes and trigger

collaboration in regenerating space. Thus, helping to form new relationships and new forms of community that are activated around the same “common good” [2; 3; 4] with a shared vision, taking care of it over time. Participatory practices in the regeneration of urban spaces are increasingly widespread and Participatory Design methodologies are now widely recognized and used in urban transformation processes by public administrations that, aware of the potential role of neighborhood communities, invite citizens to develop, co-produce, and co-design new actions and initiatives.

In this context, universities can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between bottom-up and systemic city-planning practices, strengthening their connections with territories, contributing to activate transformative potential and fostering social innovation in neighborhoods. These processes can become experimental learning opportunities for university students, enriching their educational and training experience through the “action learning” approach [5], a process in which students, teachers, and local partners share learning experiences while working on projects for a specific community [6], considering cities and territories not only as a field for applying knowledge but also as an environment for co-producing knowledge. The creation of live teaching environments and the facilitation of multi-stakeholder discussions form the foundation of action learning activities, fostering horizontal learning spaces for both students and educators [6].

This paper reflects on the ongoing process of regenerating an interstitial public space in a neighborhood located in the first belt outside the city center of Milan (Italy), activated through the intervention of Off Campus Nolo. Off Campus (OC) is an initiative of Politecnico di Milano, promoted and coordinated by the Innovation and Social Responsibility Service. OCs are living labs active as ecosystems of proximity and inclusion in four peripheral areas within the city of Milan. Within the OCs, responsible research projects are conducted in marginalized contexts, co-design practices are experimented for the development of actions, micro-projects, urban transformation, and services for the neighborhoods and innovative educational projects are promoted in which students participate in the research as an integral part of it. The OCs function as enabling platforms [7] for empowering local communities [8], rooted in local needs and promoting mutual learning.

Off Campus Nolo (OCN) is situated in the Municipal Market at Viale Monza 54, in a vibrant and dynamic neighborhood characterized by spontaneous transformations due to the presence of a very active social fabric and a “creative community” [9]. At OCN, the Polimi DESIS Lab research group from the Design Department promotes action-research activities, co-design with local entities and residents, and innovative teaching. OCN encourage situated knowledge [10] research and participatory processes through a horizontal approach and the empowerment of the local community [11], encouraging citizens to take an active role in transformations. Since its opening, OCN has worked to foster the neighborhood’s proactive social fabric, hosting an observatory on issues related to space reactivation, workshops and educational laboratories, open lectures, seminars, exhibitions, and public events [12]. OCN explores issues of proximity, fair access to food, and the circular economy to make the neighborhood more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, focusing on regenerating urban spaces and activating and strengthening community relationships that can generate new initiatives.

From these premises, the “OUT. Il Cortile Sociale” (OUT) project was born, a process of regenerating and reactivating a disused space in the Municipal Market at Viale Monza 54 (Milan), a historic building where OCN itself is also located. The site involved in this process is the market’s outdoor courtyard, an open space that had been used for years only as storage and waste by the shop owners, despite its significant potential.

2 METHODOLOGY

The regeneration of a public space, both from a physical and social point of view, first requires the activation of a social conversation that can produce new shared visions [13] to foster new forms of collaboration and achieve results that have value for each and for every one. In this process, universities and local actors can become facilitators of such dialogue, contributing to building alliances that generate transformative social innovation.

The first step in the process leading to the regeneration and activation of the interstitial space in the courtyard at Viale Monza 54 was to establish “coalitions” [14] of actors located around it and to take advantage of those administrative tools that enhance the role of citizens in participatory approaches [12]. This process can be divided into three main phases where the role of OCN was decisive: the creation of an active local network, the physical regeneration of the space and the shared activities planning. This methodological framework follows the principles of mutual learning, creating opportunities

where university students, researchers and local actors collaborated in the co-design and regeneration of the space.

The three key activities conducted in the courtyard space, which will be analyzed in the paper, represent different levels of engagement of students and local actors and constituted three moments of interaction between the university and the local community, building a bridge between responsible research and innovative education.

2.1 Activating a local network: the Collaboration Pact

The process's first phase consisted of creating a network of local associations interested in regenerating the courtyard space as a common good. This was consolidated through the signing of a Collaboration Pact (*Patto di Collaborazione*) with the Municipality of Milan. The Collaboration Pact is a tool for active citizen participation and for the shared care of common goods, provided by the public administration. Through the Pact, the signatories commit to reactivating, overseeing, and taking care of a particular common good, whether tangible or intangible. The Pact, open to individual citizens or associations, allows the signatories to carry out initiatives and projects that would normally require longer bureaucratic processes to be approved in public spaces. The signatories "adopt" the public space for a limited period (ranging from 6 months to 3 years), co-designing activities and a shared vision for the space to transform it into an active common good [15].

For the courtyard reactivation in Viale Monza 54, it was first necessary to create a network of associations interested in considering this space as a common good, thus activating a "coalition." The the Collaboration Pact was signed by three associations - *ilVespaio ETS*, *Associazione Genitori Ciresola ETS*, and *MEMO54* - with the Municipality of Milan. The role of the OCN team was fundamental in this process, following the associations throughout the envisioning and consolidation phases, from first interactions with the Municipality to the signing of the Pact on January 15, 2023 [16].

2.2 Spatial regeneration: minimal interventions and use flexibility

OCN also contributed to the spatial regeneration of the courtyard, which was previously unusable and used as a storage and waste area by the vendors. The renovation work was financially supported by *Fondazione di Comunità* through the "Bando57" and by the *Fondo De Albertis*. The spatial project for OUT. Il Cortile Sociale involved minimal restructuring of the outdoor area of the market, as it is a historic asset, making the 70 square meters of the courtyard accessible and available to host 35-40 people. An area was created for the shop owners to solve its primary function as a storage and waste facility, while the remaining space was designed to be reconfigurable and usable in various scenarios: workshops, lectures, exhibitions or simply as an area for market customers. A curricular internship was activated during this phase, allowing an Interior and Spatial Design student from the Politecnico di Milano's School of Design to co-design the space together with associations and the Municipality, providing the opportunity for field research. OUT. Il Cortile Sociale was inaugurated on April 20, 2023.

2.3 Activating the space: co-designing a shared program

The regeneration of the space was not limited to its physical renovation. The OCN team, in collaboration with the signatories, co-designed a program of activities and events to daily reactivate the space, offering the neighborhood a variety of free and open-access activities. Specifically, during the first year of operation, the following activities were scheduled:

- Educational activities for children from local schools, promoted by *Associazione Genitori Ciresola ETS* and *ilVespaio ETS*: after-school programs and coding workshops, guided tours of the market and educational activities exploring themes related to the circular economy and food waste.
- Activities for university students, promoted by OCN: educational courses, thematic discussions and events, co-construction and co-design workshops.
- Cultural and artistic activities organized by *MEMO54* for the local community: cultural events, musical and entertainment performances, events related to local productions and food, included in the city of Milan's event calendar.

2.4 Experimenting with new interaction forms between the university and the local community

As part of the activities proposed by OCN and coordinated by Polimi Desis Lab, OUT provided a unique opportunity to experiment with new forms of interaction and exchange between the university and the neighborhood. The courtyard, as an accessible and informal public space, facilitated opportunities for encounters between the local community, associations, and university students, embodying the values of mutual learning and horizontality that characterize OC's approach. In particular, this paper analyzes three activities:

- The *"Designing in a Multispecies World"* Design Course (Politecnico di Milano, School of Design, A.Y. 2023-2024). This elective course, by Professor Francesco Vergani, explored how design should take into account other forms of multispecies life forms, considering them as stakeholders in the design process and envisioning future scenarios that involve collaboration between plants and humans. The course, which brought together multidisciplinary students with diverse backgrounds, experimented with a hybrid teaching approach, using OUT's spaces as a classroom and allowing students to directly explore the area subject to their projects. At the end of the semester, the courtyard became an exhibition space for the students' project boards and a meeting place with neighborhood residents, who were invited to participate in the final project presentations.



Figure 1. Final student *"Designing in a Multispecies World"* Course.

- The "Ab-OUT green". A co-design and participatory setup action for greenery within the courtyard, organized during Milano Green Week 2023, involving neighborhood residents to foster a sense of belonging and responsibility towards the courtyard. The event also included an educational moment on the topic of hydroponic inaugurations, led by *T12 Lab*, a local association, which inaugurated a hydroponic cultivation as part of the *"La terra che non c'è"* [17] project within OUT. The event was open and free, and in addition to local schools and residents, some students from the Politecnico also participated.



Figure 2. Inauguration of the hydroponic installation during the event “Ab-OUT green”.

- A meeting with the “Service Design Drinks Milan” (SDD) community. External event coordinated by SDD and hosted within OUT. The OCN team had the opportunity to present the ongoing projects and objectives of OCN to a community of interest linked by the discipline of service design [18]. On this occasion, the courtyard became an opportunity to weave new relationships by exchanging knowledge with professionals and students.



Figure 3. Meeting with the Service Design Drinks Milan community.

3 RESULTS

The three analyzed activities engaged different audiences with varying levels of formality. The first activity, aimed at course students, nonetheless facilitated interaction with the local community, stimulating public interest in the course themes. The second activity focused more on the local audience by directly involving neighborhood associations, yet it also spontaneously engaged some students. A significant example is a student who, after participating in the activity, continued collaborating with OCN in the following months through a curricular internship, which allowed to observe the ongoing processes from within. The third activity was directed towards a highly specific audience around the themes of

service design, thus encountering a mixed audience of students and professionals, providing a platform for disseminating the OUT project and facilitating dialogue among various involved competencies.

Participatory processes are delicate, requiring constant monitoring and continuous adjustments. Dynamics must be renegotiated over time, and collaborations need to be actively maintained. In this regeneration and activation context, OCN's role has been crucial, not only as a facilitator of space regeneration and local community activation but also as mediator between the associations and the Municipality of Milan. However, although OCN supported local associations throughout the process, it did not diminish their ability to autonomously manage complex dynamics. Continuous, albeit minimal, energy from OCN was necessary to advance activities, presiding the space, program the courtyard's animation, and facilitate ongoing meetings and discussions among the associations. One of the most challenging aspects was managing internal conflicts among market shop owners regarding the use of the courtyard space: it was necessary to renegotiate some management dynamics and foster the development of agonistic discussions where all stakeholders could democratically express their opinions. These moments of confrontation, while challenging, provided learning opportunities for students, interns, and researchers involved.

The regeneration of OUT. Il Cortile Sociale has contributed to strengthening collaborations between OCN, local associations, and the Municipality, returning an accessible space to the community. OUT serves as a "link" between the university and the neighborhood, not only creating new opportunities for shared design but also bridging academic skills to a community level and exploring new forms of spreading knowledge.

This case study aims to demonstrate that the regeneration of underutilized public spaces can become a moment of exchange and enrichment between universities and communities through careful and continuous activity planning.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The regenerated courtyard space has been useful in experimenting with innovative teaching practices that facilitate exchange between universities and local communities. These experiences can lead students to a greater awareness of their societal role, offering them the opportunity to observe and participate in concrete processes of regeneration and activation, and to understand their dynamics and challenges.

The analysis of the three activities outlined in the previous section highlights the positive impact of the OUT project, providing added value for various stakeholders, particularly:

- For the local community: the regenerated public space has been returned to the local community, becoming an accessible place that stimulates new initiatives and opportunities for participation. This has strengthened existing bonds and created new points of contact between residents and local associations.
- For the students: participation in the activities or greater involvement through internships has allowed students to develop skills beyond those provided in academia. Direct contact with real, complex, and marginalized contexts fosters a sense of responsibility regarding their societal role, opens new research perspectives, and provides access to an already active local network. This approach makes it possible to work in practical and situated environments, rather than in the classroom, promoting experiential learning rooted in the needs of the territory.
- For the university and OCN: the OUT project has strengthened the relationship between the university and the community, promoting a collaborative approach both with local associations involved in the Collaboration Pact and with new entities interested in the space. In addition to attracting the attention of local festivals and new associations, the project has generated interest among students in territorial research, providing an open and informal experimentation space. The open and informal nature of the OUT space compared to OCN has made it accessible to those who might perceive the university as distant or exclusive, allowing for greater community engagement. This informality in the use of the space can eventually foster new forms of collaboration, mutual-learning, and spark new collaborative networks.

The reflections on the ongoing OUT. Il Cortile Sociale project presented here highlight that, in this case, the regeneration of underutilized public spaces not only contributes to urban environmental improvement but also acts as a bridge between academic institutions and communities, promoting a model of co-creation and shared learning.

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