

Situated Vocabularies

A SITUATED AND AGONISTIC CONVERSATIONAL PLATFORM

Edited by

Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda, and Francesco Vergani

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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 agnostic 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 months.

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 reimaged 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 (Foucault, 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 highly 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 crystallized 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 & Staszowski, 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 rarely 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 *agoràs* 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 (Björqvins-son *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 where we inhabit with our practices and then, eventually, lead towards co-created and collectively shared solutions. SV calls for a radical reimagining 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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