

# Situated Vocabularies

A SITUATED AND AGONISTIC CONVERSATIONAL PLATFORM

Edited by

Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda, and Francesco Vergani



# Design International series

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PART 2

# Nolo Situating Vocabulary



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

**Ambra Borin**

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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, grassroots 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 n° 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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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.