

A black and white photograph of a tiled roof. A sharp shadow of a vertical object is cast across the roof from the left side, creating a strong contrast between the lit and shaded areas. The tiles are arranged in a regular grid pattern.

UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING!

PROJECTS, PRACTICES, POLICIES

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VALENTINA NOVAK, FRANCESCA SERRAZANETTI,
CONSTANCE WOLFGRING



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Edited by
Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Valentina Novak,
Francesca Serrazanetti, Constanze Wolfgring

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CONSTANZE WOLFGRING, MASSIMO BRICOCOLI*

HOUSING GOVERNANCE AND THE
LEGACIES OF A COMPANY TOWN
San Donato Milanese beyond ENI

San Donato Milanese, bordering Milan to the southeast, is a city of 33,000 inhabitants with a history strongly linked to the establishment of the general headquarters of ENI, the Italian National Hydrocarbons Authority, in 1953. It is one of the most remarkable Italian examples of a company town, which gave rise to a distinctive architectural, urban, and sociocultural heritage, and specific configurations in terms of housing. Today, as part of the metropolitan area of Milan and connected to it by subway, San Donato faces increasing housing affordability pressures (Bricocoli & Peverini 2024), including rising prices and rents, the expansion of a luxury residential segment, a rise in short-term rentals and a growing hesitance of private landlords to rent out their properties on a long-term basis, as well as the outmigration of young populations to more affordable municipalities. Together, these developments pose a wide range of housing-related challenges for the public administration to address.

Against this backdrop, a collaborative process was launched in 2024 by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU) of Politecnico di Milano with the city administration of San Donato Milanese, within the framework of the national research project UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing. Drawing on an earlier collaboration that began in 2014 and led to the drafting of the city's Guiding Document for Housing Policies (*Documento Direttore per le Politiche Abitative*) (Bricocoli *et al.* 2021) and contributions to its Territorial Governance Plan (PGT, *Piano di Governo del Territorio*), adopted in 2022, the renewed engagement with the city government also aimed to advance insights into how housing-related challenges have evolved over the past decade.

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The primary objective of the recent collaboration is to reflect on current housing-related challenges, resources, and emerging perspectives on how contemporary housing needs are articulated in the city. Specifically, the exchange sought to address the following questions: What are the current challenges and available resources in San Donato Milanese's housing landscape and related policymaking? How are these connected to the city's legacy as a company town? And what opportunities for innovation exist in addressing these challenges and leveraging available resources? The process, conducted between 2024 and 2025, entailed closed-door meetings with representatives of multiple municipal departments – encompassing both technical-operational and political roles –, a workshop engaging a broader group of stakeholders, including third-sector actors, and in-depth interviews with key figures from the public administration, experts, and actors from the realms of ENI. Overall, the encounters involved around 50 persons, with public administration personnel including, among others, representatives from the Department of Community Development, the Housing Office, the Urban Planning Department, Social Services, the Office for Youth Policies, and the Office of Productive Development. Interviews were conducted with ten individuals.

Building on this process, the paper examines the duality of ENI's influence on San Donato – while historically, ENI contributed to the city's growth and to the provision of a consistent housing stock, in recent years its presence implies ambivalent dynamics, as it has transformed into a financialised market actor whose assets, formerly part of a public infrastructure, have transformed into private real estate holdings subject to valorisation. Our research seeks to understand how local urban and housing policies can cope with such a strong corporate legacy in a post-company-town context, and what implications it has for urban governance today. The paper thus firstly introduces the history of San Donato Milanese as a company town and ENI's impact on the city's housing situation, revealing both challenges and resources; secondly, it lays out what has emerged from fieldwork and interviews regarding contemporary housing issues, how these are informed by the city's history, and how they

are being addressed by the current administration; and thirdly, it discusses what the case of San Donato may contribute to broader debates on housing affordability, the legacies of company towns, and urban governance.

San Donato Milanese and its legacies as a company town

For me, there is something that fundamentally characterises San Donato Milanese: You cannot avoid starting from its history. And this needs to be acknowledged. As a result, there is still a bit of veneration of the past. But that past is gone, and it's not coming back (Tassinari 2025).

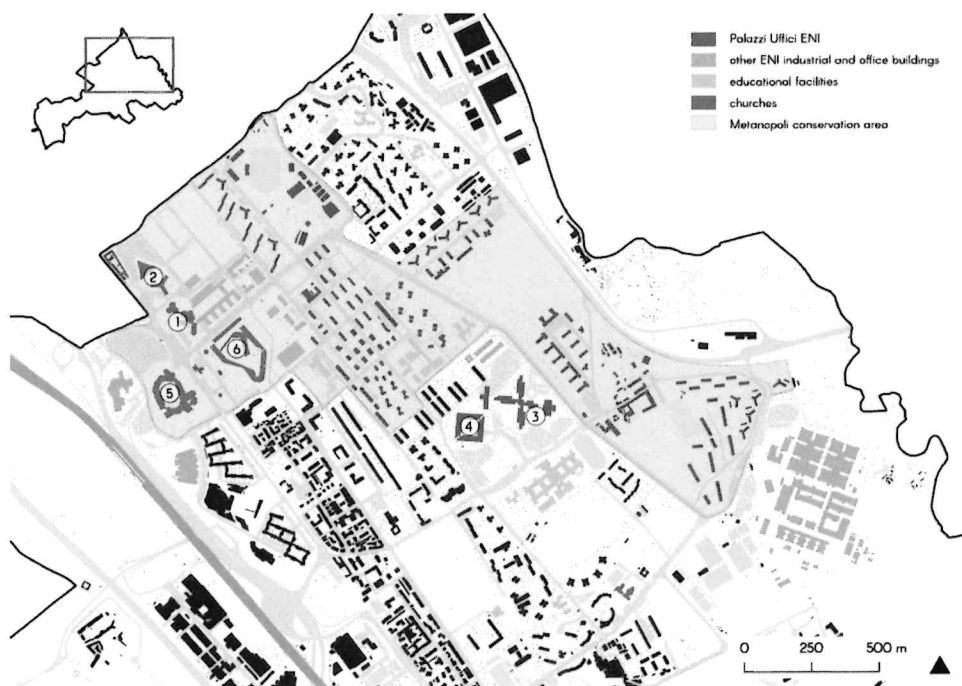


Figure 1. The physical imprint of ENI in San Donato Milanese (by authors).

San Donato Milanese, bordering Milan to the southeast, is inextricably linked to ENI, the Italian National Hydrocarbons Authority, founded in 1953. With the creation of ENI's facilities,

including the company's administrative centre, offices and productive infrastructure, and housing, the then-small town – home to 2,700 inhabitants in 1951 – underwent a process of rapid transformation, growing tenfold to around 27,000 residents by 1971. The choice of site acquired by Enrico Mattei – paternalist and visionary founder and president of ENI – followed strategic and logistical considerations, as the area was traversed by SNAM²'s first methane pipeline and bordering via Emilia, a major thoroughfare linking San Donato with Milan in the north and Emilia-Romagna in the south (Deschermeier 2008). The establishment of ENI within the municipality of San Donato and its rapid expansion throughout the 1950s and 1960s consolidated its role as both an industrial and residential centre.

To give you a sense of the person: he wanted to do things quickly, with an aim of the common good. But he was a corsair. Someone who had his own rules, who knew exactly what he wanted, and had a way of pursuing it... at times borderline illegal, certainly by today's standards. [...] This reflects, to some extent, the postwar spirit overall – because above all, there was a need to build, to move beyond the destruction, despair, and pain of the war (Anselmi 2025).

Mattei had drawn inspiration from the experience of Adriano Olivetti in Ivrea³ – in terms of the ambition to pursue a comprehensive vision of a city in which work, housing, and welfare would be interwoven to enhance both productivity and quality of life. As regards the built form, “Metanopoli” (or “villaggio ENI”), as the new and growing part of the city soon came to be known, did not follow a predetermined design programme

2 The SNAM (*Società Nazionale Metanodotti*) is an Italian company established in 1941 as part of the AGIP (*Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli*), a state-owned company founded in 1926 – both predate the establishment of ENI in 1953. ENI merged with AGIP and other entities to form a national energy conglomerate, and SNAM became part of ENI's corporate structure.

3 An industrial town in Piemonte developed from the 1930s onwards, which is an essential point of reference in the history of Italian urban planning, architecture, and industry (Savoldi 2007; Peroni 2016).

but was incrementally developed in response to emerging needs and contingent circumstances (Sermisoni 1995). One of the first completed buildings – the church of Santa Barbara, the saint of miners – designed by Mario Bacciocchi and inaugurated in 1955, was intended as a focal point at the intersection of the residential sphere (to the east) and the sphere of labour (to the west) (Anselmi 2024), where two years later the first ENI headquarters (the “Primo Palazzo Uffici”) was constructed. Metanopoli subsequently expanded significantly, incorporating various housing types, differentiated by employee profiles and ranks (executives, middle management, and workers), work facilities – ranging from industrial sites to office complexes – and services such as kindergartens, schools, churches, sport facilities and green areas. To complement the provision of material welfare, Mattei moreover initiated the construction of a holiday village in Borca di Cadore (Veneto), which ENI workers could access free of charge. As several interviewees pointed out, San Donato Milanese was divided between “the world of ENI” – which encompassed the majority of the population, granting a series of privileges – and “the world of non-ENI”, excluding those not employed by the company:

There was definitely an invisible wall, distinguishing the population in their access to services: for example, the park’s sports facilities were for employees and their families only. So, a part of the population has always experienced this “being excluded” from the magical, golden world of ENI (Tassinari 2025).

There was, however, also a material (albeit subtle) dimension to this divide, as Giorgio Bertolotti, former long-term employee in the city’s planning department (2025) explains:

Metanopoli was somewhat a city within the city. Because it was in its entirety owned by ENI, including the streets, which were usually open and accessible. But what tends to be forgotten is that there were gates – some of them still exist – dividing Metanopoli from the rest. I have personally never seen them closed, but some inhabitants of the “villaggio” told me that in fact they had been closed at times, when opening hours were scheduled.



Figure 2. The *Pagoda* in front of the *Primo Palazzo Uffici* (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 3. The *Ex Laboratori di Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnica* in front of the *Primo Palazzo Uffici* (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 4. The *Terzo Palazzo Uffici* (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 5. The *Quarto Palazzo Uffici* (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 6. Housing in Metanopoli (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 7. Housing in Metanopoli (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 8. Housing in Metanopoli (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 9. Housing in Metanopoli (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 10. Centro sportivo Enrico Mattei (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).



Figure 11. Centro sportivo Enrico Mattei (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Despite Mattei's untimely death in a plane crash in 1962, his role in shaping both the physical and social landscape of San Donato was foundational and continues to resonate in the city's identity to this day. ENI's presence – and specifically the decisions taken during Mattei's leadership – left a lasting imprint on the city's socioeconomic fabric, urban layout, and housing conditions. Today privatised, ENI still maintains its headquarters in San Donato. The privatisation process itself, initiated in 1992 and culminating in the company's stock market entry in 1995, brought further transformations with significant repercussions for the city and its inhabitants. The legacies of these trajectories include:

A population of privileged renters transformed into privileged owners

During the privatisation process, most of ENI's physical assets were sold off, including both the residential and tertiary building stock. Dwellings were offered to sitting tenants for sale at prices well below market value, providing privileged access to homeownership for many workers and the opportunity to accumulate substantial wealth based on real estate ownership. In cases where tenants opted not to purchase their dwellings, others could step in, resulting in a situation where several formerly working-class households in San Donato today own one or more dwellings previously owned by ENI, several of which have become small-scale landlords (Bricocoli *et al.* 2021). Today, the rate of owner-occupation in San Donato reaches 82.2%, exceeding both the national (76.7%) and the Milanese share (70%) (ISTAT 2021). Another specificity is the disproportionate presence of large dwellings, with around 25% of the housing stock exceeding 120 square meters, as a survey conducted by DASTU (2020) revealed. A concentration of dwellings over 200 square meters is found in Metanopoli, with many of these being inhabited by single, often elderly residents. This suggests a significant share of underoccupied, oversized dwellings, largely constructed during the 1960s and 1970s (DASTU 2020). San Donato is demographically ageing at a fast

pace, with an elderly index⁴ of 195.8, surpassing both the Milanese (187.9) and the national value (193.1). Differently from Milan, where the index declined over the past twenty years (from 202.8 in 2004), San Donato experienced the opposite trend, having increased substantially from 119.3 in the same year. This situation constitutes both a challenge and a potential opportunity. On the one hand, the city faces a strongly ageing population without institutional facilities to support their needs – there is no elderly care home in San Donato, signifying that care must be organised at home. On the other hand, the current underoccupation of large dwellings might become a catalyst for experimenting innovative housing models based on sharing and intergenerational living – approaches that might benefit younger people, who are currently priced out of the market or unable to access housing in the first place.

The transition from “Mamma ENI” to big corporate governance

ENI’s privatisation and stock market listing – despite the Italian state retaining significant shares, with 30% through the Cassa Depositi e Prestiti and 2% through the Ministry of Economy and Finance (ENI 2025) – marked a clear cultural shift in the company’s philosophy. It evolved from a paternalistic model of corporate welfare (“As people here used to say: Mamma ENI will take care of it”) (Tassinari 2025) – personified by its founding figure – to one oriented around private ownership and market efficiency. These changes subjected ENI to market valuation, with its worth now driven by investor confidence rather than political or personal priorities. Broader structural changes in the economy – including periods of crisis and austerity politics – have additionally contributed to ENI’s evolution, as well as shifting work paradigms and habits, including the rise of remote work and digitalisation, accelerated by the pandemic. In combination, these transformations also resulted in a changed relationship between

4 The ageing index is a demographic indicator measuring the degree of ageing in a population, calculated as the ratio between the population aged 65 and over and the population under 15 years of age.

ENI and its workforce, as both current and past employees underline: “Those who have been working at ENI for decades often say: ‘it is not the ENI that it used to be.’” (E. 2025). Sandro Maniga, president of the San Donato fraction of the Associazione dei Pionieri e Veterani dell’ENI⁵, stresses (2025):

We, the “old ones” who have experienced and been part of ENI in its earlier years, try to pass on the values that Mattei had promoted to the young employees, but it’s difficult. They are not very interested in this. Times have changed, and of course conditions have also changed. They haven’t lived through that company; they haven’t experienced the atmosphere of those times.

Concrete efforts to keep Mattei’s memory alive, specifically addressing younger generations, include countrywide collaborations with schools through the *Progetto Mattei*:

Every year, we agree on a small project with ENI’s external relations department and choose a topic related to energy – last year it was artificial intelligence, this year it’s alternative energy sources, and the students then develop projects on that topic. [...] The best projects are awarded, with plaques for the winning school and medals for teachers who put in an effort (Sonson 2025).

“Vacant giants” awaiting transformation

As part of the privatisation, not only housing was sold to tenants, but also the tertiary building stock – including five large office complexes, the “Palazzi Uffici ENI” – to a real estate asset management company. Two of these (the “Terzo” and “Quarto”) were dismissed in 2023 and 2024. As outlined in the PGT, they are designated for transformation into a mixed-use neighbourhood with around 700 new housing units, including both market

5 The APVE (*Associazione dei Pionieri e Veterani dell’ENI*) is a voluntary organisation established under the patronage of ENI in 2007. It brings together former and current employees, organising socio-cultural and educational activities.

and social housing, public services, and a museum centered on the theme of ecology. The remaining three office buildings – the “Primo”, “Secondo”, and “Quinto” – are expected to be decommissioned in upcoming years and repurposed for non-residential mixed uses. Possible functions may include a mix of offices, laboratories, small-scale production, and educational activities, following a precedent set by another repurposed ENI property, which formerly hosted the company’s scientific and technical research laboratories (Carminati 2025; Sermisoni 1995). Meanwhile, construction on the “Sesto” – a new headquarters which will eventually accommodate all remaining ENI staff – is underway. The transformation and repurposing of the five “vacant giants” is both an important challenge and a complex task, for various reasons. One concerns constraints imposed by heritage conservation regulations: as outlined in the PGT, specific protection measures apply not only to the architectural heritage of the buildings, but also to the wider *Metanopoli* neighbourhood, which was granted landscape conservation status in 2003 following ENI’s privatisation, to prevent alterations. More substantially, however, a challenge lies in identifying uses that both respond to the city’s needs and are at the same time economically viable and thus attractive to potential developers. Given that the alternative to transformation – ongoing abandonment – is a worst-case scenario for the city, the process demands a delicate balance and negotiation between the owners and the municipality in finding mutually beneficial solutions. As Francesca Micheli, deputy mayor for housing and social policies, stresses (2025):

ENI shaped the lives of thousands of families and generations have experienced and spent time in those buildings. There is a deep affection for them. [...] I am well aware that they are energy-intensive and not sustainable by today’s standards. But that building [note: the “Quinto”], if you think about it twenty years from now, still holds up because of how it was designed. The Terzo and the Quarto as well. Maybe they have unusual forms, but it is as if they were eternal – they are part of the city’s history. So, there is a strong collective sense of responsibility; the citizens are asking and expecting from us to find solutions to give those buildings a new life.

The paradox of non-public public spaces

One of San Donato's main qualities, mentioned by several interlocutors, is its abundance of green areas, shaped by garden city principles that inspired Mattei. In Metanopoli, a dense presence of trees is combined with a remarkable integration of housing and open space, reflected in the absence of fencing. Several interviewees, however, noted a contradiction between the abundance of green and public space and the lack of areas for social use, gathering, and spontaneous encounter, as well as the absence of an urban core – a result of the lack of comprehensive public planning, which has led to a fragmented and non-hierarchical organisation of open spaces. Alessandro Carminati (2025), director of the city's planning department, explains that

the reason for this is that the development of the city was entirely based on conventions between the public and private actors. There were never any public projects for centers, public spaces, or squares – all the “public” areas resulted from agreements, from subdivision plans that included spaces designated for public use, but they fundamentally remained private property. What we are trying to do now is the opposite – to shift gears and create spaces that are fully publicly owned.

Housing-related challenges and resources in San Donato Milanese today

The interviews revealed a broad and diversified set of housing-related dynamics in San Donato Milanese, some of which are rooted in the city's specific legacy as a company town, while others have emerged against the backdrop of more recent discussions about prospective urban developments, including plans for an expansion of the subway, the construction of a new stadium for the AC Milan soccer club, and overall growing housing price dynamics across the metropolitan area. Some of the key issues that have emerged shall be outlined in the following.

Increasing prices, rents, and market selectivity

Housing costs in San Donato Milanese have increased significantly over the past decade, as several interviewees underlined:

10 years ago, rents were already high, but not as they are today. Today, it is as if San Donato has become a small piece of a wealthy Milanese neighbourhood (Micheli 2025).

This is reflected by data which show a clear upward trend in purchase prices and even more so in rents, with dynamics accelerating after the pandemic. As of 2025, asked prices for residential property have increased by 21% since 2017, and rents by 31% (immobiliare.it 2025). Looking at how dynamics have changed in the OMI (*Osservatorio del Mercato Immobiliare*) database of the Italian Revenue Agency (*Agenzia delle Entrate*) from 2017 to 2024, this evolution is largely confirmed, showing a particularly pronounced increase in the case of rental contracts, both for dwellings in “normal” qualitative conditions (where rents have increased by between 23 and 45%⁶) and in “very good” conditions (where rents have grown by between 41 and 62%). This highlights a concern raised by several interlocutors: the recent dominance of luxury residential developments, largely inaccessible to low- and middle-income groups.

Vacancies in the private stock and micro-financialisation

10.6% (around 1,700 dwellings) of the city’s housing stock is vacant (ISTAT 2021). These vacancies (mostly in the private stock) constitute a potential resource for San Donato in mitigating growing market pressures, however, they are hard

6 The OMI database compiles data on actual prices recorded in property sales and rental contracts. The data is presented as a range – indicating minimum and maximum prices and rents per m² – for specific locations (here, the reported data refers to central locations, including Metanopoli), and is differentiated by the state of the dwelling (classified as “normal” and “very good”).

to mobilise. Many owners are reluctant to rent them out on a long-term basis due to concerns over tenant reliability, a lack of trust in the public administration to provide adequate support, and an increasing preference for short-term rentals, perceived as safer and more profitable alternatives. “This is one of the key differences to ten years ago”, as Micheli (2025) underlines, “because back then short-term rentals didn’t exist at all in our reality”. Demand for short-term rentals in San Donato is largely driven both by its vicinity to Milan (“here we feel the ‘weeks’ – Design Week, Fashion Week, the *Salone del Mobile* – because you’re in piazza del Duomo in 20 minutes by metro”) (Tassinari 2025) and by the presence of the Policlinico – a teaching hospital that sustains a continuous but temporary presence of students and medical professionals. The emergence of short-term rentals in the city reflects a growing trend of “micro-financialisation”, where the availability of a second or third home is not merely treated as an integration to the household income, but as an opportunity to generate high profits.

We have seen that incentives to private owners are not enough to mobilise housing at long-term and affordable conditions. We are investigating which kinds of instruments we can develop to render it more attractive and increase trust, but we also ask ourselves whether and how we can find ways to appeal to the “social responsibility” of owners,

as Lara Baio (2025), coordinator of the Housing Office, underlines. The reluctance of property owners to rent out their dwellings, particularly to lower-income groups, is further illustrated by Licia Tassinari (2025) along the following example:

We – social services – had an allocation of about €25,000 in the 2024 budget that could be used to help with the stipulation of new rental contracts, for families facing eviction, people losing their homes, etc. But we couldn’t use this money. Not because there is no need for it, but because these people couldn’t find homes to rent. Because no one wants to rent out their properties.

In 2023, a public-led housing agency – the “Agenzia dell’Abitare” – was established as a joint initiative between San Donato Milanese and eight other municipalities⁷ with the aim to tackle housing-related issues in a comprehensive and coordinated way, representing an important attempt to innovate (supra-)urban governance on a cross-sectoral issue. Operationally, its institutional positioning within the municipality of San Donato follows a dual logic, combining technical and social tasks and competencies – a rather atypical arrangement in Italy, where housing governance is usually compartmentalised and integrated with welfare policies. One of the Agenzia’s tasks is to build a solid knowledge base on how housing needs and resources within its operational realm are articulated – a currently ongoing process undertaken with the aim to ground policy decisions in evidence. Another task is the facilitation of the mobilisation of vacancies in the private stock, by acting as an intermediary between owners and tenants, offering incentives and guarantees to promote long-term contracts at moderate rents, attempting to create benefits for both. So far, these efforts have had limited success – partly due to the relatively short existence of the Agenzia, and partly because the available instruments lack persuasive power and leverage when compared to more attractive market alternatives. However, the establishment and particular design of the Agenzia as a collaborative endeavour is a substantial step forward as compared to ten years ago, when the lack of intermunicipal interventions and coordination had been identified as a major obstacle in tackling housing challenges effectively (Bricocoli *et al.* 2020).

Limits and potentials in negotiating with big commercial players

A particularly complex and delicate issue regards the negotiation of developments between the municipality and commercial private actors, particularly in the case of large-scale built heritage like the

7 Carpiano, Cerro al Lambro, Colturano, Dresano, Melegnano, San Donato Milanese, San Giuliano Milanese, San Zenone al Lambro e Vizzolo Predabissi, together constituting the so-called “Distretto Sociale Sud Est Milano”, a governance level established to facilitate intermunicipal cooperation in social and health-related affairs.

“Terzo” and “Quarto”. Such negotiations unfold against the backdrop of largely differing, to some degree incompatible interests. Commercial actors, like the asset management fund owning the office buildings, first and foremost represent the interests of their shareholders – i.e., profitability and the maximisation of returns –, while the public administration is accountable to citizens and must ensure that projects meet local needs, preserve heritage, and generate public value. As Carminati (2025) elaborates:

Big funds think in terms of profit, of monetisation. They don't have the kind of sensitivity a builder may have, who might take pride in constructing a beautiful building because people will say “this was built by that company”. So, it's very important to find strategies that are attractive for the fund and present them concrete proposals that give them a vision – but one from which they can also generate revenues.

A key challenge lies in the municipality's reduced bargaining powers when dealing with big commercial players. The instruments available are those laid out in planning regulations and the PGT, which – while setting a formal framework – provides limited means and weak incentives to enforce action on the part of the owner. If the conditions set by the municipality are deemed unattractive, a private real estate fund can opt for leaving a property vacant – awaiting a more accommodating future administration –, resulting in its deterioration, without breaching any legal obligations. Such inaction, however, can have substantial negative repercussions for the city, particularly where large-scale and symbolically significant sites such as the “Palazzi Uffici ENI” are concerned. Carminati (2025) stresses that:

we absolutely need to sit down at the table with them – early in the process – and avoid making decisions solely from our own perspective, because the risk would be failure, meaning that the buildings remain empty. For the development of the city more widely, we really cannot afford to leave them empty. We wouldn't achieve anything beneficial, neither for us nor for them.

The risk of long-term vacancy and decay highlights that there is a structural imbalance in power – reinforced by the fact that San Donato has less negotiation power than a larger administration (as for instance Milan). This underscores the need for stronger regulatory tools or innovative forms of negotiation able to align private investment strategies more closely with public interest goals. So far, the main instruments at hand include quotas (typically, 20%) for the compulsory development of social housing units in cases of a change in land use designation (which can, however, also be compensated for through payment), as well as volumetric bonuses in the case of further contributions to public wellbeing. In terms of negotiation capacities, a so far underused lever is the requirement to deliver

a detailed financial plan, submitted by the implementing party, and evaluated by us in a way that the economic balance of the operation can be assessed. As San Donato in some areas is starting to have very high real estate values, the implementing party is required to include them in this plan in a way that the value increase is made clearly evident. Of course, if a plot is valued at, let's say, a billion Euros, you cannot demand a billion in public works as a contribution – that is true. But rendering explicit the economic situation provides a unit of measurement that allows you to negotiate. And this is why usually no one comes forward with a precise financial plan: they're all very vague. So, this could definitely be an important lever to improve our position for negotiation. Another important factor is uncertainties – uncertainties which, however, on paper are already set. For example, the issue of the metro extension is crucial: today, it is not visible, so it is difficult to use it as a lever or as a driver for value enhancement. However, we know that it is a concrete project – it hasn't been financed yet, but it most likely is going to happen next year, meaning that works could start in two years, and in three or four years, the metro will be there (Carminati 2025).

Learnings from San Donato Milanese beyond ENI

The case of San Donato Milanese highlights several broader societal and governance challenges that are common to many

European (and not exclusively urban) contexts yet accentuated here by the prominent role played by ENI.

One of these is the question of intergenerational justice. The city can be considered paradigmatic of a growing divide between those who were able to benefit from the post-war economic boom and today's younger generations, who face increasing difficulties in securing decent incomes and thus in obtaining and maintaining stable and affordable housing, eroding not only the economic security of lower- and middle-income groups, but also access to the city. This calls for a "renewed intergenerational alliance" (DASStU 2020, p. 35), a social contract across generations aimed at redistributing wealth as well as access to resources and opportunities. This is not only a matter of equity and the sustainability of welfare systems (increasingly strained by pension-related expenditures), but also a structural necessity if current pathways shaped by demographic and market dynamics – ongoing population ageing alongside the attraction of an exclusively high-income population – are to be redirected towards more inclusive visions of what the city should become, and for whom it is intended, in the future.

Secondly, the case of San Donato Milanese highlights the complexities of negotiation between the public and property owners, including both major commercial players and private individuals, which require profound and very different kinds of efforts and instruments, as ideological visions for the city and societal goals clash with smaller and larger economic interests. Harmonising longer-term development objectives with short-term market logics remains a key challenge in contexts of limited regulatory leverage. In this regard, San Donato – as the "*città dell'ENI*" – exhibits some particularities, but is far from unique in facing the need to operate within a given framework of power relations, constraints, and opportunities which are – more or less so – the result of its historical trajectories. The tension between the city's historical dependence on ENI – perceived as both a resource and a burden – and its aspirations to autonomously define its future trajectories will thus remain a constant companion for those tasked with governing the city. While ENI's role has substantially changed over the decades, its influence remains very

relevant, as its presence, actions, and decisions continue to shape the city's development, room for manoeuvre, and physical environment. As Licia Tassinari puts it (2025):

San Donato has the “six-legged dog” tattooed on it. You can't remove it. [...] When you say, “now we are finally free to do what we want”, I think you are denying the obvious. [...] If we had a Mount Rushmore, we would have Mattei on it. That's just how it is. [...] But I think we can say: Let's start from that point and move forward.

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8 All interviews have been conducted by Constanze Wolfgring in San Donato Milanese.