

Designing Hybrid Spaces

ENVISIONING PLURAL ECOSYSTEMS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL
PRACTICES FOR REGENERATIVE URBAN FUTURES

Edited by

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ISBN e-book Open Access: 9788835183099

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PART 3

Cultural and Participatory synergies in reclaiming Public Spaces

15. Co-designing Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces: methods and transformative practices

Ambra Borin

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ABSTRACT

Culture-based urban regeneration can be interpreted as a vector of transformation capable of generating value not only in terms of physical redevelopment of spaces, but also in terms of social cohesion and sustainable development. This contribution highlights how Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces (SCHS) can be co-designed as enablers of new forms of publicness, inclusion, territorial transformation, and community resilience. Situated at the intersection of institutional policies and grassroots initiatives, these spaces serve as experimental platforms where social innovation, cultural production, and civic engagement converge. Within this framework, the OSMOSI research project investigates SCHS as proximity-based urban devices and infrastructures for territorial regeneration. This contribution provides an overview of the participatory strategies underpinning the project, situating them within a broader theoretical and operational context. Through the case of *Open Casello*, it highlights how participatory strategies, interdisciplinary academic frameworks, and SCHS can activate co-designed services, collaborative governance, and plural community-driven transformations.

15.1 Introduction

Culture-based urban regeneration, as a strategy for re-functionalisation, is currently a developing phenomena marked by growing dispersion and institutionalisation. The proliferation of various experiences across Italy underscores that this process is progressively assuming the attributes of a systematic social occurrence. Cityscapes that facilitate social interactions and intricate human experiences shape the social spatialisation of the environment (Shields, 1991). This spatialisation critically enhances the city's potential to develop new kinds of engagement.

Consequently, the density and proximity of urban residents facilitate a mutual interchange of values and behaviours among the various social elements distinctly observable in urban areas. The growing intersection between the cultural and social dimensions contributes to redefining the traditional boundaries of both spheres, giving rise to *hybrid practices* (Ostanel, 2023) that, through the connection between spaces, culture and citizenship, converge towards common goals of urban regeneration in a generative and sustainable development perspective (García *et al.*, 2015). As Poot (*et al.*, 2015) point out, many of these environments, today de-functionalised, can be reconfigured as active nodes in the contemporary urban network. In this scenario, the geography of culture is enriched with new configurations, capable of fostering the strengthening of communities and experimenting with innovation on multiple levels: social, cultural, management and welfare (Trapanese & Mariotti, 2022).

In this context, culture-based urban regeneration can be interpreted as a vector of transformation (Satta, 2023) capable of generating value not only in terms of physical redevelopment of spaces, but also in terms of social cohesion and sustainable development (Krasilnikova & Klimov, 2020). Inserted in this framework is the figure of the Hybrid Spaces. In detail, Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces (SCHS) represent points of intersection between evolving social dynamics and cultural practices, configuring themselves as urban cultural institutions that not only respond to the needs of local communities, but are also shaped by urban regeneration processes and ethical and political transformations of culture (Lo Stato dei Luoghi *et al.*,

2024). Studies indicate that SCHS, which integrate physical, social, and digital components, might enhance youth involvement and foster a sense of belonging in urban settings. These hybrid habitats have the potential to transform recreational activities and social settings for youngest, foster cultural continuity and civic participation among marginalised groups, hence enhancing resilience and community cohesion (Liebenberg *et al.*, 2019). To proficiently construct these hybrid environments, it is essential to comprehend the interaction among social dynamics, physical locations, and digital technologies (Paay *et al.*, 2007). By including these components, co-created Hybrid Spaces can offer significant opportunity for youth to engage with their communities, cultivating a sense of belonging and involvement in urban settlements.

A primary characteristic of these SCHS is precisely their plurality. These habitats are defined by its integration of multiple functions, thus attracting a heterogeneous public and facilitating interactions between individuals who, in other contexts, would be unlikely to meet (BASE, 2023). In recent decades, the design of these plural spaces has become an important *modus operandi* in the contemporary cities (Avermaete *et al.*, 2006).

Drawing on this perspective, Moulaert *et al.* (2005) reconstructed alternative models of local development from neighbourhood projects that interpret social innovation in a plural perspective, such as integrated neighbourhood actions, voluntary associations, worker cooperatives and housing associations.

Furthermore, Tricarico (*et al.*, 2022) emphasise the centrality of the territorial dimension of social innovation as a lever to transform spatial and social relations in response to collective needs. It is precisely from these premises that the OSMOSI research is developed, whose objective is to explore the role of SCHS as urban regeneration devices and social infrastructures of territorial proximity.

This contribution aims to offer an overall framework of the project from the participative strategy approach, placing it within a broader theoretical and operational framework, and questioning its transformative potential on an urban, social and cultural scale.

15.2 From Participation to Transformation: SCHS as catalysts for collaborative practices

«Cities have been assuming the form of multifaceted spaces of collaboration and creativity where citizens operate in proximity or remotely to improve the urban quality of life» (Volpi & Opromolla, 2017). As Granata (2021) argues, the role of the *placemaker* is becoming increasingly important in the redefinition of plural urban spaces according to a horizontal, inclusive and participatory model; an approach that contrasts with the traditional model, characterised by vertical governance and urban regulation that has limited the protagonism of local communities. As already stated, a central aspect of social innovation processes applied to urban regeneration is the reactivation and experimentation of SCHS, strategic places for experimenting collaborative practices and building territorial networks. Therefore, urban regeneration cannot be understood solely as a technical intervention, but should be recognised as a complex social process. Manzini (2015) characterises design for social innovation as a collection of techniques that can initiate, facilitate, and guide transformation towards more sustainable urban paradigms. Thus, territorial social innovation relies on the capacity to forge various coalitions and partnerships, integrating external resources and amplifying local particularities. Design thinking and design methods are used in successful ways to guide collaborative processes (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010) and it is possible to imagine a more dedicated application of these principles and instruments to support the continual emergence of hybrid spaces of interaction within the city. In this sense, every occasion of connection and social exchange among different stakeholders may be considered as a trigger for a process of urban development enhancing the life of the city dwellers. Design could give shape and consistence to these different occasions by using the SCHS as catalysts for the creation of sustainable urban environments. To fulfil this objective there are not fixed solutions, but a multitude of approaches to frame and test, in respect of the adaptive nature of the whole plural hybrid system of «connectedness» (Price, 2013; Siemens, 2006).

Urban Living Labs, Community Hubs, Policy Labs, City Service Hubs, Public Innovation Places, as open innovation spaces and context-driven environments, are some of the useful models able to integrate different levels of government and practices. These hybrid environments can become bridges between urban institutional mechanisms and micro-scale actions, aiming to be drivers of social and spatial innovation. They use circular, incremental and adaptive processes, shifting from projects to processes (Ostanel, 2017) where Design for social innovation through participatory strategies becomes one of the drivers of change. SCHS are characterised by a predominantly cultural nature oriented towards interpreting the contemporary through artistic, social, educational and participatory practices. They open up to a plurality of audiences, stimulate hybridisation between disciplines and subjects, and promote dialogue between artists and communities. Co-creation is not only an operational mode, but becomes a lever for social and civic innovation. In this sense, these spaces activate processes of inclusion, territorial cohesion and democratic participation, representing one of the most significant places to imagine and build a new culture of proximity (Massari, 2019).

15.2.1 The case of Open Casello

The OSMOSI research-action project avails itself of the support of two Italian reference realities in the field of SCHS: BASE Milano in Milan (Lombardy), an experiment in the contamination of art, business, technology and social innovation, located in the former Ansaldo complex and a reference point for social innovation and public-private collaboration; and Farm Cultural Park in Favara (Sicily), an independent initiative that has transformed the city's historic centre into a pole of urban and cultural regeneration, promoting active participation and sustainable development. In continuity with the experiences developed by these SCHS, two pilot projects were activated as local spin-offs: Open Casello in Milan and the Museo delle Città del Mondo in Palermo. Both represent experimental contexts in which to test innovative models of activation and management of hybrid spaces, in dialogue with local communities and public institutions. Focusing on the case of Open Casello, inaugurated in 2024, it is a public space in a former tollhouse in the centre of Milan, which acts as a space of

opportunity and connection, enhancing city networks and promoting youth activation, as a laboratory for experimenting urban strategies. The project is promoted by the Municipality of Milan with Department for Youth Policies, with the support of BASE Milano, Codici and Avanzi, realities and youth groups associations already involved in Milan's social transformation. It is a space of opportunity for youth communities, a space of policy in the field of youth politics and above all a space to be co-inhabited by young facilitators and activators of change in the city. Classified as an action research project due to its interdisciplinary and participatory nature, as it aims to develop practical knowledge while pursuing valuable human goals (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The aim is to integrate action and reflection, theory and practice, through a collaborative and iterative process that replaces the traditional relationship between researcher and research object with a more participatory dynamic (Murray *et al.*, 2010). To be more specific, the purpose of this contribution is to bring attention to the participatory and interdisciplinary aspects of the OSMOSI project, with a specific focus on the *Open Casello* pilot project. One of the central phases of the project process is highlighted – applied and adapted in the different contexts of intervention – which consists of the systematisation of six co-designed sessions with an interdisciplinary char-



Figure 1.
Open Casello.
Photo courtesy of
Comune di Milano.

acter, realised in synergy with the local context and with the active involvement of a plurality of «situated-stakeholders» (Fassi & Vergani, 2022). These co-designed activities focus on the analysis and shared design of spaces and services, promoting synergy between plural actors, including citizens, local authorities, and organisations in the proximity territory.

The participatory approach makes it possible to collect different contributions, useful for the definition of innovative experimentations and the replicability/adaptability of the model in other contexts. The involvement of plural stakeholders is crucial to build an operational framework that responds to territorial specificities, favouring the sustainability and effectiveness of project actions. In this sense, co-production hybridisation processes has increasingly been recognised as a process that promotes citizen empowerment and direct involvement in the design and delivery of public services (Brudney & England, 1983; Ostrom, 1996; Kleinhans, 2017; Jungsberg *et al.*, 2020). Rather than focusing solely on service efficiency, participatory strategies in SCHS aim to place users and communities at the centre of decision-making (Bovaird, 2007), fostering a redistribution of power among stakeholders through inherently also political processes (Mitlin, 2008). In this light, Open Casello may be understood as a plural and agonistic infrastructure (Mäntysalo *et al.*, 2011), enabling inclusive and contested forms of participation. It opens up deliberative spaces where diverse identities, values, and power relations can be negotiated on equal terms (Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2011; Albrechts, 2013; Balducci, 2008; Forester, 2009). In this direction, OSMOSI project proposes innovative solutions for the regeneration and enhancement of SCHS. Through a participatory and experimental approaches, the project not only develops operational tools and replicable strategies, but also addresses the need to integrate culture, environment and community in an urban regeneration process. Regenerating these plural environments means not only combating urban decay, but also activating social interaction and cultural exchange, reinforcing the idea that «culture heals» (Satta, 2023). Integrating environmental, social and economic dimensions in the design of SCHS therefore means pursuing shared goals: protecting and transforming cityscapes quality and strengthening the sense of community. Six multidisciplinary co-designed

activities were carried out at the Open Casello spaces, including many stakeholders and an interdisciplinary co-construction of the resources and tools utilised by the departments comprising the OSMOSI research team:

Workshop 01: Community

The *Community*' workshop aimed to explore the context surrounding Open Casello through active listening and the systematization of stakeholders' needs. Using a participatory approach, participants identified key opportunities and risks emerging from the relationship between the infrastructure and the local environment. The workshop also involved mapping proximity relations – geographical and social – between Open Casello and its territory, with the goal of co-defining short- and long-term development scenarios rooted in sustainability and shared values. Participants used boundary objects, such as brainstorming cards, to individually and collectively surface needs (e.g., spaces for intergenerational dialogue, inclusion of marginalized youth, cultural expression), opportunities (e.g., positioning the space as a local hub, fostering participatory programming), and risks (e.g., self-referential dynamics, dependency on political support, exclusion of unstructured youth). The *Mappa della Prossimità* (Proximity Map) activity visualised relationships among local actors and institutions across *iperlocal*

Note 1.

Departments involved:
Department of
Architecture - University
of Palermo; Polimi DESIS
Lab at Design Department
– Politecnico di Milano.



Figure 2.
Workshop activities at Open Casello. Photos by author.

scale (5 minutes by walk from Open Casello), *territorial scale* (≥ 30 minutes) and hybrid (space) dimensions; revealing a dense network of universities, cultural centers, and civic organizations. The session concluded with the creation of scenarios, imagining the future of *Open Casello* through 10 distinct narrative visions featuring evocative metaphors such as the *Urban Jungle*, *Free-Style Space*, and *White Cube of Possibilities*.

Workshop 02: Spaces and Services

Note 2.
Department involved:
Polimi DESIS Lab at
Design Department –
Politecnico di Milano.

The *Spaces and Services* workshop² focused on defining activities and services to be integrated both within the Open Casello pilot projects physical space and across the broader territorial network. Building on the scenarios developed during the *Community* workshop, participants created a structured offering map board, distinguishing between primary offerings (e.g., library of things, youth support desks, co-curated cultural programming) and secondary offerings (e.g., exhibitions, urban exploratory walks, neighborhood feasts). Proposals ranged from tangible services (e.g., creative workshops using AI-generated images, support desks for adulting) to innovative social mechanisms (e.g., participatory governance models, community concierge services). The spatial configuration (interior and outdoor spaces) session linked these ideas to practical spatial needs such as flexible furnishings, stage areas, signage systems, and green spaces, while also mapping temporal cycles of use and functional zones. The result is a clear and shared representation of Open Casello's potential as a space capable of serving diverse publics, through a layered service ecosystem distributed across time and space, aligned with community values.

Workshop 03: Space Performances

Note 3.
Department involved:
Polimi DESIS Lab at
Design Department;
Material Balance
Research Lab at
Department of
Architecture, Built
Environment and
Construction Engineering
– Politecnico di Milano.

The *Space Performances* workshop³ focused on defining key parameters for assessing indoor spatial comfort from thermal, visual, and acoustic perspectives. Participants collaboratively developed moodboards to explore desired atmospheres and identify design qualities aligned with the project's values. The session also involved the selection of appropriate materials and technologies to support flexible, sustainable furnishing solutions. Configurations were

discussed in relation to how spaces can adapt to diverse activities and user needs, ensuring comfort while preserving the spatial identity of Open Casello. The result is a foundational framework for performance-driven spatial design, combining environmental well-being with functional versatility.

Workshop 04: Ecosystem

The *Ecosystem* workshop⁴ focused on validating and refining the Community Map in relation to the integrated system of services, spaces, and products co-designed throughout the project. Participants worked on structuring the network of stakeholders—both current and potential—mapping their roles, degrees of involvement, and collaborative capacity in relation to future scenarios.

The session also explored the concept of a scalable and replicable model to activate or strengthen territorial relational networks, aiming to generate long-term cultural and social impact. This model seeks to position Open Casello as a strategic infrastructure within a broader ecosystem of local innovation and community-led development.

Workshop 05: Management Strategy

The *Management Strategy* workshop⁵ focused on validating the social business model canvas, with particular attention to the different value propositions emerging from the project. Participants analysed the strategic dimensions necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability and governance of Open Casello. A key output was the identification of roles and competencies required within the future management board, outlining a framework for distributed responsibility and effective leadership.

This foundation supports the development of a governance model aligned with the project's participatory and community-driven vision.

Workshop 06: Impact

The *Impact* workshop⁶ focused on defining a monitoring and evaluation framework starting from the two pilot projects, aimed at identifying key indicators related to social and economic impact. Participants collaboratively explored and shared a multidimensional co-understanding of impact for Open Casello, reflecting on cultural,

Note 4.
Department involved:
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Department of Design –
Politecnico di Milano.

Note 5.
Department involved:
Department of
Management Engineering
– Politecnico di Milano.

Note 6.
Departments involved:
Polimi DESIS Lab
at Department of
Design; Department of
Management Engineering
– Politecnico di Milano.



Figure 3. Workshop “management strategy” at Open Casello. Photo by author.

social, relational, and institutional-administrative dimensions. The session also involved the identification of key concepts and keywords to define impact in this specific context, laying the groundwork for the creation of an hybrid *Open Casello Manifesto*. This manifesto articulates the values and long-term vision of *Open Casello* as an infrastructure for community transformation. By the end of the project (late 2025), a dissemination phase will be launched to share outcomes and initiate a hybrid experimental modeling process. This phase aims to support a systemic rethinking of urban and territorial dynamics, recognizing the evolving role of Public Administrations in processes of change.

15.3 Plural Shared Futures

The research aims to produce concrete and transferable results capable of guiding urban policies and supporting institutions and local actors in regeneration processes. Participation continues to represent one of the most critical dimensions of contemporary design, closely connected to themes such as sustainability, spatial justice, urban regeneration, and the responsible consumption of land. These challenges require a critical revision of how society is imagined and how its spatial implications are configured. The most effective experi-

ences of reactivating underused public spaces often rely on collaboration with local actors who are capable of interpreting the needs and potential of the area (Lanzoni, 2015). These initiatives emerge as local practices and experimental processes initiated by private citizens through bottom-up approaches. In such processes, Manzini (2015) identifies a more complex dynamic, where «initiatives taken directly by the people involved (*bottom-up interaction*) are always supported by exchanges of information with similar organizations (*peer-to-peer interaction*) and by different forms of intervention from institutions, civic organizations, or companies (*top-down interaction*)».

The outcomes of the OSMOSI research materialise into concrete and transferable tools and frameworks, designed to support local institutions and territorial stakeholders in implementing effective urban regeneration strategies towards experimentation of SCHS.

These highlight:

- The research defines a framework that can be used by Public Administrations and other stakeholders to develop strategies aimed at identifying innovative solutions. This framework takes the form of guidelines, manuals, or toolkits – tools specifically designed to ensure the replicability and scalability of the process. Each of these outputs, although differing in format, includes enabling strategies and solutions to create the necessary conditions for reproducing similar projects in different contexts. The framework is made available to local institutions and stakeholders engaged in territorial initiatives, with particular attention given to methodological reflection and research design. This allows for the modeling of procedures and ensures their replicability in other contexts and service areas.
- The role of Public Administration is defined within this broader process of social, spatial, and service transformation. These urban experiments interact with institutions, influencing and reshaping them, while contributing to the creation of new forms of governance. Institutional value is generated through social enterprises, supporting the principle of subsidiarity at different institutional levels, shaping territorial policies, establishing public-private partnerships, and aligning with shared

visions and objectives (Zamagni *et al.*, 2015). The forms of institutional support required for the project are explored, ranging from the involvement of local associations to the establishment of public-private partnerships and administrative support – elements that are fundamental to ensure the durability of the intervention. Crucially, Open Casello serves as a connective hub, bridging social, cultural, and institutional networks. It functions as a relational infrastructure that links individuals, social groups, and institutions; from the immediate local area to the broader extra-urban contexts (Fassi & Borin, 2024). By activating and making visible latent relationships, Open Casello weaves together youth initiatives, cultural operators, schools, universities, institutions, and active citizens. This connective capacity makes the space fertile and generative, producing ripple effects throughout the territory. Looking forward, Open Casello embodies an adaptive and replicable model based on dynamic relationships and hybrid governance. Its strength lies not in standardized offerings but in its ability to activate expansive ecosystems through agile and inclusive practices that continuously respond to social, cultural, and urban transformations. As an experimental SCHS, in terms of civiness, sociality and cultural, can be adapted to different contexts, offering a flexible framework for sustainable community development.

To conclude, the OSMOSI project, exemplified by Open Casello, demonstrates how participatory, interdisciplinary, and SCHS can drive urban regeneration by fostering active community engagement, co-designed services, and collaborative governance. Open Casello functions not only as a youth-oriented cultural hub but also as a relational infrastructure connecting diverse local actors and institutions, enabling innovative models of activation and sustainability. Through iterative workshops and the co-creation of adaptable frameworks, the project offers replicable strategies that support institutions and communities in transforming public spaces into inclusive, vibrant ecosystems. As Open Casello evolves as an adaptive model for sustainable urban regeneration, how can such experimental spaces balance their local specificity and plural co-created identities within SCHS, while

ensuring scalability and long-term impact across both urban and extra-urban contexts?

Aknowledgement

Special thanks go to all those who contributed to and actively participated in the PRIN project *OSMOSI – Observation and Study of Design and Development Models for Hybrid Spaces, places of urban experimentation and social inclusion through creative and cultural activities*, funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU; and its related co-design activities: Martina Balestrieri, Marco Biferale, Domiziana Caliri, Maya Libera Castellini, Natalia De Martin, Riccardo Danese, Sara Giorgia D'Alessi, Matilda D'Urzo, Andrea Falcini, Giulia Ficarazzo, Anna Gargantini, Alessia Grazzini, Greta Guerrini, Chiara Maria Lugli, Cecilia Mezzano, Irene Pantani, Eleonora Rossi, Valentina Ronzo, Cecilia Sgubbi, Luana Stramaglia, Angelo Mattia Tinella, Giulia Cugnasca, Giulia Tosoni, Concetta Terrazzano, and Stella Civardi. A heartfelt thank you also goes to all the students from the MSc in Product Service System Design at the Politecnico di Milano – School of Design, and to everyone who took part in the co-design activities related to this research, including those not individually mentioned here. Gratitude is also extended to the teams from Open Casello, the Municipality of Milan (Comune di Milano), BASE Milano, Codici, and Avanzi, whose collaboration and ongoing commitment to social innovation and cultural regeneration significantly enriched the research.

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This volume investigates the potential of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces as engines of urban regeneration, democratic participation, and cultural innovation. Emerging at the intersection of cultural production, social experimentation, and territorial transformation, these spaces challenge conventional boundaries between public and private, temporary and permanent, physical and digital. Through four main sections, the book develops a critical and impactful perspective on the functions, design and interdisciplinary approaches, and transformative potential of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces. From their evolving role as plural ecosystems to their capacity to generate declinations of public value; from cultural and participatory practices that reclaim and reimagine the commons to the opportunities and challenges introduced by digital technologies; it offers a multifaceted lens on *hybrid practices* in contemporary urban and territorial contexts. By weaving together theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and case studies, this book provides critical reflections by and for scholars, practitioners, and institutions. How can cultural initiatives generate new alliances between institutions and communities? What forms of participation can strengthen the democratic role of public space? And what challenges arise in connecting physical and virtual dimensions for collective engagement?