

“IN BIBLIO CON CHIARA”: INCLUSIVE LEARNING IN MILAN’S SAN SIRO PUBLIC HOUSING DISTRICT

L. Ottolini, G. Gerosa, G. Cipolla, L. Petrini, F. Guarnieri

Politecnico di Milano (ITALY)

Abstract

In today’s European urban contexts, marked by growing cultural diversity and socioeconomic inequalities, equitable access to education and culture represents a crucial challenge, especially for children and adolescents with migrant backgrounds, language fragility or neurodevelopmental disabilities. In this context, the San Siro neighborhood of Milan serves as an emblematic case study, where place-based social infrastructures, such as Off Campus San Siro and the Fondazione Don Gnocchi, act as mediators between institutions and the community, helping to bring to the surface the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

The “In Biblio con Chiara” project fits into this context by reimagining the library as a tool for social engagement and inclusion. The initiative led to the creation of two inclusive reading spaces and a mobile unit, developed through participatory co-design processes involving users, operators and local organizations. By integrating educational, social and health dimensions, the project helped strengthen local networks and transform users into active participants.

Through activities spread across public spaces and accessible environments, the library functions not only as a place of learning but also as a space for care, connection and empowerment. Finally, the project proposes a replicable model capable of promoting educational equity and social inclusion in urban contexts characterized by vulnerability and diversity.

Keywords: Inclusive Learning, Social Infrastructure, Community Engagement, Participatory Co-design.

1 INTRODUCTION

For the city of Milan, the San Siro neighborhood represents one of the main destinations of the large-scale internal migrations that, from the post-World War II period through the 1960s, affected thousands of families and workers. The neighborhood thus emerged and developed as a place of settlement, shaped by various cyclical migratory processes, not only domestic but also international. Today, within the San Siro district, residents from more than 80 nationalities coexist, with foreign nationals accounting for approximately 51–55% of the local population, a percentage significantly higher than the citywide average, which hovers around 20%. The international component is particularly marked by communities from North Africa (especially Egypt and Morocco), the Philippines, Peru, Romania and Sri Lanka, reflecting a highly pluralistic and constantly changing neighbourhood characterized by high mobility and intense cultural diversity [1].

This situation results in a demographic structure that is markedly different from the rest of the city: San Siro is now one of Milan’s “youngest” neighbourhoods, with a growing number of minors, young adults of foreign nationality, and large families. Census and municipal data indicate that, between 2011 and 2021, the population of the district increased by approximately 11%, while the proportion of people with foreign citizenship grew by 53% and the 0–19 age group increased by 45%, significantly exceeding the municipal and metropolitan averages. During the same period, households with five or more members increased by 93%, confirming a demographic trend that runs sharply counter to the rest of the city [2].

In this multicultural context [3], where the population is predominantly young, children and adolescents with migrant backgrounds, language difficulties, or neurodevelopmental disorders often face structural barriers that limit their participation in educational programs, thereby contributing to exclusion and marginalization. The San Siro neighbourhood thus serves as an emblematic case study: an area defined by socio-territorial challenges but, at the same time, energized by dynamics of urban regeneration and community care. It is therefore necessary to understand the synergy between two place-based social infrastructures in the district: Off Campus San Siro and the Fondazione Don Gnocchi (specifically, the IRCCS S. Maria Nascente Center and its Unit of Child Neuropsychiatry and Developmental Rehabilitation). Although characterized by different functions, both entities operate as care providers and mediators, seeking to bridge the gap between formal institutions and the local community, and

making the needs of marginalized youth visible. Within the San Siro neighbourhood, Off Campus San Siro and the Fondazione Don Gnocchi represent two complementary poles dedicated to care, education, and social proximity.

Off Campus San Siro is an initiative promoted by Polisocial, the social responsibility program of the Politecnico di Milano [4], which brings the university into the city of Milan, specifically into marginalized urban areas, to increase its openness, accountability and connection to local communities. Created in 2019 as the first community hub in public housing neighbourhoods, the Off Campus initiative functions as a multidisciplinary observatory on inequalities, access to the city and processes of marginalization, where research, education and social action intersect in a participatory approach.

In the San Siro neighborhood, Off Campus serves as a center hosting activities and services to counter isolation and exclusion, enhancing public spaces and forms of co-design with associations, schools and local services. Among these are the Legal Aid and Legal Education Desk (sponsored by Bocconi University) and the Talent Hub (an initiative of the University of Milan), which support young people aged 14 to 29 in academic, educational, and career guidance, with a particular focus on those facing socio-educational and migration-related challenges [5]. Through these initiatives, Off Campus San Siro serves as a community-based educational hub, capable of identifying learning difficulties associated with particularly vulnerable contexts, with the aim of transforming physical spaces into places of connection, trust and mobilization of local resources. Within the same urban context, the Fondazione Don Gnocchi, through the IRCCS S. Maria Nascente Center [6], serves as a qualified reference point for the diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of neurodevelopmental disorders, particularly in childhood and adolescence. The operators' approach is multidisciplinary and considers the linguistic, cultural and social dimensions of children and adolescents, moving beyond a purely clinical perspective to include conditions of experiential poverty, language barriers and family vulnerabilities typical of contexts such as San Siro.

Located within a young, multicultural and particularly fragile neighborhood, Off Campus San Siro and Fondazione Don Gnocchi can be seen as two social infrastructures within a broader territorial system, in which educational, social and health functions are increasingly intertwined. Their geographical proximity and operational complementarity create the perfect conditions for the emergence of forms of collaboration: by acting as mediators between formal institutions and communities, they bring to light the needs of minors and their families, raising awareness of vulnerabilities and fostering integrated support pathways. In this sense, the synergy between these two entities can help reduce some of the discontinuities typical of urban welfare systems. Off-Campus, thanks to its informal presence deeply rooted in the local community, can serve as an early intervention mechanism for identifying needs and as a cultural mediator, facilitating the identification of situations of distress that would otherwise remain invisible. At the same time, the Fondazione Don Gnocchi offers specialized expertise and structured care programs, ensuring continuity and quality of intervention. In this sense, Off Campus San Siro and the Fondazione Don Gnocchi serve as concrete resources capable of promoting education and culture; by collaborating, they have the potential to amplify the neighborhood's capacity to address inequality, educational poverty and marginalization.

From this perspective, the partnership between Off Campus San Siro and the Fondazione Don Gnocchi is not only a response to existing needs, but also a potential laboratory for social innovation, where approaches can be tested that can be replicated in other urban contexts characterized by similar conditions of vulnerability.

2 OBJECTIVES

In consideration of the socio-territorial context described above, characterized by significant cultural diversity, educational fragility and inequalities in access to services, this research aims to examine the collaboration between Off Campus San Siro and Fondazione Don Gnocchi and how it can promote new forms of educational inclusion and active participation in vulnerable urban contexts.

In particular, the focus is on building and expanding an educational network in the San Siro neighbourhood, involving diverse participants and creating a transferable and repeatable system, thanks also to a heterogeneous methodology. In this perspective, the research also explores how existing educational, healthcare and community spaces can be transformed into integrated and open learning platforms. This approach aims to create inclusive learning environments that foster the active participation of young people with linguistic, cultural and neurological challenges, overcoming the

barriers typical of multi-ethnic contexts such as San Siro through collaborative strategies, accessible educational services and informal, participatory learning practices.

The project “In Biblio con Chiara – Inclusivity and Libraries for a Culture That Invites, Brings People Together, Regenerates and Engages” fits into this context, reimagining the library as a tool for social engagement. Structurally and spatially, In Biblio con Chiara involves the design of two inclusive libraries, one connected to the Fondazione Don Gnocchi and the other at the San Siro Off Campus, along with a mobile reading module, conceived as flexible platforms for informal learning. Travelling through streets, squares and school courtyards, this mobile unit breaks down linguistic and social barriers, bringing youth-centered support and solidarity initiatives directly into the public sphere. These spaces are designed to offer reading experiences in the widest sense, from traditional reading to workshops and sensory immersions, in welcoming environments adaptable to the needs of both individuals and groups. The challenge lies in designing furniture elements that meet aesthetic, performance and functional requirements, ensuring accessibility, attractiveness, adaptability, safety, maintainability and sustainability, in line with guidelines for innovative libraries.

More specifically, the research aims to:

- Analyze how co-design practices can contribute to the creation and transformation of more accessible and inclusive spaces and services.
- Assess the role of the library - in both its permanent and mobile forms - as a tool capable of overcoming physical, linguistic and social barriers, while supporting informal and participatory learning processes.
- Observe how integration among different actors (educational, healthcare and community institutions) can strengthen local networks and generate new forms of collaboration and shared knowledge production.
- Explore the project’s potential as a model that can be replicated in other urban contexts characterized by similar conditions, as well as its capacity to redefine institutional spaces as more open and community-oriented infrastructures.

Finally, the network’s objective aims to strengthen collaboration between formal institutions (schools and universities), healthcare institutions (Fondazione Don Gnocchi), support organizations (Off Campus San Siro) and local communities, fostering social cohesion and promoting inclusive access to learning opportunities in vulnerable contexts.

3 METHODOLOGY

Based on the research objectives outlined above, the methodology adopted takes the form of a structured and multi-site process centered on the design and testing of three complementary spatial devices: the inclusive library at the Fondazione Don Gnocchi, the “In Biblio” corner within Off Campus San Siro, and the mobile library module. While these three interventions share a common vision, they were developed through differentiated methodological approaches adapted to specific contexts, constituting a process of research through design [7], in which design practice becomes a tool for investigation and knowledge production.

In line with established approaches in the fields of design education and co-creation [8] [9], the methodology integrates analytical, participatory and experimental dimensions, with the aim of building a replicable system of spaces and services for inclusive education. The project unfolds through a differentiation of approaches based on operational contexts:

- **Traditional approach**, adopted within the healthcare context of the Fondazione Don Gnocchi, characterized by more restrictive technical, regulatory and functional constraints.
- **Participatory approach**, developed within Off Campus San Siro, based on co-design practices and the active involvement of users.
- **Self-constructive approach**, relating to the mobile module, conceived as an adaptive and relational device still under development.

This structure reflects the need to adapt design tools and processes to complex and diverse contexts, avoiding uniform models and favoring situated and flexible strategies [10].

3.1 Traditional approach

Within the Fondazione Don Gnocchi context, particular attention was given to the integration of multisensory technologies, such as the *Stanza Magica* [11], to support inclusive and experiential learning processes. These tools enable the creation of immersive environments that facilitate engagement for children with neurodevelopmental disorders, supporting both individual and group activities. Their implementation required the adaptation of existing technological solutions to complex spatial conditions, ensuring usability in environments characterized by multiple users and dynamic interactions, in continuity with approaches already validated in rehabilitation settings.

In this case, the design process takes the form of guided problem-solving [12], in which the aim was to act as mediators between technical requirements and user needs, in line with traditional design models.

3.2 Participatory approach: co-design in Off Campus San Siro

In contrast, in the context of Off Campus San Siro, the approach adopted was developed through three phases: observation, activation and reworking.

3.2.1 Observation: ethnographic analysis of the space

The first phase involved an ethnographic observation of the Off-Campus San Siro space with the aim of capturing local dynamics and the daily use of the environments, thereby collecting both quantitative and qualitative data [8]. People flow (up to 40 users at peak times), schedules of various courses, service counters and activities were observed. Furthermore, through informal interviews with staff, volunteers and users, recurring spatial challenges emerged: the need for partitions to ensure privacy and soundproofing during concurrent activities, flexibility, playful appeal for adolescents and dedicated areas for children during consultations with mothers, given the difficulty of maintaining privacy in communicating spaces.

To visualize these dynamics, simulated floor plans and usage maps were developed, categorizing the space's visitors into users, volunteers, staff and external visitors (those frequenting adjacent spaces), highlighting challenges and opportunities for the redesign of inclusive learning environments.

3.2.2 Participatory initiative: revitalizing public space

The second phase, titled “Off Campus: here I would like to...,” was a collective initiative aimed at everyone who passes through and experiences the Off Campus San Siro space. Drawing inspiration from Candy Chang’s interactive installations [13], we were able to engage residents, passersby, staff and users to stimulate exchanges, discussions and a shared reimagining of the spaces. The goal was simple yet profound: to explore perceptions of the spaces and gather dreams for their future, with the slogan “Off Campus: here I would like to...” serving as an invitation to envision ideal uses, actions, and atmospheres.



Figure 1. Off Campus San Siro display window facing Via Gigante.

The installation, set up inside the Off Campus San Siro display window facing Via Gigante (Figure 1), gradually took shape thanks to the spontaneous participation of passersby: participants filled out A5-sized boards (previously designed by the team) with their personal information, indicating whether they lived in the San Siro neighborhood. Participants were also given the opportunity to freely customize the board with themed stickers: round ones for action verbs (e.g., “play,” “meet”), rectangular ones for characteristics and adjectives describing the space (e.g., “welcoming,” “flexible”), and a speech bubble to fill in as desired with intuitive suggestions. This relational device, visible throughout the neighborhood and in Piazza Selinunte, evolved from a symbolic concept into one rich with collective traces, transforming the point of contact between inside and outside into a catalyst for belonging and responsibility through tangible aspirations.

This intuitive and immediate phase directly involved those who frequent Off Campus and its surroundings, primarily service providers and users, resulting in a mapping of desires that emerged in a simple yet meaningful way: visions of more welcoming, flexible, and private spaces, which set the stage for the subsequent needs-assessment workshop aimed at collectively reworking these contributions. In this way, the showcase not only described and displayed the dynamics at play but also opened an open dialogue with the community, making the spaces visible and fostering innovative connections, in line with action-research practices [14] in the Off Campus sites across the Milan area.

3.2.3 Needs collection: translated into design guidelines

The participatory experience (Figure 2) at Off Campus San Siro concluded with the organization of a needs-assessment workshop, designed as an analytical session to identify the priorities and needs of users, visitors and staff. The workshop was structured around 8 key themes: flexibility, privacy, coexistence of activities, internal/external relationship, light/colors/materials, environmental comfort, informal social spaces and visual identity, with the aim of transforming the “Off Campus: here I would like to...” activity into concrete inputs for the design guidelines.



Figure 2. Participatory experience at Off Campus San Siro.

The workshop was structured in two steps:

- Priority evaluation: using thematic maps and ranking systems, participants assessed the relevance of the eight themes by using colored stickers to indicate how adaptable the spaces should be, how well they should ensure privacy from visual and acoustic disturbances, how well they should accommodate diverse activities in an orderly manner, interact with the courtyard and street, promote physical and mental well-being, ensure adequate environmental conditions and offer areas for social breaks and informal learning spaces for young users.
- Design refinement: using case studies, it was possible to encourage comments on post-it notes, translating desires into actionable guidelines.

The activities confirmed needs that had already emerged from the ethnographic research: spaces for informal learning, play areas for adolescents, privacy for sensitive conversations, flexibility for rapid reconfigurations and an attractive environment to engage young people.

3.3 Self-constructive approach: the mobile library module

The mobile library module is the most experimental component of the research [7], designed to be a traveling unit that, as it moves through schools, streets and squares, can activate the public space in which it is situated. Still in the development phase, the device was designed to create a relational space around itself, connect the network of existing spaces and act as a dynamic catalyst. The goal is to develop this module so that it can be used in the next phase of the design process, thereby completing the integrated system of inclusive education.

4 RESULTS

Overall, the methodology adopted made it possible to integrate field observations, participatory practices, co-design tools and design experimentation. This combination allowed the project to be viewed as a process of shared knowledge-building and as an active agent of social transformation. The project has created inclusive learning spaces that embody the outlined pedagogical and structural objectives, transforming vulnerable contexts into integrated educational platforms.

The inclusive library at the Fondazione Don Gnocchi has been designed as a dedicated space with its own entrance, open not only to patients but also to the local community. This design choice is a strategic element, as it helps redefine the perception of the hospital, transforming it from a closed facility into a space open to the community. The space hosts activities for children with neurodevelopmental disorders and their families, including participatory reading sessions, multisensory laboratories as Stanza Magica (Figure 3) - which proved particularly effective in supporting engagement, relational interaction and inclusive learning processes for children with neurodevelopmental conditions - and workshops for co-creating personalized books.



Figure 3. Inclusive library at Fondazione Don Gnocchi

These activities foster informal learning that complements the therapeutic process, extending the experience beyond the clinical setting and helping to reduce the perceived barriers between the hospital and the local community. At the same time, the “In Biblio” corner at Off Campus San Siro serves as a multifunctional educational hub, integrated into existing activities (Italian language courses, after-school programs and career guidance). In this case, the library is not only a physical space but a flexible platform that supports diverse educational practices and addresses the neighborhood’s emerging needs. Completing the system, the mobile library module (currently under development) represents a dynamic extension of the project. Designed to move between schools, squares and courtyards, the

module brings books, workshops and shared reading activities directly into everyday settings, helping to reduce physical barriers and expand access to educational opportunities.

In addition to creating physical spaces, the project has had a significant impact on relationships and the local community, fostering interactions between schools, hospitals and the neighborhood. Partnerships between the Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Off Campus San Siro, the Polytechnic University of Milan, Bocconi University, the University of Milan and local schools have helped build connections between sectors that were traditionally separate. This collaboration has helped strengthen the local system's capacity to respond in an integrated manner to educational and social needs. The observed impacts are articulated on two levels:

- **social**, with an increase in trust between institutions and the local community and a reduction in dynamics of isolation.
- **educational**, through the strengthening of inclusive practices and the building of a local network capable of combating educational poverty and marginalization.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The In Biblio con Chiara project demonstrates how the combination of diverse methodologies enables the involvement of different users (children with neurological conditions, migrant adolescents, families and professionals), creating a system that is transferable, replicable and scalable to other vulnerable contexts thanks to its methodological flexibility.

The research group thus responds to the Fondazione Don Gnocchi's need to expand beyond the traditional clinical setting, viewing Off Campus San Siro as an ideal platform for broadening its network. Future steps include effective collaboration between the two entities through participatory initiatives, working physically within the spaces to balance community roots with methodological innovation.

The creation of the educational network, already successfully launched, aims to expand further by leveraging the Off Campus network in the Milan area to consolidate a model of inclusive libraries as catalysts for educational equity.

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