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URBAN CORPORIS **FOUNDATIONS**

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01. La Lingerie. A permanent laboratory for co-design. The pictures portray moments of everyday life within the site. Credit: Arianna Scaioli.

Caring Foundations

The methodological project of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul Neighborhood in Paris

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Keywords: Architecture of Care, Ecological Stewardship, Feminist Design, Fragile Context, Design Methodology

Abstract

The paper Caring Foundations: The Methodological Project of the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul Neighborhood in Paris investigates how care, equity, and environmental responsibility can be understood as emerging foundations of contemporary architectural and urban design. To this end, the essay critically examines the regeneration project of the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul complex in Paris, which becomes the basis for a broader discussion on processes of care.

Against the backdrop of the climate and social crises, the study explores how certain design practices can move beyond technocentric or purely functional approaches, shifting instead toward frameworks grounded in ethics, collective action, and the interdependence between human and non-human agents. Furthermore, the analysis of the regeneration project examines the convergence between institutional planning and grassroots practices in the creation of an eco-quartier, highlighting how adaptive reuse strategies can intertwine with community care.

The essay thus proposes care as both a conceptual and operational tool, a design infrastructure capable of addressing overlapping temporalities and crises. The Saint-Vincent-de-Paul project emerges as an example of a paradigm shift: from architecture as object to architecture as process, negotiation, and maintenance. In this perspective, it redefines the “foundations” of design practice as a space of shared responsibility and creative dialogue, where issues of climate, gender, and social justice converge to generate new forms of urban inhabitation and collective well-being.

Introduction. Continuity and discontinuity of the architectural and urban project in contemporary times

Architecture and urbanism are always concerned with the future. Restoring the future to good condition does not mean more of the same, largely developer-driven and capital-centric architecture and urbanism, but rather a long-term commitment to planetary care based on human and non-human livability. We see an ethics of care as the most important perspective for an architecture and urbanism in our times of catastrophic ruination (Fitz, Krasny, 2019, p.12).

We live in a crisis-ridden time (Morin, 2020), where climate concerns are coupled with persistent social inequality. Environmental and social changes co-determine and impact each other, reinforcing and stratifying their effects, primarily on already vulnerable and underrepresented communities. These debates, although originating in fields external to spatial practices, intersect and reshape their boundaries (AA.VV., 2025). We, therefore, find ourselves in a historical moment in which plural bodies and voices seek spaces of representation and new forms of urban inhabitability, and in which the architecture discipline struggles to redefine itself within these rapidly changing horizons. Likewise, phenomena of climate fragility seem to be addressed through technocentric processes, often disconnected from local cultural practices, or lacking a reflection on the poetics of space that could be rethought.

In response to this scenario, a vision of the project is proposed as a cultural act of transformation that anticipates the future, becoming a process of re-negotiation of space, bringing to light the underlying power dynamics and the patterns of use that have informed it (Foucault, 1975; Aureli, 2020). The capacity of the project to convey new poetic and political values is therefore measured through an idea of architecture that “take(s) place differently” (Petrescu, 2007, p. 37). This act of subversion revives a movement of radical counter-projects that emerged already in the 1970s, as a rejection of the stylistic and design characteristics of the modern movement, of consumerist and capitalist demands, proposing a project of collective appropriation. An “Architettura di Sopravvivenza” (Friedman, 2010) which, in the urgency of “building less by better using what is already present in the places”¹ (Emery, 2011) and at the same time giving voice and space to marginalized bodies, confronts very different temporalities and moments of continuity and rupture; from the sudden temporality of catastrophic events, to the continuous temporality of emergencies, from the constant temporality of everyday life, to the sedimented temporality of social and gender inequalities in space. This recomposition of opposites is absorbed into the notion of architecture as a process, where these opposites become moments of a co-construction of space.

Within this framework, the contribution reflects and elaborates on the theme of Foundations, in which climate change, gender, and social inequalities intersect to generate a new procedural and design lexicon, new references, and new fields of project experimentation.

To explore this, the paper presents the methodological approach of the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul neighborhood in Paris, a project that sees the convergence of top-down visions with grassroots movements. A project which, starting from practices of spontaneous reappropriation of an abandoned urban area, generated incremental and widespread processes of care at the neighborhood scale. This project revealed its ability to keep the momentum by translating this cultural and revolutionary spirit into a long-term project. This approach highlights the ethical role of the practice. It combines environmental stewardship and equity-focused design achieved through a substantial process of care, which redefines the foundation of the design attitude when regenerating an urban fragment.

This means working from a perspective of responsibility for people and the environment, echoing Bauman's words, "To take a moral stance means to assume responsibility for the Other." By examining these "collective reconstructions" based on the "practice of curating", the paper underscores the entanglement between people and places in tackling environmental and social crises, shifting from the idea of "usagers" (Lefebvre, 1974) to that of agent. This empowerment stems from their visibility and proactive involvement in the design process, counteracting the asymmetrical effects of the climate crisis. What emerges from the design methodology presented is an ideological shift that lays the foundation for a new way of approaching the practice, grounded in social and environmental pulses.

Saint Vincent de Paul in Paris. A "factory of the common good"

The regeneration project of the former Saint-Vincent-de-Paul complex (17th Century) is a process of transformation and care of a disused site, which has successfully mediated top-down processes with a sensitivity towards grassroots participation and collective action. Located in Paris, in the heart of the 14th arrondissement, it was initially used as a novitiate and later converted into a maternity and children's hospital. The former complex was closed in 2012, and already in 2015, a progressive temporary occupation began. It was therefore decided to adopt an incremental strategy, whereby the project itself would become an "Opera Aperta" (Eco, 1962), capable of reactivating the site and becoming a construction site open to the community, even before the official opening of the buildings (Fig. 01).

In 2020, a second level of regeneration was initiated. A project to convert the disused fabric was launched to develop an EcoQuartier®, or eco-district. The reasons for this transformation can be traced to the Parisian municipality's political strategies to reduce the city's carbon footprint by 2050. For several years now, the city has initiated various urban transformation projects to improve energy efficiency and increase the use of renewable resources, thereby reducing urban energy consumption. Alongside this widespread regeneration process, Paris also aims to provide spaces capable of effectively responding to the increasing impacts made evident by the climate crisis, such as frequent and prolonged summer heatwaves, as well as hydrogeological risks linked to intense and sudden rainfall. In addition, the city of Paris is promoting micro-interventions to advance the concept of the 15-minute city. Through the restructuring of urban services and mobility spaces, these initiatives aim to reduce carbon emissions, improve air quality, and directly enhance people's daily lives and their experience of urban space. In this perspective, the regeneration of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul into an eco-district fits within a broader framework of interventions that aim to rethink the city's relationship to certain processes of vulnerability, while also sensitively engaging with the dynamics that emerged following its decommissioning in 2012. Indeed, the project, promoted by the public actor Paris & Métropole Aménagement (P&MA), acknowledged the potential inherent in the transformation the site was already undergoing, particularly in terms of cooperation and cohabitation dynamics, and outlined a project perspective for Saint-Vincent-de-Paul capable of integrating ecological stewardship and collective responsibility (Fig. 02). The theme of the ecological district thus combined sensitivity towards reducing environmental impacts with a strong connection to the residents.

The City of Paris had committed to building an eco-quartier on this public land that could accommodate different types of housing, from temporary housing for women who are victims of violence and vulnerable people to long-term housing, with support services and commoning spaces. However, given the size of the area, covering approximately 3.4 hectares, the construction work would have taken a long time, leaving a large urban void in the heart of the city.

In this context, and starting from the question “How can we use a temporarily available site in the heart of Paris boldly and generously?”, two associations, Aurore and Yes We Camp, together with the Plateau Urbain cooperative, promoted the Les Grands Voisins experience. The central concept was to create a “fabrique de biens communs, a more supportive, responsible and convivial way of producing and living the city”² transforming the former hospital into a space for hospitality and social experimentation through incremental actions of care and re-appropriation. This process of space occupation was from the outset aimed at hosting people exposed to various conditions of vulnerability – climatic, economic, and social – providing them with a safe space and creating conditions conducive to the development of local markets, ateliers, and common areas generating micro-economies. These widespread care practices have become veritable laboratories for experimentation, collaborative design based on solidarity, and ecological awareness. Community gardens, solidarity meals, craft workshops and business incubators are just some of the initiatives that have seen the reuse of specific buildings and the creation of temporary adaptive structures. Here, the motto zero carbon, zero waste, zero discharge translates into a sober urban design that combines the reuse of buildings and materials, reduces energy consumption, while simultaneously building a circular, solidarity-based community.³ (Fig. 03)

In parallel with these temporary reuse initiatives, the coordination of the urban project was entrusted to Agence Anyoji Beltrando. The first surveys were carried out in 2015, and design scenarios were defined based on public consultations in 2018, when the demolition of some buildings began. One of the buildings, La Lingerie, was converted early on into a hub for collective reflection on project definition. An antenna-space which provided not only a physical space but also a social space for developing activities to revitalise and transform the neighbourhood (Fig. 04). The architects defined a set of criteria that guided not only the design of the neighborhood, open spaces, and communal areas, but also informed the housing and service projects that were put out to tender and entrusted to various design firms. The neighborhood thus becomes a testing ground for different housing practices, where the idea of plurality, diversity of bodies, and housing needs is taken as the founding principle of the project. The urban criteria serve to spatialize the two issues at the heart of the project, namely environmental stewardship and equity-focused design, not as separate aspects, but as themes that reinforce each other in their mutual relationship.

The spaces of the former hospital complex were rethought, reusing 60% of the existing structures, thereby minimizing demolition, through adaptive reuse actions that could reconfigure the existing buildings. In addition, a series of infills and additions reconfigured the fabric of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul while maintaining a link with the traditional forms of habitation, recalling courtyard spaces at the ground levels of the new buildings, intended as collective areas. One of the blocks, the former Pinard maternity unit, has been converted into a collective care facility, with a day-care center, school, and gym. The courtyard is not only dedicated to these activities, but when schools are closed, it becomes a collective space for events. This line of intervention sees the ground floors and semi-basement spaces feature naturally lit and ventilated English courtyards, becoming spaces that host commercial activities, associations, and shared micro-economy, breaking the closure of the ground floors, making them highly permeable and connected to the outside. Beyond implementing reuse at the neighborhood scale, the project also adopted an upcycling approach. During the demolition and reconstruction phases, a systematic process of material recovery and cataloguing was carried out, with salvaged components used for new construction or to be recycled as aggregates.



02. Saint-Vincent-de Paul. A neighborhood under construction, where the former structure and elements remain as traces for the new uses. 2023. Credit: Arianna Scaioli.



03. Saint-Vincent-de Paul. Practices of reuse and care for a disused space and reversion into temporary accommodation for marginalised populations. 2023. Credit: Arianna Scaioli.



02. Saint-Vincent-de-Paul. Salle de Projects in La Lingerie. A space designed to host co-design activities becoming a living archive of projects and materials. 2023. Credit: Arianna Scaioli.

Finally, the unbuilt space was redesigned to establish a new balance between minerality and naturalness, implementing new vegetated areas that act as natural stormwater management systems and, at the same time, enhance local biodiversity. Through this intervention, the district maximizes evapotranspiration, positively influencing the increasingly frequent heat waves. The eco-district, therefore, not only achieves high energy efficiency standards, but also embodies a holistic rethinking of the built fabric, in which the urban plan mediates between human and non-human actors.

A methodological approach

The potential, as well as the radicality, of the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul regeneration project lies not so much in its formal component, which is not discussed here, but rather in the methodological sphere it proposes. This approach treats the neighborhood as an experimental laboratory-worksite, where transformative action embraces uncertainty and the idea of “working with doubt” (Holl, 2023) as the poetic essence of a process that does not seek definitive answers, but rather builds possibilities through listening, negotiation, and reappropriation.

The spaces resulting from this regeneration process are indeed the outcome of practices of self-organization and reappropriation, which, following the decommissioning of the pre-existing complex, subverted power hierarchies. The top-down project built a design alliance with local activists and associations, who thus became the drivers of both material and cultural transformation. The ephemeral temporality of the occupation was thus transformed into a project of space conceived to last, while remaining anchored in a logic of care for both the space and the people who inhabit it. In this sense, the project is analyzed as a prototype of an approach that intertwines space, time, and collective action, as a form of reinhabitation and transformation of abandoned urban fragments, to be understood both morphologically and relationally. A process that recalls Ricoeur’s triple mimesis, with prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration, where the project becomes a device for reading and rewriting places, starting from the experiences and daily expectations of the people who inhabit these spaces, up to the reinterpretation of places and processes of prefiguration that transform their character. The project itself thus becomes a process, an open infrastructure, where voices and bodies, times and places converge in the construction of shared questions. The starting point was not, in fact, to outline solutions, temporary or long-term, but to use the moment of the project as an opportunity for dialogue between institutions, communities, and associations to reflect and construct a shared question, outlining cross-cutting methodologies. The dual nature of this project thus emerges: to establish the process-project as a space for dialogue for everyone and by everyone, but also to restart actions of prefiguration and transformation from places that tell the story of the past. Designing in these contexts, therefore, requires a delicate presence, respect, and listening, in which the project neither wants nor must disrupt an existing condition, but rather gradually promotes forms of improvement, care, and the reactivation of ‘grey’ spaces, introducing hope. The Saint-Vincent-de-Paul project can therefore be interpreted according to a Deleuzian logic of assemblage⁴, where, through the operations carried out by local associations on the one hand, and the central political will on the other, it was possible to consolidate a heterogeneous network of materials, social, cultural, symbolic, and technical phenomena. This is translated into an open-ended design practice that has embraced and continues to embrace discontinuities and negotiations, and is necessarily grounded in the idea of continuous maintenance and care, both of space (consider the relationship established between the community and the use of shared natural spaces) and of people.

Focusing instead on the physical transformation tools deployed by the project, a central element and expression of the concept of care is the overwriting of the existing fabric and a new negotiation between human and non-human space (Tsing, 2015). This approach declines the idea of Project as a care infrastructure that works on different scales (Krasny, 2022), generating practices of mutualism and collective responsibility, as species activity “that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’” (Tronto and Fisher, 1990). “Here is where a feminist-inspired, relational, critical care approach begins to change our perspective entirely. Rather than thinking of buildings as things, thinking of them in relationships – with ongoing environments, people, flora and fauna – that exist through time as well as in space, changes the approach fundamentally.” (Krasny, 2022, p. 28). This becomes even more significant considering the urgency of the climate crisis, in which local-scale changes increasingly compel us to abandon the idea of an autonomous and isolated architecture, rediscovering instead the possible interdependence with the environment. Recently, H el ene Frichot has further explored this concept, proposing a vision of design practice rooted not so much in functionality as in a creative dialogue between the human and the non-human, echoing the fundamentals Krasny proposed. The systematic reuse of building components and entire structures, as well as the attention to permeable surfaces and green roofs, are not merely technical responses to a priori necessities, but constitute new spatial figures emerging from the crisis⁵ and fragility of the site and contemporary urbanity.

Care, equity, and environmental responsibility as design foundations

Reflecting on the project’s capacity to engage with issues intersecting contemporary life leads us to the necessity of formulating its foundations. The theme of foundations refers to a conceptual, theoretical, and cultural matrix, which positions the project not so much in terms of its (self-)stylistic definition, but rather within a conceptual framework capable of establishing the rules and principles through which architectural action can respond to social, cultural, and economic needs, as well as providing tools for critical reading through which to engage with society and space.

The study of the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul project allows us not only to highlight a series of design tools useful for repositioning architecture within social and environmental action, but also to reflect on the foundations that contemporary projects can assume when confronted with overlapping crises, such as environmental, social, and cultural ones.

The effects of climate change are not proportional; they mainly affect the most vulnerable people, and gender is a relevant factor in determining their ability to respond to the consequences (C40, 2019). The theme of care becomes a design paradigm at the intersection of the climate crisis, the social crisis, and gender inequalities as they manifest in urban spaces. The Saint-Vincent-de-Paul project operates on this dual track, in which the architectural project works on several levels: providing an immediate response to the emergency through reception facilities, and creating a space where solutions to reduce the impacts of climate change and forms of empowerment are consolidated through the project process. The buildings are designed to interpret and address these challenges through plural spaces, adaptable to the daily needs of different, non-standard bodies, and interpret the theme of well-being not only in terms of formal quality, but also in terms of physical and psychological well-being.

From an environmental perspective, in Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, we observe a shift from the use of purely environmental metrics to a concept of shared responsibility toward the non-human sphere. Vegetated spaces are not merely green surfaces applied between buildings, but become

relational spaces between human and non-human actors, where the community plays an active role in care and maintenance practices. This concretizes ecological stewardship as a form of distributed responsibility, non-delegable, which entails community actions and long-term practices. Together with the extensive reuse implemented on site, this frames the project as an agent of care for the built palimpsest, constituting a material practice. In relation to Elke Krasny's thought presented in the preceding paragraphs, positioning care as the foundation of the project situates it within a perspective that rejects the nature/culture and human/non-human dichotomies, recognizing a physical and conceptual continuity between environment, society, and technology. Care is therefore not only a symbolic condition, but a concrete action of maintenance, reuse, and adaptation. In this sense, assuming care as a foundation means observing architectural phenomena beyond their physical and formal dimensions, as the concretization of a value-based matrix that guides activities and relationships within the space itself, while also providing a conceptual framework to read the dynamics and processes of the project.

In conclusion, Saint Vincent de Paul can be framed as a methodological project of spatial transformation through community engagement. The project works on three interconnected operational dimensions that can be replicated in other contexts, not as a formal outcome, but as a process. The first concerns the transcalar approach, in which devices to mitigate climate change and reduce inequalities are introduced at different scales, from the masterplan design to the selection of construction materials. The second dimension concerns the ability of the project-process to act as a forum for dialogue between institutions and associations, becoming a platform for collective and democratic discussion on the future of a disused area. Understanding the project as a moment of dialogue contributes to the construction of a spatial narrative in which future inhabitants have been able to gradually appropriate the area through the idea of incomplete and transformable architecture. This dimension of time, individual and collective, institutional and civil, formal and informal, has been reinterpreted within the processes of incremental transformation of the area, leaving room for uncertainty and forms of spontaneous care.

This relationship between design, politics, ethics, materialised within the poetics of space, is found within a feminist approach to architecture, where the themes of care and the right to the city appear in the ways daily practices are integrated into the urban fabric and in how the morphology of cities differently influences and is influenced by the diverse modes of living and inhabiting.

Notes

1. "nell'urgenza di costruire meno utilizzando meglio ciò che è già presente nei luoghi" English translation by the Authors.
2. Project Saint-Vincent-de-Paul. Les Clés du projet. Available at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmn-nibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.paris-metropole-amenagement.fr/sites/default/files/2025-10/DepliantSVP_2025-PRINTBIG_BAT%20Light.pdf.
3. Paris & Métropole Aménagement. 2025. Saint-Vincent-de-Paul. Available at: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmn-nibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.paris-metropole-amenagement.fr/sites/default/files/2025-02/250221%20128-44%20%20Brochure%20SVP%20WEB%20BD.pdf>.
4. Here, reference is made to the concept of agencement proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, later taken up by Bruno Latour in *Reassembling the Social*.
5. As described by Michael Abel and Nile Greenberg (2025), with regard to the reflection linking architectural form and the complexity of contemporary crises, the form of the project can no longer be tied to a cause-and-effect conception, but rather "form today must emerge from crisis rather than merely respond to it" (p.15).

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