

# BDC

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

# 24

numero 2 | anno 2024



# BDC

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

Via Toledo, 402  
80 134 Napoli  
tel. + 39 081 2538659  
fax + 39 081 2538649  
e-mail [info.bdc@unina.it](mailto:info.bdc@unina.it)  
[www.bdc.unina.it](http://www.bdc.unina.it)

**Direttore Responsabile: Luigi Fusco Girard**  
**BDC - Bollettino del Centro Calza Bini Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II**  
**Registrazione: Cancelleria del Tribunale di Napoli, n. 5144, 06.09.2000**  
**BDC è pubblicato da FedOAPress (Federico II Open Access Press) e realizzato con Open Journal System**

Print ISSN 1121-2918, electronic ISSN 2284-4732



fedOAPress

Journal home page [www.bdc.unina.it](http://www.bdc.unina.it)

**BDC volume 24, issue 2, year 2024**

print ISSN 1121-2918, electronic ISSN 2284-4732



## **An opportunity to re-discover the complexity of inclusion. The experiences of Mantua**

*Un'opportunità per riscoprire la complessità dell'inclusione. Le esperienze di Mantova*

Martina Borini<sup>a</sup>, Carlo Peraboni<sup>a,\*</sup>

### AUTHORS & ARTICLE INFO

<sup>a</sup> Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

\* Corresponding author  
email: [carlo.peraboni@polimi.it](mailto:carlo.peraboni@polimi.it)

### ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

#### **An opportunity to re-discover the complexity of inclusion**

Cities are complex systems that integrate different elements to create inclusive, liveable spaces. The pandemic has brought significant changes, calling for a reconsideration of urban values and a new interpretation of inclusion, especially in vulnerable areas. Our study, applied in Mantua, in collaboration with the municipal administration, developed an inclusive knowledge framework and launched initiatives to address the new challenges of the contemporary city. Through a series of didactic, research and third mission activities, we have attempted to develop tools to address urban issues related to the themes of urban accessibility, inclusion, sustainability, co-design, proximity and involvement processes, like Placemaking approach. These experiences have led to the definition of six key concepts for the design of urban spaces: elimination of architectural barriers; rethinking the relationship between buildings and the city; integration of proximity in everyday spaces; valorisation of diversity and the human dimension; inclusive improvement for all; adaptability and flexibility of spaces. These concepts make it possible to understand and manage the changing the complexity of cities, supporting urban projects in continuous transformation.

**Keywords:** urban inclusion, accessibility, flexibility, social integration, community

#### **Un'opportunità per riscoprire la complessità dell'inclusione**

Le città sono sistemi complessi che integrano elementi differenti per creare spazi inclusivi e vivibili. La pandemia ha introdotto cambiamenti significativi, richiedendo una revisione dei valori urbani e una nuova interpretazione dell'inclusione, specialmente nelle aree vulnerabili. Il nostro studio, applicato a Mantova, in collaborazione con l'Amministrazione Comunale, ha sviluppato un quadro di conoscenza inclusiva e avviato iniziative per affrontare le nuove sfide della città contemporanea. Attraverso una serie di attività didattiche, di ricerca e di terza missione abbiamo cercato di definire degli strumenti per affrontare problematiche urbane legate ai temi dell'accessibilità urbana, dell'inclusione, della sostenibilità, della co-progettazione, della prossimità e dei processi di coinvolgimento, come l'approccio del Placemaking. Queste esperienze hanno portato alla definizione di sei concetti chiave per la progettazione degli spazi urbani: eliminazione delle barriere architettoniche; ripensamento della relazione tra edifici e città; integrazione della prossimità negli spazi quotidiani; valorizzazione della diversità e della dimensione umana; miglioramento inclusivo per tutti; adattabilità e flessibilità degli spazi. Tali concetti permettono di comprendere e gestire la complessità in evoluzione delle città, supportando progetti urbani in continua trasformazione.

**Parole chiave:** inclusione urbana, accessibilità, flessibilità, integrazione sociale, comunità

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## 1. Premise

The reflections shared here were inspired by the research we undertook at the Politecnico di Milano's Mantua campus in 2016. That year, thanks to a happy coincidence, we experienced an interesting and stimulating overlap between our educational activities and our collaboration with the Local Administration of Cerea (Verona), which had asked us to help provide an innovative reconsideration of the 'inclusive' dimension of its urban planning tool. What arose out of this was the idea to organise a workshop which we tasked with experimenting with new forms of education and promoting initiatives geared towards carrying out studies and research projects, with a view to not only allowing us to complete qualified educational paths capable of engaging with the range of issues affecting the town, but also providing the local administration with an opportunity to take on board a collection of reflections, developed at the various design scales in question, that could serve to spark a discussion on the merits of the proposed solutions and the different levels of feasibility (Figure 1).

The organisation and running of the workshop, entitled 'Places Without Limits: In search of new relationships in the city' made it possible to consolidate a research topic, developed in increasing depth over a matter of years by a group of researchers who were committed to gaining an understanding of how the issue of inclusion could shape and characterise the design of a city. As an experiment, the workshop represented a springboard for us that allowed us to launch a research project in October 2018: 'Mantua Human Design'.

The proposed contribution aims to provide an initial and partial report on our research activities by presenting the working topics and issues around which, through a collective work effort engaging on multiple fronts, we have consolidated some degree of understanding.

**Figure 1. Collective reflections and individual experiences**



Source: Author's photo

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## 2. Introduction: the complexity of urban inclusion

The common thread linking these considerations on the topic of inclusion of (and in) the city is complexity. The city has always been an example of a complex social system, and many of the considerations, analyses and conclusions proposed around the issue of urban inclusion must necessarily move beyond the disciplinary boundaries inherent to the study of urban systems, instead expanding out into fields that potentially involve every aspect of human existence. As such, we consider it crucial to highlight the three different approaches around which we have organised this article, to focus attention on the impact of the issue of inclusion when studying the mechanisms underpinning the formation and evolution of complex urban centres. An initial theme for discussion is the acknowledged need to start reconsidering the theme of urban design (Guaitoli et al., 2019), its constituent characters, and the full set of transformations it generates. Through this reconsideration, it has been possible to gain an understanding - albeit perhaps not always with the necessary lucidity - of the nature and intensity of the changes that are bringing about profound mutations in an ever-expanding city and in urbanised areas which, as a whole, lack a governmental perspective capable of suggesting visions for the future, placing faith in its citizens and, more generally, in the heterogeneous assortment of people who identify with the urban community that currently lives in the city, both physically and socially (Peraboni, 2024). Cities have traditionally been places in which opportunities are generated that could promote experiences of collective value and have historically been recognised as places of culture and innovation with the means to generate opportunities for economic growth. Today, it seems important to reflect - not least in light of the considerations offered by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - (ONU, 2015) - on what it now means to think of the city as a place capable of promoting an inclusive, resilient approach to urban development. A thorny issue, partly since, now more than ever, cities give rise to surprising and unexpected intermingling influences of places, customs and functions: influences that are amplified and propagated by means of the diffusive potential of the new information and social technologies available. Influences that give rise to unprecedented complexities and that require both methods of investigation and strategies for interpretation to be updated.

Over the course of the activities that were run, three different approaches to the theme of inclusion emerged - three approaches that serve to open our eyes to the importance of design that takes into account everyone's rights and to garner commitment to finding design solutions capable of speaking different languages, with a view to remaining comprehensible to the various actors involved in decision-making processes that are increasingly articulated and complex.

This dimension of urban complexity is the yardstick for inclusive design, and it aims to educate wider society, combating stereotypes and raising awareness, by working in all the different dimensions that interact with the design of the city. As such, the priority in this context becomes investigating the morphological effects of design, anticipating its perceptual characteristics, assessing its social interferences, planning the timescales for its implementation, etc.

Based on the idea that inclusion is a concept that reflects a society's desire to respect everybody's human rights, one which relates to every single person's right to be fully involved in all aspects of community life (UNESCO, 2008) the first consideration revolves around the theme of the spatial dimension of inclusion, which is traditionally more closely associated with the disciplines of urban and architectural design. Cities are traditionally places where disparities in how space is handled tend to exacerbate the socio-economic exclusion of the most powerless and marginalised

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segments of the community. Spatial inequalities are often the result of urban planning and regulation processes that fail to pay adequate attention to matters of inclusive design, or indeed to the possible interactions between the different types of urban spaces and inclusivity practices. Pursuing this line of thinking means seeking out potential spaces through which to cast light on the complex and possible interaction between the processes of city formation - which have the power to generate a sense of identity and belonging - and the ability to 'include' the different forms of urban life. Working to seek out porosities, confined spaces, marginal situations... to find areas within which to reconsider the inclusive capacity of a renewed form of urban proximity.

A second sense of 'inclusion' explored here has to do with educational inclusion. An issue of some significance that is rooted in a firm belief that to create inclusive societies, the members of the community must work on educational projects capable of embracing all the needs expressed by citizens, rather than working separately to accommodate different needs or disabilities. Educational inclusion should be considered a working strategy founded upon visions and practices that eschew designs based on the idea of being able to (or worse, having to) compensate for individual or collective deficits (Cologon & Thomas, 2014) and one which must be open to encompassing the full and articulated range of human complexity and diversity (Cologon, 2019). The underpinning assumption is that inclusive education can only be achieved by changing a community's approach to the concept of ableism, in other words a society's acceptance of a system that attributes different values to individuals based on predetermined ideas of intelligence and excellence in relation to criteria of normality.

A third meaning of inclusion explored here has to do with the need to assess how the opportunities offered by the spread of digital technologies can represent a chance to reconsider an inclusive dimension of the urban community. Over the last few decades, technology has provided a massive contribution to promoting different lifestyles and has significantly changed our interpersonal relationship systems. According to the social contexts and conditions that we operate in, the rise of technological capabilities can either create opportunities or exacerbate existing inequalities.

Every single day, we use the digital world to engage in a series of activities: a trend that has only been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. We use the internet and new technologies to work from home, acquire new skills, watch TV programmes and, more generally, stay up to date with the latest news. Indeed, there is no question that the transition to the digital world has created all manner of exciting new opportunities. That said, not everyone has equal access to these opportunities: for some, the digital world is not yet fully accessible, whilst for others, affordability is the barrier to access, and others still have not been taught the necessary skills to fully participate in them.

Three lines of thinking that our research workshop has engaged in and that we have put at the service of our university in different forms and under different circumstances.

### **3. Teaching, research and third mission: three different fields of work**

The reflections set out in this paper use a combined and complementary approach to build on the set of activities carried out by our research group over the last few years; working in different directions and with differentiated goals, we have engaged in a variety of experiments, all of which relate to the range of activities carried out at our university in three specific sectors: teaching, research and third mission (Figure 2).

The work being carried out in these three directions - which are fundamental to the life and growth of the university - has been done with the primary goal of promoting the interests of the institution and the university community, as well as those of civil society in its entirety. Achieving this goal involved promoting active partnerships with schools and universities; local, national and international public authorities; and scientific, cultural and economic institutions, both public and private.

For the teaching element, the module entitled 'Inclusive Design in Historical Context' that is part of the Architectural Design & History Degree Course, held during the previous academic year, saw 15 students involved in exploring inclusive design as a distinctive and characteristic element of the curriculum. This approach has fostered the development of systemic skills, an interdisciplinary perspective, a focus on innovation, and the ability to work in contexts characterised by interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral interactions.

About the research element, the activities are oriented in two directions: on the one hand, bolstering the theoretical research geared towards understanding the potential contribution of inclusivity in the context of urban regeneration, and on the other, analysing the interdisciplinary relationships that this topic forges with aspects and issues that are central to the design of the city. A reference that proved crucial when deciding how to direct our research activity came in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and especially the relationship that exists between Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and the rest of the goals established by the UN, which are considered vital to the overall sustainability of Planet Earth.

Finally, in reference to the Third Mission - which is defined by the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research Systems (ANVUR) as the 'propensity of structures to open towards the socio-economic context, exercised through the enhancement and transfer of knowledge' - the activity involved collaborating with the City of Mantua on drafting a Plan for the Elimination of Architectural Barriers (PEBA).

**Figure 2. Teaching, research and Third mission activities**



Source: Author's photos

The activities carried out in the areas of teaching, research and the Third Mission have helped to establish a knowledge framework that incorporates data and critical reflections on design strategies for urban development by experimenting with a Placemaking approach. Placemaking represents a multifunctional approach within urban design that brings together communities around places to foster their sense of belonging and to enhance the identity of urban spaces.

It reinterprets urban design issues in social and political terms by involving people and addressing relevant questions for their daily lives with special attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place. Placemaking inspires people to collectively rethink spaces and recognize their potential, fostering the connection between people and places to maximize shared values (PPS, 2007) It becomes a process of creation, co-design, and activation aimed at empowering the community for the re-appropriation, re-signification, construction, and care of community spaces (Chrysostomou, 2022). This organic and conscious approach reflects community needs and desires, improving the quality of their daily life. It brings together diverse stakeholders, enriching urban projects with varied perspectives and creating intangible values that enhance vibrancy and livability.

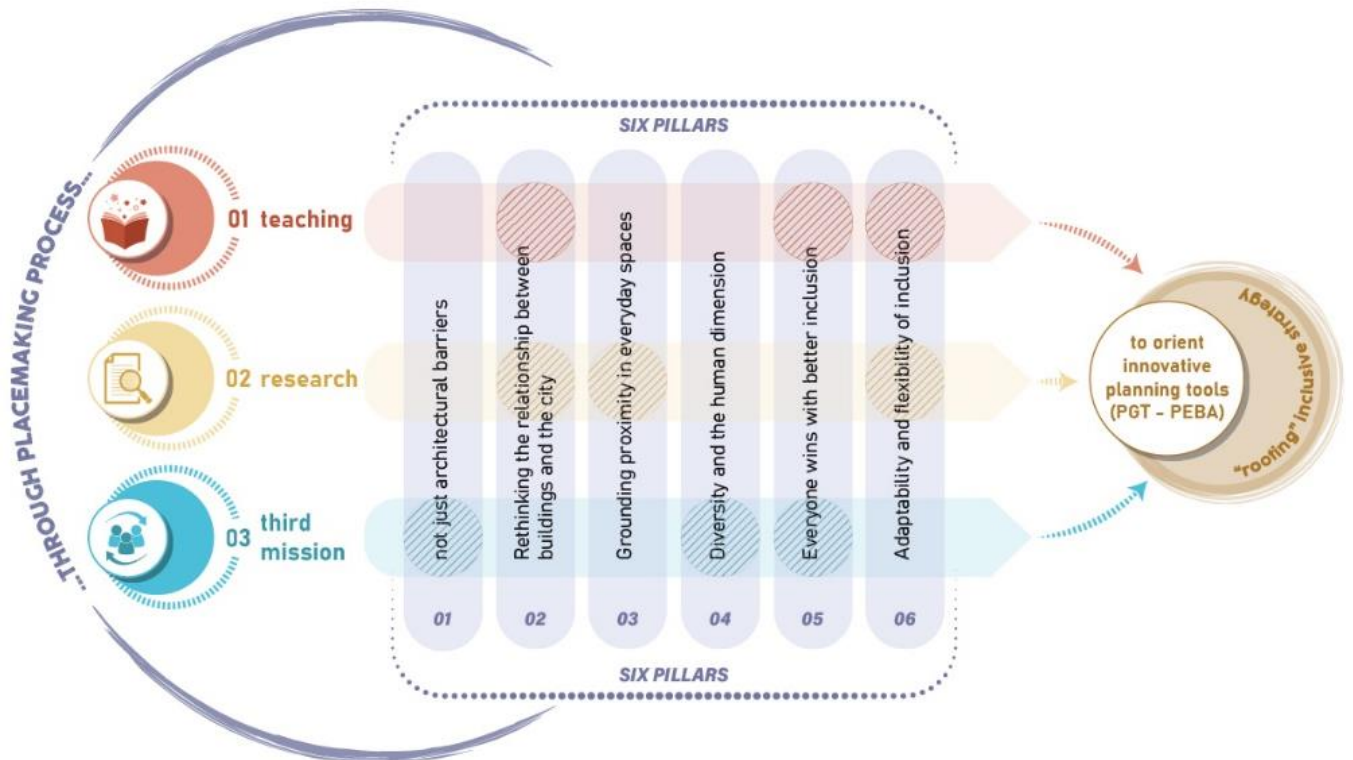
In this sense, the activities of teaching, research and the Third Mission, obtained using this placemaking process, allowed us to identify six design pillars that are essential to implementing increasingly inclusive, accessible, sustainable and resilient projects into planning tools. The goal is to improve quality of life for the communities living in and using the city's spaces. In particular:

- ‘Not just architectural barriers’ highlights the importance of making a city accessible to everyone by removing the obstacles that prevent people from fully enjoying the use of its spaces and actively participating in city life, thus ensuring equal opportunities for all.
- ‘Rethinking the relationship between buildings and the city’ involves considering the accessibility not only of buildings, but also of the surrounding spaces, with a focus on viability and mobility to allow for free movement.
- ‘Grounding proximity in everyday spaces’ is about an approach that addresses critical urban issues and promotes inclusion, rooted in sharing and caring for the mutual needs of people inhabiting the same space.
- ‘Diversity and the human dimension’ refer to considering public space as a collective and holistic experience, where the diversity of its inhabitants contributes to creating the complexity and richness of the external environment.
- ‘Everyone's a winner with better inclusion’ aims to create better cities for all, serving as a driver for innovation and an economic resource, with a view to improving overall quality of life.
- ‘Adaptability and flexibility of inclusion’ is about creating versatile urban spaces that can accommodate a wide range of users and uses, adapting in a reversible way. It focuses on both the result and the transformation process itself.

Each of these pillars - which will have a dedicated, in-depth analysis in the sections below - is crucial to effectively designing public space, in that they promote the cohesiveness of the community and improve quality of life and urban environments. The diagram below therefore summarizes the Placemaking approach that we constantly try to experiment within our activities, verifying every time the consistency of our actions with these six design pillars, derived from different activities of teaching, research and third mission activities. The scheme also shows that these activities address the six pillars in different ways, leading to a varied “rooting” of the inclusion strategy, which must necessarily be reflected in planning tools (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Six pillars to describe the complexity of inclusion into planning tools



Source: Author’s graphical scheme

### 3.1 Not just architectural barriers

Whenever we hear the word ‘disability’, we tend to immediately picture a wheelchair, a motor impairment, an impediment to a person’s free, independent movement. At the same time, we are all aware that - be it visible or invisible, congenital or acquired over the course of one’s lifetime - disability goes beyond mobility, spanning a vast spectrum of issues: visual, auditory, cognitive, motor, chronic diseases and many more besides. We can quite confidently say, then, that disability is an integral part of the human experience.

The experiments we have carried out have thrown into stark relief that the concept of disability is long overdue a radical paradigm shift. The collective conception of disability has long been occupied by the idea that it is a problem to be solved, cured or eradicated, and this has led to categories being established (defined with varying levels of elegance) that define people according to how close or distant they are from the canons of ‘normality’.

If we could extricate the concept of disability from the idea of a condition of deficiency or impairment, we could begin to develop the awareness that a person’s individual physical, sensory, intellectual or psychological ‘difference’ is nothing more than a natural variation of the human condition.

This paradigm shift formed the basis for the World Health Organisation’s redefinition of the concept of disability in 2001. A few years later, in 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) continued the work of bringing about this transition of interpretation. And in this regard, the Convention represents a tool shared by the international community to declare common values and goals geared towards improving the degree of social inclusion of disabled people.

Education and work are two areas of particular focus referred to in the Convention,

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calling on institutions and civil society to make a specific commitment. Education, training and work experience represent, as they do for everyone, crucial occasions in the life of a disabled person. As such, it is necessary to develop new pathways, services and technologies capable of adequately addressing these needs, moving past the concept of 'removing a barrier' and towards a condition of complete inclusion of the person.

Accessibility - insofar as it engages primarily on the material level of elements, i.e. establishing a fair and proper relationship between inhabitants and the built environment - is what makes it possible to move around and access all the urban and suburban components and functions that make up anyone and everyone's life, in other words providing the ability to use them, albeit differently, to achieve the same goal and derive the same degree of satisfaction. In this sense, accessibility should be understood as an important prerequisite without which people will find it difficult or even impossible to enjoy their human rights and feel that they can play an active part in society.

To remain focused on the anthropic components of inhabiting the urban environment, inclusion also brings up another important factor that is capable of characterising people's relationship with the environment: the interactions and relations they have with other people who belong to the community. This factor is distinguished by the fact that its effects are felt primarily on an intangible level. Inclusion engages with the issue of the identity of places, their history, their potential to be welcoming, their ability to educate people. And in this sense, the immateriality of inclusion involves the sphere of communication and orientation, of social, political and cultural participation, of independent living, of the safety of socially fragile individuals.

To better clarify these two concepts and how they are interrelated, it is key to consider the complex relationship that exists between an inhabitant and the urban environment within which their social relationships play out. These relationships are expressed through the condition of accessibility that makes the city useable, but also through the levels of comfort and wellbeing that urban places offer and express. These aspects relate to the psychological relationship that people establish with their host environment: as such, the environment can be hospitable or inhospitable, promoting wellbeing or distress depending on everyone's condition (Figure 4).

Environmental psychology has shown that in the inhabitant-environment relationship, people seek out and remain in places where they feel safe, that they are familiar with, or at the very least, that they have already visited on previous occasions. All these aspects contribute to facilitating, improving and fostering the individual's good relationship with these places.

The encounter between the two levels - material and immaterial - highlights how when we talk about inclusion, we must bear in mind that each person belongs to multiple different social categories. Acknowledging this condition of intersectionality allows us to understand how each person is defined in multi-characteristic terms and exists in a state of continuous evolution; understanding this condition means turning our attention to forms of discrimination that were previously ignored in the public debate due to the attention predominantly being devoted to categories of people who are particularly disadvantaged, to the minorities within the minority and the marginalised (Crenshaw, 2015).

Our experiments indicate that it is particularly interesting to gain an understanding of the times, places and situations in which these intersections occur, as well as which intersections garner the most attention when it comes to policy development. Intersectional thinking has recently been expanded to encompass environmental

issues, such as climate change and transportation. It could well be said that in social analyses, in policy or identity development, intersectionality has, historically speaking, always existed, though it may not always have been visible (Hearn & Louvrier, 2016) Acknowledging that everyone can express different social identities at the same time - which must be considered in light of the effects brought about by the relationship that exists between them - can therefore be taken as the first step towards constructing tangibly inclusive social and urban planning policies.

**Figure 4. Collective experience of urban accessibility in Cerea (Verona)**



Source: Author's photo

### *3.2 Rethinking the relationship between buildings and the city*

Places influence life and the quality of the urban experience that people enjoy, be they users, consumers, visitors or simply passers-by. They are represented not only by the urban voids and the public or green spaces distributed throughout the city, but also by all the other elements surrounding them. Building façades and their ground floors, squares, pavements, pedestrian and cycle paths, residential and shopping streets are all considered public spaces, in that they are places of interaction capable of creating relationships, both visual and physical, between urban elements and those who pass through them. Over time, many cities faced with significant infrastructural changes, the transformation of ground floors, the evolution of historical centres and the proliferation of land use - sometimes for a single purpose - have weakened the relationship that used to exist between buildings and their adjacent interaction spaces by increasingly disregarding and underestimating them at the design stage. Indeed, city planning rarely took into consideration where and how people undertook their social and public activities; for a long time, urban expansion was promoted with no regard for the actual needs and requirements of its main users, namely the citizens themselves. Given that the interaction spaces between buildings constitute the backbone of cities, around and along which urban settlements have always developed, the task at hand is therefore to restore the relationship between the built and unbuilt environments, striving to improve their accessibility by, amongst other

things, focusing on the road network and the mobility that allows people to move around and travel from one place to another. These public spaces represent the arena for people's lives, in that they are the places where the unplanned and social day-to-day activities of citizens unfold. They must be able to foster a flourishing mutually beneficial relationship between people's quality of life and the built environment that exists around them. As such, architectural forms must respond to people's needs by creating spaces that are functional, accessible and inclusive. What arises from this is a need to try and imagine and concretely design 'cities for everyone' in which accessibility is a consideration for both the buildings and the spaces in between them. We must shift from 'building the city' to 'being the city' (Campioli & Peraboni, 2019). To achieve this, we must study the relationship between these urban elements, examining how buildings can impact and contribute to - be it positively or negatively - people's public life, in terms of both size (height, dimensions, mass and scale) and functionality (intended use, interactions, etc.). To satisfy this requirement, we must not only design architecture and its exterior aesthetics to create a beautiful building, but, crucially, consider its relationship with its context, to create a city that exists at eye level (Karssenberget al., 2016). This metaphor is an appeal to once again design common spaces on a human scale in which buildings strive to establish a relationship between what is inside and what is outside. As a step in this direction, the ground floors of buildings can become hybrid interaction spaces that can adapt to fit the uses and functions that the city requires. They are diverse and active spaces capable of creating safe, effective urban dynamics, making for pleasant urban paths and locations where people can walk and feel protected. In urban design, ground floors are crucial and definitive of the quality of a lively, vibrant public space where different types of relationships can be struck up and cultivated. What's more, their intended use can also be adapted according to the building's location and functions, as well as the nature of the surrounding space. People pass by and walk near these buildings, constantly in and out, coming and going; it is only natural for these transitional spaces to become the location for a vast array of different activities that attempt to connect the buildings' internal functions with life outside on the street by establishing them as meeting places. Other nearby streets can also take on a different role: streets that contain buildings with accessible, transparent ground floors, for example, attract many more people than those filled with buildings that have long blind walls or small businesses that are not open to the outside world. These streets become urban catalysts with the power to foster sustainable development in a city by generating inclusive, accessible and sustainable spaces. By becoming desirable locations for open-air activities - as is often the case near certain businesses - streets also promote a collective experience of the public space and allow people the opportunity to derive pleasure from passing through different outdoor environments and locations. Further to this, whilst the main function of streets is to facilitate travel from one place to another, they have been imbued with a multitude of additional meanings; indeed, in the context of town planning, they take on a vital role in driving the social and economic life of the community. The space between buildings, therefore, is made up of various elements that take on a different role according to the intended use of each of the buildings, the presence of pavements or other paths, of meeting spaces or green spaces, the nature of the street itself, and much more. Each of these must be meticulously designed to create an increasingly inclusive and accessible city where people are the main actors. As such, the attractiveness of these interaction spaces is synonymous with urban vitality, in other words the presence of social interactions, exchanges, relationships between individuals, the coexistence of different experiences, efficient services, organisation and synergy between different

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situations that help to improve the quality of an environment (Campioli, 2020). There is a proverb that says, ‘people go where people are’, and this effectively encapsulates the essence of public life in urban spaces (Campioli & Peraboni, 2019). With that in mind, we need to rethink cities, making them more inclusive and accessible, creating rich and flourishing environments where people can find pleasure in simply existing, sharing and enjoying interactions with those around them, whilst also experiencing their surroundings.

### *3.3 Grounding proximity in everyday spaces*

Now more than ever, to respond to the assortment of global challenges and crises they are faced with - as highlighted by the recent pandemic - cities are being called upon to radically and innovatively overhaul their urban organisation and structure. This involves designing increasingly dynamic cities, starting with the dimension that characterises them, as well as attempting to reinterpret urban complexity by weighing up the needs and new demands of the area and the community living in it. In this regard, one concept that has garnered growing engagement from researchers and academics is that of proximity. Proximity makes it possible to imagine new dimensions capable of fostering wellbeing at different urban scales, created with a people-oriented approach, in which all services considered primary and necessary for all citizens are close by and easily reachable and accessible on foot or by bike. The city of proximity is constructed based on people’s everyday lives and an idea of liveable proximity, where people can find everything they need to not only go about their lives, but also do so in the company of other people (Manzini, 2021). A city that is envisioned to be open, dynamic, supportive, open to intermingling influences, capable of engaging with change, accepting it and welcoming different opportunities. It allows us to rethink spaces and recognise their potential, promoting the connection between people and spaces to maximise the overlap of their shared values. This liveable proximity is the result of a combination of functional and relational proximity. Functional proximity involves a diversified series of functions, a blend of public and green spaces, of residential areas connected with industrial and commercial ones, as well as different types of mobility. The prospect of rethinking cities, however, as the issue has been discussed in various national debates, cannot simply and exclusively involve seeking to establish this functional proximity through urban reorganisation, but must instead redesign and reconfigure spaces to provide a better quality of life and improved wellbeing for the communities that inhabit these cities. As such, functional proximity must necessarily go together with a relational proximity that represents a more immaterial dimension capable of facilitating connections between urban spaces and people as a means of developing the social interactions that constitute the very essence of the city itself (D’Onofrio & Trusiani, 2022). Perhaps unsurprisingly, when in proximity, people find it easier to meet, collaborate, share their experiences, and forge collective identities to be passed on. Through people’s constant interactions and exchanges with different ideas, habits, traditions and cultures, it becomes possible to build a diversified community in which everyone is not only included, but indeed considered key players in the constant changes that the city undergoes. Over time, people begin to trust in others and to recognise these spaces as places for interaction that are capable of consolidating and spontaneously generating opportunities for people to come together. These relationships instil people with a sense of identity and, gradually, a sense of belonging and attachment to the spaces they frequent, transforming them into people-oriented places where their feelings are allowed to flourish and where, in time, they make memories. These feelings, however, are not merely inspired by

their being in close physical proximity, but rather by the emotional and affective involvement they develop with their surroundings. As such, what fundamentally underpins the concept of proximity is not only a need to redevelop places in the city through design activities, but also, crucially, to generate diverse communities that can stand the test of time and take care of themselves in a self-sustaining way (Manzini, 2021). To this end, it becomes essential to use proximity as a means of educating the community on responsibility and care for the places they visit daily, promoting a 'sense of place' that could rekindle a 'sense of belonging' in every citizen. By making people responsible for the transformations that take place in their local area, they will be more inclined to take care of both their surrounding environment and their fellow citizens.

Reinterpreting the urban dimension of the city in this sense makes it clear that it is the city's 'voids' that are most 'full', in that they are where proximity seeks to ground itself and take root: these are the places in streets, pavements, squares, open spaces and all urban areas that tell the story of a community and its culture. These places are repositories of the life, attitudes, behaviours, dynamics, rituals and customs of citizens who, over time, have transformed an apparently empty space by continuing to inhabit it over the years, defining its intrinsic identity and cultural qualities. All that is open, social, common, shared and collective is the intangible and immaterial glue required to make proximity practices work within the urban spaces of contemporary cities (Colafranceschi & Noguè, 2021). In this regard, urban and local policies should hold up the urban strategy of proximity as a fundamental principle for improving the diversity and functionality of any urban settlement, in all its material and immaterial complexity, as a means of rebalancing the city's spaces and creating new and improved living environments: places that are more wholesome, healthy, inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Mecca, 2023). If proximity is to become a potential urban strategy for reactivating and reorganising cities, however, it must also be considered as a potential design approach within the town planning tools that guide and regulate local regeneration processes. Indeed, many cities are currently considering a possible overhaul of their urban planning tools, as they were originally developed during a historical period with different needs in terms of housing, lifestyle, employment and mobility that make them poorly suited to interpreting the urban complexity of the modern world. With this in mind, an overhaul of these planning tools offers an excellent opportunity to reorganise the city as interpreted through the lens of proximity. A radical transformation such as this, even at the urban planning stage, could prove to be capable of aligning the various urban policies and actions to strive for proximity, inclusion, sustainability and resilience.

### *3.4 Diversity and the human dimension*

The contemporary city, when observed with specific reference to the European context and western cities in general, is fundamentally characterised by three significant changes that are heavily interconnected, namely: the environmental crisis, which is an issue that stems from the unsustainable consumption of natural resources, resulting in an ever-growing concentration of pollutants and rising incidence of the consequent changes to the climate; the social and economic crisis, which is linked to the progressive weakening of forms of welfare that are no longer adequately supported by the dwindling employment opportunities in the most heavily industrialised countries; and the crisis affecting the urban space that contains, amplifies and outwardly manifests these phenomena. Urban systems reflect these rapid, large-scale transformations, which are accentuated by the conditions of social

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pluralism that we live in and that we are called upon to engage and interact with.

Some of our experiments have shed light on how the progressive extension of the urbanisation process that our cities have undergone has, for a long time, highlighted the need to turn our attention to the issue of the composition and articulation of resident communities (Guaitoli et al., 2019). Urban communities that represent the conceptual evolution of the forms of aggregation described in a fascinating essay by Ethan Watters entitled 'Urban Tribes' (2004) In his essay, the author remarks upon how with the advent of postmodern society, the younger generations are forming small groups - 'tribes', even. A conceptualisation borrowed from an earlier work by Michel Maffesoli (1988). Whilst Maffesoli's essay does not, understandably, address the effects of the digital culture that exploded in the latter half of the 1990s, it does tackle the macrosystemic issue of the crisis of individualism, which is considered the cornerstone of the modern urban experience.

Nowadays, communities change according to the types of social ties that produce them and the demographic characteristics of their members, which is why having an awareness of a community's descriptive characteristics is becoming an increasingly important concern. The 2017 Annual Report produced by ISTAT marked the institute's first experiment with interpreting households by categorising them into groups, conducted according to a statistical methodology that made it possible not to predefine the outcome of the classification in advance through the lens of certain characteristics - such as role within the production process or job position held - but instead to articulate the identification of social groups based on their characteristics, painting a more complex and nuanced picture capable of offering interpretations, including in terms of heterogeneity, of the socio-economic and structural characteristics found across the country. Through examining the static variables, this type of survey allows for a more refined interpretation of the demographic makeup of the country; examining the dynamic variables, meanwhile, offers insights into the directions of the changes that are underway in society (ISTAT, 2017).

The different characteristics that define the social groups identified therein make it possible to interpret the contexts and effects of income differentials, as well as to cast light on the combinations of elements that help to understand the inequalities in equalised household incomes. ISTAT explains that the growing complexity of the world of work has sparked an increase in the diversity that exists not only between occupations, but also within the same occupational roles, thus exacerbating both long-standing inequalities between social classes and fresh inequalities within the same classes.

Regardless of any considerations relating to the results achieved, it seems important to highlight that the Institute of Statistics saw a need to review its descriptive profile in relation to a social component as significant as the household. This should prompt us to establish more open and nuanced approaches to learning, with the ability to experiment with elaborations that serve to pinpoint the characteristics that make the different urban communities recognisable as a means of promoting consciously oriented strategies.

This radical transformation of the urban condition influences - perhaps even revolutionises - the conditions of urban life, our perception of how people live in cities, and the wide array of hopes and anxieties that we tend to associate with the urban environment. And when we talk about the conditions of urban life, we are talking about 'the conditions of the life of mankind' (Bauman, 2006).

Any design for a city capable of faithfully adhering to the situation presented by space and society must respond to not only the physical and cognitive accessibility requirements of the places within it, but also the requirements for social inclusion

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and ties with the community living in said places.

Urban fragmentation - which is responsible for segmenting and creating distance between the individuals and social groups living in the city - leads to new forms of social marginalisation, making relationships between people, places and activities increasingly difficult. This is a condition that translates directly into social fragmentation, inevitably leading to as many ways of experiencing and relating to public space as there are people (Carmona et al., 2008).

And in this regard, the destandardisation of social behaviours and remote working have also significantly contributed to differentiating how urban spaces are used and the forms and degrees of social cohesion.

At the community level, the multiplication of the forms and timeframes that work has taken on has resulted in a reduced probability of random encounters with people in our own social network and, consequently, in a need to redefine the mechanisms of cohesion and rootedness that are traditionally based on the population's social and occupational homogeneity. 'The consequence is that people are forced to negotiate where and when they will meet other people' (Borlini & Memo, 2009), and this is a task that falls to everyone, with the general consequence of synchronisation with others becoming more challenging, thus resulting in an even greater need for mobility in ever-larger spaces and with increasingly limited timeframes.

### *3.5 Everyone wins with better inclusion*

If we wish to grasp the scale of the phenomena we are dealing with when talking about inclusion, it would be wise to pause and reflect upon three simple figures: the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that over a billion people - approximately 15% of the global population - suffer from some form of disability, with only 5% of these disabilities being congenital; 80% of people with disabilities live in developing countries, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); and the World Bank estimates that 20% of people living in poverty around the world are disabled. Whilst it may be true that it is the common understanding that people with disabilities are considered to be the largest minority in the world, we must bear in mind that unlike most other groups that make up minorities, the size of this social group is in constant flux: any one of us could, at any given moment, become a member of it due to an accident, an illness, or simply the natural progression of the ageing process.

The figures quoted here - which are no doubt conservative estimates - open our eyes to the fact that the fundamental goal of any inclusion policy should be to broaden the range of opportunities for these people to participate in by making it possible for them to access the many different social, cultural, educational, sporting and other activities that the world has to offer. Involving this community means allowing them to expand their participation in quantitative terms and, more importantly, opening new opportunities in terms of improved enjoyment and a better quality of experience for all participants in any given event. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (2013), in his essay entitled 'The Inclusion of the Other', highlights that 'inclusion of the other means that the borders of the community are open to all: including, most importantly, to those who are mutual outsiders or who want to remain outsiders'.

In short, a conception of universalism that is sensitive to the differences inherent in a unified, open and inclusive humanity. Our experiments have shed light on the importance of taking a relational approach, where the emphasis is placed not on resolving a person's disability, but rather on what the context can do to ensure that everyone is equal and fully able to participate. In this regard, working to resolve a disability must be taken as an opportunity to work towards innovating the product



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(or process) and an excellent opportunity to create social and economic value that can ultimately serve everyone.

It is no coincidence that the option of working on innovating the creative process is a cornerstone of the project dubbed the 'New European Bauhaus', designed and promoted over the course of 2021 by the European Commission (EC, 2021) as a means of promoting sustainable solutions to transform our built environment and lifestyles as part of the green transition. The aim of the initiative is to facilitate a profound, collaborative and multidisciplinary transformation of society on three fundamental levels: first, quality of experience, with a particular focus on aesthetic quality, in a way capable of promoting safe and wholesome living environments; second, sustainability, in terms of its usefulness as a strategy to maximise elements of circularity; and third, inclusion, understood as the ability to promote and deliver better living conditions for the communities living within the European Union.

On 15 September 2021, the Commission adopted a communication establishing the framework, fundamental principles and key actions that will make it possible to move from co-design to delivery, highlighting the four main themes that will guide the implementation of the initiative: 1) reconnecting with nature; 2) regaining a sense of belonging; 3) prioritising the places and people that need it most; 4) fostering long term, life cycle and integrated thinking in the industrial ecosystem. A particular focus was placed on the issue entitled 'Transformation of places of learning', geared towards prompting the individuals and organisations engaged in educational fields to reconsider the development of projects aimed at the younger population (Figure 5). The aim is to select proposals that focus on transforming places of learning, as well as introducing innovative teaching methods that are capable of garnering involvement from local communities and that reflect the values of the New European Bauhaus. Once again, the goal is to put forward a fresh vision for the process, specifically one capable of concretely reaffirming the idea that when everyone is included, everyone is a winner.

A second reflection has to do with the opportunities that a systematic focus on the issues of inclusion can generate about product innovations, as well as the benefits that these innovations can offer everyone. The theme proposed here as an area for discussion is that of Paralympic events - events that are now of global importance and that demonstrate the potential value of sports in terms of inclusion. Sports offer countless opportunities to study and develop training methods, mechanical aids and tools for carrying out activities, electronic signallers that notify the athlete of the different stages of a race, sensory assistants that guide athletes along the correct route or indicate their proximity to obstacles or the boundaries of the field of play, and all manner of other innovations. And whilst the Paralympic Games present an opportunity to demonstrate how sports can be an arena for inclusion - and not exclusively in terms of aiding people to overcome their physical limitations - their value goes far beyond this: the work that the athletes put into training and preparation serves as an extraordinary field for experimentation as a means to innovate products which, in a logic of progressive technology transfer, can also offer benefits to other people with functional limitations, such as the elderly, pregnant women, and even simply people travelling with luggage.

As previously mentioned, the concept of 'people with functional limitations' includes those with physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, age-related impairments, or any other conditions that affect the performance of the human body - whether permanent or temporary - which can interact with various barriers to result in limited access to products and services, thus causing a situation that requires said products and services to be adapted to accommodate their specific needs (EU, 2019).

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Viewed through this lens, it quickly becomes clear how the experiments carried out have highlighted how the potential to improve the living conditions of a community can be realised by expanding the range of fundamental activities and functions that can be performed without discrimination, including by people with disabilities; what's more, they have allowed us to observe that working towards resolving the problems faced by disabled people can offer up opportunities for growth and to improve quality of life for everyone who, be they differently abled or otherwise, live in and interact with our cities. Essentially, working to reduce the limitations faced by some can prove to be of value to all.

**Figure 5. 'Transformation of places by learning' in Carpi Campus experience**



Source: Author's photo

### 3.6 Adaptability and flexibility of inclusion

Cities and urban settlements are characterised by continuous evolution and transformation, insofar as they could respond in an adaptive, resilient way to unexpected and unforeseeable events. These events, be they positive or negative, influence the main functions of a city and profoundly affect quality of life for those who live there. In this dynamic context, public space plays a crucial role as a key element in the transformation of cities, adapting to meet emerging urban needs. Its flexibility and versatility stem from the diverse range of activities and functions it supports, encompassing not only social and economic roles but also cultural and political ones, while accommodating a variety of users. All these characteristics are qualitative elements of public space that allow it to cater to a variety of needs and challenges in both the short term and the long term. What's more, they make it possible to trigger a process of urban and social redevelopment within the urban fabric that is capable of innovating and creating alternative synergies. These urban regeneration processes, however, involve lengthy lead times due to the complex bureaucratic procedures they entail and the many different resources to be employed. Indeed, the traditional procedure that controls the management of urban transformations makes it difficult for administrations to take prompt and effective

action on the local scale to respond to the needs and requirements of the citizens they serve. The dwindling resources available to local authorities make the prospect of attending to the city's needs even more challenging (Bazzu, 2019). Considering these realities, bottom-up actions are one of the adaptive responses to addressing the needs of citizens in the face of the apparent immobility of public administrations, tackling an inability to implement top-down projects, and acting on a local scale. As a step in this direction, Lydon and Garcia (2015) attempted to introduce an urban development strategy that does not require significant resources, but that is nonetheless capable of prompting a reaction from the public administration, making communities' needs visible, and achieving long-term results and permanent innovations that include all the city's various stakeholders. The concept they developed was dubbed 'tactical urban planning': a design approach with the ability to improve the city and its spaces through temporary interventions. Tactical urban planning is founded upon a set of collective practices geared towards generating shared, short-term, low-cost urban transformations with a high potential for replicability. Its purpose is to test out to what extent certain interventions are capable of not only bringing about spatial transformations, but also building a community that can collaborate to achieve a common goal. Although these transformations may not always become permanent fixtures, they seek to improve the liveability of urban spaces by generating immediate benefits as well as long-term results. In this context, 'tactical' can refer to any low-cost action or transformation that can be quickly and easily replicated and scaled to suit different urban settings and situations, and that is intentionally created, designed and developed to effect long-lasting change through an iterative process. What's more, these local measures are also considered a means of changing the community's attitude towards a space, thus generating new social relationships. It is worth pointing out that tactical urban planning is not intended as a replacement for traditional urban planning, insofar as it is merely a tool for preliminary experimentation, but it does represent a fundamental means of immediately reactivating certain public spaces in the city. Tactical urban planning offers a suitable approach to multiple areas of intervention, such as mobility for pedestrians and cyclists, resolving conflicts between mobility and liveability, and improving the experience of public spaces. This approach has a range of advantages, including: taking into account the actual needs of users and citizens through listening and active participation; improving interactions between the city's stakeholders, such as non-profit organisations, local businesses and local administrations, as well as increasing the public engagement of citizens; serving as a low-cost primary investment before forcing local administrations to commit to significant investments which they cannot guarantee will be successful; offering a reversible option for any measure; seeking to leverage citizen participation to provide a creative response to local problems that are specific to a context and a community (Mohankumar, 2020). It is worth highlighting that, as places and the people who live in them are never static, tactical urban planning does not aim to propose one-off solutions, but rather flexible responses that are appropriate for different urban situations. This perspective helps make it possible to imagine a dynamic, resilient city that is keen to work with its citizens to explore an approach with the power to effect long-term transformations, but equally the ability to adapt to the inevitable changes in urban conditions. A tactical urban planning project promotes experimental workshops intended to breathe life back into the city and its community by establishing new urban catalysts, which can be places for social and cultural interaction. Citizen participation and involvement play a crucial role in this process, from the initial conception phase all the way through to implementation. Participation has proven to

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be a particularly virtuous and effective process in that it is capable of producing solutions that are more collectively advantageous as a result of the collaboration of multiple people working towards a common goal; what's more, it represents an opportunity for all stakeholders to get involved and discuss their strengths and desires with one another, drawing upon different kinds of skills and expertise, mobilising their energy and passion for a cause (Paba, 2003).

#### **4. Conclusions: future scenarios of urban inclusion**

Cities occupy a central position in the national and international public debate on strategies for future development. They are centres for public and private innovation that must foster forms of social and cultural interaction between their citizens by promoting increasingly sustainable, resilient collective practices (Pierotti, 2023). The past few years, marked by economic, health, climate, and demographic crises in the post-pandemic world, have highlighted the fragility of contemporary cities' social, economic, and spatial structures. In response to these challenges, cities worldwide are being urged to reassess their internal structures, primarily through a radical rethinking of urban planning and design practices. Central to all measures and projects must be policies and actions focused on inclusion, sustainability, and resilience. This approach focuses on enhancing the livability of urban spaces, making them more accessible and inclusive by offering a variety of services and opportunities for all citizens. It underscores the role of cities as hubs for sharing, connection, learning, promoting social interaction and fostering a sense of community with an emotional dimension. These spaces are seen as vital for cultivating responsibility within communities. As communities are dynamic and constantly evolving, they drive significant changes in the places they inhabit, highlighting that designing cities is a continuous transformative process.

In this context of constant change, innovative planning tools are needed to develop effective design solutions that address both people's needs and public policies guiding local development. While many cities have tools regulating land use and urban transformation, they lack the foundations and actions required to adapt to contemporary challenges of the city. These tools, designed for a past era with different needs, are insufficient for addressing today's complex urban issues.

As a result, cities have found themselves having to reconsider and review their planning tools to find effective answers to the collective and individual needs of citizens as they demand new ways of living, working and travelling in the area they have made their home. For example, the city administration of Mantua recently announced an overhaul of its Territorial government Plan (PGT) as it seeks to integrate urban actions and policies that champion the principles of accessibility, inclusion and proximity, with a view to ensuring that its designs can improve the quality of services and spaces for its citizens. As another step in this direction, the city has also drawn up its Plan for the Elimination of Architectural Barriers (PEBA) to monitor, design and plan measures aimed at achieving an optimal threshold of usability for all citizens in its buildings and spaces, promoting an ever-growing level of inclusion. In this sense, the drafting of a PEBA, as an integral part of urban planning and public policies on inclusion, involves activities - like workshops, surveys, interviews - aimed at overcoming the physical and architectural barriers present in the city. This process involves various stakeholders who, through a placemaking approach, actively contribute to the design of the city. Engaging in this way made it possible to achieve a deeper level of integration between the issues of inclusion and the regulatory and policy-based aspects of planning.

At the end, PGT and PEBA are just some of the planning tools in a city's toolbox;

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they can be taken as a solid point of reference - rather than a mere prediction - for future urban planning, highlighting the need to be able to read and interpret the wide array of phenomena impacting upon the contemporary city and understanding their possible consequences in advance. They offer a glimpse of the potential to promote planning tools that are capable of dialoguing with a system of values, as well as collective and individual practices specific to each urban situation, “rooting” inclusive strategies able to encourage an organic vision for a city that must become more inclusive, sustainable and accessible for everyone.

### **Funding**

This research received no external funding.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Originality**

The authors declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, in English or any other language. The manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. The authors also declare to have obtained the permission to reproduce in this manuscript any text, illustrations, charts, tables, photographs, or other material from previously published sources (journals, books, websites, etc).

### **Use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies**

The authors declare that they did not use AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing of the manuscript; this declaration only refers to the writing process, and not to the use of AI tools to analyse and draw insights from data as part of the research process. They also did not use AI or AI-assisted tools to create or alter images and this may include enhancing, obscuring, moving, removing, or introducing a specific feature within an image or figure, or eliminating any information present in the original.

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