

# Proceedings of the OpenLivingLab Days Conference

*Co-creating Innovation:  
Scaling-up from Local to Global*

2019

The logo for OpenLivingLab Days is a yellow circle containing the text "open living lab days" stacked vertically. To the right of the text are three small yellow triangles pointing right, and to the right of those are three small black dots stacked vertically.

open ▶  
living ▶  
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days

# European Network of Living Labs

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**The “Call for Papers” encouraged contributions from three different paper categories to stimulate a diverse participation of actors: Research Papers providing consolidated scientific research; Innovation Papers showing case studies from a practitioner perspective; and Research in-Progress works, presenting relevant preliminary results.**

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# Adapting the Urban Living Lab approach to marginal contexts and urban regeneration: the case of Mapping San Siro Lab

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**Category:** Innovation Paper

## **Abstract**

The aim of the following paper is to offer a reflection on the role and the characteristics that an Urban Living Lab could assume in processes of urban regeneration of marginal and deprived contexts of contemporary cities. The paper analyses Mapping San Siro case study: an on-going University-promoted Lab, opened in 2013 in one of the biggest Milanese public housing neighbourhoods (Milan, Italy). After briefly introducing the potential of Urban Living Labs in urban regeneration, the authors will contextualize the case study within the approach, highlighting the most significant points of contact. To conclude, they will open up the reflection on critical points to be considered when orienting an Urban Living Lab to the local development of a marginal context.

**Keywords:** *Living Lab, Transportation, ICT Tools, Big data, GIS, Decision-making*

\*\* Although the paper is the result of a collective work of the two authors, paragraphs 1, 2 and 5 should be attributed to Elena Maranghi; paragraphs 3 and 4 to Francesca Cognetti.

## **1 Introduction**

In the last decades, in the Italian context, the topic of urban regeneration and local development of marginal and peripheral areas has expanded its boundaries and meanings, becoming a more and more complex arena, characterized by the presence of very diverse actors. Increasing importance was especially gained by citizens and local organizations, considered able to interpret and bring out local resources and competencies, essential to develop successful interventions, especially in an era of scarce availability of funds.

In Italy, the concept of participation – as applied in the Nineties to urban regeneration – was progressively overcome by the ones of social activation and social innovation: notions that are questioning the mere information and consultation to which participation risked to be confined in the widespread institutional approach to urban policies. As a result, nowadays, local communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) are assuming a more and more active and direct role in the transformation of their own environment and in the fulfilment of their social and cultural needs.

But what happens to especially fragile communities or populations, not always able to promote or actively participate in local development processes?

It appears urgent for engaged researchers and practitioners in urban regeneration to question themselves on the development of effective tools that could support the transformation of local citizens and organizations in truly empowered actors, able to promote and “control” changes, but also to claim for effective institutional support.

## **2 SoHoLab project: questioning Urban Living Lab methodologies in marginal context**

Currently, it can be observed, indeed, how marginal territories suffer from a lack of chances in terms of bottom-up promoted regeneration. On the one hand, because of the difficulties for especially fragile populations to access to certain languages or tools (among other factors because of a substantial digital divide); on the other hand, because of a widespread sense of distrust, generated by the perceived “absence” of competent institutions, which seem to be no longer able to promote effective policies in such contexts. As a result, the process of exclusion of these territories is currently worsening.

In the last years, applying the Urban Living Lab (ULL) approach to urban regeneration has been seen as promising to tackle this issue: existing literature has especially underlined their potentiality in terms of transformation and enlargement of urban governance and of empowerment of the different social actors (Concilio, 2016; Steen & van Bueren, 2017; Nesti, 2018; Naumann et al., 2018). ULLs are described, indeed, as “cross-boundary objects/arenas” and knowledge creative contexts (Concilio, *ibid.*), able to connect stakeholders and relevant actors at different levels (institutions and the so-called “users”: here, citizens, dwellers, communities); and, at the same time, capable of fostering social innovation (Naumann et al., *ibid.*) through the emphasis given to co-design and co-creation, as elements able to promote a really participated change.

Indeed, as several authors have pointed out so far (Hakkarainen & Hyysalo, 2013; Concilio & De Bonis, 2012; Franz, 2015; Ståhlbröst et al., 2018), even if considered to be valuable tools in developing smart and innovation strategies in the urban context, the academic debate on ULLs in urban studies still remains underdeveloped and unclear, especially when coming to a more socially-centred orientation of this approach (Franz, *ibid.*). Moreover, so far ULLs have rarely addressed deprived and marginalized contexts and superdiverse (Vertovec, 2007) communities, characterized by severe conditions of social, cultural and economic exclusion.

Started in 2017, the SoHoLab Project “The Regeneration of Large-scale Social Housing Estates through Living Labs”<sup>7</sup> has, indeed, the aim to establish and evaluate how ULLs could deal with the regeneration of social housing complexes, focusing on the role of University-promoted Labs<sup>8</sup> and aiming «to develop an action research to effectively deal with the social-spatial exclusion of residents in underprivileged large-scale social housing estates in Europe through a Living Lab approach<sup>9</sup>».

### **3 The case study: Mapping San Siro Lab**

Moving from these general statements and assuming the framework of ULLs as developed so far, as Politecnico of Milan team we have started to question ourselves on if and how it was possible to “translate” (Franz, *ibid.*) the technologically-centred approach to ULLs to a more socially- oriented one especially addressed to marginalized contexts, starting from our own on-field experience. In fact, The SoHoLab project involves as a case-study an already existing and on- going experience in which we are involved in as researchers: Mapping San Siro (MSS) Lab. Supported by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies and by Polisocial Program (Politecnico of Milan public engagement program), MSS was started in 2013 as a workshop activity, involving the participation of a group of students, researchers and teachers, interested in challenging the negative narratives associated to San Siro neighbourhood, one of the biggest public housing complexes of the city<sup>10</sup>, and in producing shared and “usable” representations that could effectively trigger local change. Thanks

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<sup>7</sup> Financed through the JPI URBAN EUROPE CALL 2016 - ERA NET COFUND SMART URBAN FUTURE the SoHoLab Project (2017 – 2020) involves three Universities: Vrije Universiteit Brussel (international coordinator), DASTU – Politecnico of Milan and AHTTEP – AUSSER – École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture Paris La Villette. The project also includes non-academic partners at national levels. More information available on the website: [www.soholab.org](http://www.soholab.org).

<sup>8</sup> The approach is developed, tested and refined on the basis of a retrospective evaluation of existing projects in Paris, of action research in an ongoing LivingLab experience in Milan and a new one in Brussels.

<sup>9</sup> From project proposal

<sup>10</sup> Located in the North-West part of the city, not far from the city centre, San Siro is composed of about 6.000 housing units and with a population of about 10.000 inhabitants, the neighbourhood is characterized by the presence of fragile populations and by strong socio-spatial inequalities and intercultural/intergenerational conflicts (around 50% of the population are immigrants, with about 85 nationalities represented). Despite being also characterized by the presence of diverse and strongly committed local actors (associations, cooperatives, groups of inhabitants), San Siro has always been heavily stigmatized in public discourses with the effect of worsening its exclusion from urban dynamics. More information on the website [www.sansirostories.com](http://www.sansirostories.com) (developed by Master in Journalism of Università Cattolica of Milan together with Mapping San Siro) and on [www.mappingsansiro.polimi.it](http://www.mappingsansiro.polimi.it).

to the involvement of local actors, the workshop was particularly successful and a group of researchers decided to continue to work in the neighbourhood. In 2014, MSS obtained from Aler – the Regional Agency for Public Housing of the Lombardy Region, which owns and manages the housing stock – the possibility to re-open a vacant shop in the neighbourhood, located on the street level, which became the headquarter of the group.

It was the beginning of a new phase: inhabiting a space and becoming a locally rooted actor, on the one hand developing research and teaching activities on three main topics – home and dwelling conditions; courtyards and public spaces, non-residential vacant spaces – and, on the other hand, trying to tackle the urgent issue of promoting participated local change, in a neighbourhood characterized by abandonment, distrust and inertia. We have defined our presence on the field as situating (Cognetti & Castelnuovo, 2019): building significant relationships with the context and gaining an internal perspective to the neighbourhood through a long and slow rooting process. An aspect which profoundly shapes the other two dimensions of our practice: inquiry (embedded research) and acting (promoting participated change).

#### **4 A local research-driven Urban Living Lab?**

Even if MSS was not intentionally started as a ULL, but as an action-research experience, several elements could be identified that it shares with the approach (among the others see Concilio, *ibid.*). In particular, elements that – even if already present in the broader approach – should be taken into particular consideration in order to steer the ULL approach when dealing with marginalized contexts.

(1) *The centrality of the co-research phase for co-learning and co-design (inquiry)*: as broadly known, LLs are based on a co-creation approach that directly involves the so-called users. To our experience, when coping with marginalized and fragile contexts, particular attention should be paid to make the phase of co-research as inclusive as possible: identifying and highlight a shared and co-constructed vision of problems and resources, especially by significantly linking scientific knowledge with common knowledge (Dewey, 1938), produced by the so-called everyday-makers (Bang & Soresen, 1999) as to say dwellers and local organizations. Co-research is here intended as a mutual learning process (co-learning) which constantly shapes the phase of co-design. It is particularly relevant because it allows local actors to mutually acknowledge themselves a competence and a voice on issues concerning the neighbourhood and its possible transformation, empowering their ability to act<sup>11</sup>. As MSS, we have practiced this aspect in particular through the development and coordination of the local network of formal and informal organizations, called Sansheroes (see Maranghi, 2019), which became able to produce a shared vision on the

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<sup>11</sup> We refer here to the concepts of “right to research”, proposed by Appadurai in 2006, and of the one of knowledge as a “condition for development”, Freire, 1970.

neighbourhood and a platform of planning, elements that reinforced their capacity to interact with institutions.

(2) *Co-creation as an incremental process to experiment on effective cross-boundaries arenas (acting)*: in marginal context – where a relationship of mutual trust and acknowledgement of the different actors often needs to be re-build – we have experimented how the co-design of little and incremental pilot projects, which engages both institutions, local organizations and inhabitants, is a powerful tool to rebuild a learning-friendly context, fertile to acquire the ability of working together and generating new forms of governance. As Franz has already pointed out (ibid.), socially- oriented LL are usually concerned with process-based innovation rather than with product based one. To our experience when coping with marginal contexts, the ULL itself – as an arena of collective work – should be considered as a significant incremental outcome, capable of generating innovation in the way in which different actors interact. The University as a promoter of the ULL in this sense plays a key role since its “third position” allows it to effectively engage institutions, civil society, local actors and city level actors (Castelnuovo & Cognetti, ibid.).

## 5 Provisional conclusions

To conclude, we would like to share some open issues that we consider to be able to influence the “success” of so-called Living Labs in marginalized contexts. Elements that challenge, on the one hand, the competencies that we should develop as researchers and practitioners involved in the process, on the other hand, the possibility to activate practices able to produce a durable and scalable change in terms of local development/regeneration.

(1) *Situating*: spatiality and time matter. We have defined situating as the practice of conducting embedded research through the opening of a space in the field (specifying, somehow, the concept of geographical embeddedness of ULLs, Voytenko et al., 2016). The physical space could be considered the core of our activity since it helps to practice contingency (Karvonen & Van Heur, 2014): a constant process of co-learning – related to the “here and now” – grounded in facts, relationships and situations directly experienced and shared with the research field. We argue that when setting up a ULL in a marginal context opening a physical space matters: “being local” helps to build trust and reliability – both towards the institutional level and the local level – and it opens up access to different forms of knowledge (local one, institutional one, scientific one, etc.), key elements for urban regeneration. We recognize, however, that such a rooting process is profoundly demanding in terms of time and possibility to engage in a deep relationship with the context (Kondo, 2012).

(2) *Potentiality and limits of a local scale*. To intend the ULL as an incremental object, questions how not to be “trapped” not only on the local scale but in very minute issues (referring to San Siro, for instance, the transformation of public space in a neighbourhood where housing is the most urgent matter). Besides, it more broadly questions the ULL approach, tackling the matter of how to create a durable and significant change, even if starting from a very local dimension

(Steen & van Bueren, *ibid.*). In this sense, we are exploring the possibility to intend a ULL in marginal contexts precisely as a device to engage different actors – especially the ones usually perceived as distant from the local level – through the development of pilot projects, constantly giving them the chance to experiment new configurations of urban regeneration governance (co-producing knowledge, working together, etc.)

Both points, indeed, question whether do we have to intend local regeneration as an incremental process and, if so, ULLs as local permanent structures, always capable of reinventing themselves but at the same time to be stable and durable.

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## European Network of Living Labs

The European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) is the international federation of benchmarked Living Labs in Europe and worldwide. Founded in November 2006 under the auspices of the Finnish European Presidency, the network has grown in 'waves' up to this day. ENoLL counts today over 150+ active Living Labs members worldwide. Directly, as well as through its active members, ENoLL provides co-creation, user engagement, test and experimentation facilities targeting innovation in many different domains such as IoT, media, energy, mobility, healthcare, agrifood, societal transformation, etc.

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The Thessaloniki Active & Healthy Ageing Living Lab (Thess-AHALL) operational since 2014, and a unique setting in the city of Thessaloniki, Central Macedonia region (Northern Greece). The lab fosters initiatives encouraging regional development and healthcare systems sustainability by the provision of novel technologies and innovation. The lab is actively engaged with the end-users and relevant community stakeholders, actively pursuing co-creation and co-design of technological solutions to improve health and social conditions and facilitate independent living. Thess-AHALL aims to develop a business plan for self-sustainability, in line with the ENoLL's strategy, facilitating the people demand with the active involvement of SMEs within pilots.

The Thess-AHALL is governed by the Laboratory of Medical Physics, School of Medicine, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki which has essentially spun-off two commercial entities: the self-funded (University based) initiative LLM Care and Neuroanadrasi which was founded by members of the Lab based on exploiting the neuroscientific capacity of the Lab.