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PARTICIPATORY DESIGN EVENTS TO REACTIVATE URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS: A SOCIAL-DRIVEN EXPERIMENTATION IN THE NOLO DISTRICT OF MILAN

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Abstract

Contemporary urban spaces, here intended as vibrant outdoor and indoor places made of people and activities, suffer from a lack of integration between different areas that have not been adequately developed over time. This not always planned transformation of the urban pattern has led to the creation of some interstitial areas that remained inactive and stuck in an uncomfortable situation. The ineffectiveness of political-administrative practices still makes the reactivation of these areas extremely hard, leaving people and spaces inert and channeled in a vague and undefined destiny. These fragile interstitial areas are experiencing a process of a revival thanks to the strength and commitment of local communities which, through bottom-up activities, intend to reclaim the identity of the urban spaces. Although in recent years a request and proposal process, carried out between citizens and administrative authorities, has already been activated, people are trying to avenge an ever increasing right on the management decisions of their neighborhood in the perspective of a profoundly different future characterized by a sustainable recovery of everyday life.

This process of renewing urban districts is often assisted by external actors - such as companies, corporates and public entities - that help the community of citizens not just by offering economical support but also through design-led solutions. Co-design activities and other innovative collaborative processes can lead and support a reactivation of local communities and their relationship with the context of belongings. The activation of a participatory process for the development of future scenarios can be effectively stimulated by design-oriented intervention strategies in which the communities themselves can interact with a run-in system that encourages social innovation. The role of universities is extremely important in the process by establishing research activities that, carry out also through educational activities, fit in parallel with the commitment of local communities, generating targeted and effective intervention strategies.

The paper will present a work carried out in the NoLo district, a relatively new acronym that represents a portion of Milan that, after a past as a suburb with a complicated story of social integration, is flourishing thanks to a hidden artistic quality. The neighborhood, following urbanistic interventions in the XX century that on the one hand caused a social and space alienation on the other the creation of a miscellaneous cultural community, has been the stage of a social innovation process - illustrated in the paper - and oriented by practices of design-thinking. The collaboration was activated through the creation of a network between artists, shop's owners and inhabitants of the neighborhood in order to develop temporary art exhibitions in unconventional spaces. The work processed within the district by the students of the Master's Degree in Interior Design of the Politecnico di Milano, and merged into the "ARNOLD - Art and Design in the NoLo Social District" event, led to imagining future scenarios where the synergies between different actors, communities, places, and activities could be an extremely fundamental element in the innovative regeneration of urban districts.

Keywords: Design for social innovation, Social inclusion, Co-design, Design-thinking, Creative communities, Participatory design.

1 INTRODUCTION

The contemporary city is a place of contradiction and expectations generated by fragmentation, hostility and different dynamics that have changed its morphology; a space no longer perceived as an entity consistent and compact but as a diverse ecosystem that claims new care and understanding. This disruption of the city's grammar, which caused the creation of a system "*made of places and non-places*" [1], is due to the rapid evolution that cities have undergone in a period condensed in just two centuries. The reorganization of the urban pattern implemented in the twentieth century, above all due to urban pressure and new capitalist economic systems, triggered a gradual and inevitable transformation of the city. Modern cities have therefore become a container structured in specific

thematic areas: the business center, commercial, administrative and political areas, living quarters (well divided by social classes) and leisure areas [2]. Over time, the desire to transform the city into a purely political, economic and cultural place has produced a growing depletion of all those spaces linked to the world of industries. Entire districts consisting of imposing architectures and oppressive factories - witnesses of the distant industrial revolution - have turned into large wounds that are difficult to assimilate in the new urban fabric, the latter more based on a concept of demolition/construction than on safeguard/regeneration. Moreover, the widening of the railways and the creation of great road arteries have further segmented a situation already made of growing contradictions, limiting the expansion of some areas by condemning them to years of degradation and ghettoization.

The development of a global sensibility that opts for the re-use and regeneration of critical and disused areas in new possibilities for the well-being of a community is relatively recent; only in the last decades has been understood the importance of the re-appropriation of the culture of the territory for the purposes of the economic restart and development of a city. The spaces of contemporary metropolises linked to art, with their effervescence and multiculturalism, are the perfect places for the creation of ever new and stimulating scenarios aimed at improving the quality of life and the attractiveness of a specific context [3], [4]. Above all, thanks to the experimentations of the 60s and 70s that, in various fields of investigation, intercepted the lack of boundaries of the artistic experience [5], it has been possible to reconsider as positive resources all those places of social and urban distress now lacking of a particular function. In this perspective, cultural and artistic competences (as well as urban, productive and commercial) provide a new interpretation to design relationships between the city and its abandoned places with recovery difficulties.

One of these urban patterns located in the city of Milan was and continues to be the subject of a series of design-oriented interventions aimed at raising public awareness towards actions and responsibilities that people have to undertake for the well-being of their context of belonging. NoLo (acronym of North of Loreto) is the urban district in which an improvement process has been activated through a bottom-up path guided by the Politecnico di Milano which, through targeted university courses planned by the School of Design, has invested its own academic resources in activating a series of initiatives in this regard. The paper, after a brief excursus on some contexts similar to the one examined, will focus on the methodologies implemented during the pilot course "ARNOLD – Art and Design in NoLo Social District", in the MSc Interior Design Final Studio held by Davide Fassi, Laura Galluzzo, Anna Meroni and Xiaocun in the academic year 2016/17. The concept of the studio is linked to the use of art as a driving tool for social improvement, and on the personal experience as a student that led to the definition of a series of essential factors of cognitive simplification to tackle the project path.

2 CREATIVE NEIGHBORHOODS AND BOTTOM-UP PROCESSES

The urban context of NoLo examined here is one of the examples of neighborhoods that in the last two decades have seen changes driven by a desire for improvement blossomed more from the community of belonging itself than from the municipal administrations. This process of re-stitching the social fabric occurs through the bottom-up intervention model and leads to the interest of the single people who join together in a production and local development system, in order to improve the well-being, not only economical, of their district [6]. This model, unlike the top-down model oriented by a promoter (public or private) with sufficient resources to support a radical change of the entire neighboring area, draws more significant development from local capacities and from the synergic work of the actors involved, and is sometimes made possible by widespread cultural experiences that are transmitted by contagion, from one neighborhood to another [7].

As previously mentioned, the use of a strategy linked to artistic-cultural initiatives is perhaps one of the most effective choices for choosing a path of improvement and awareness of an urban fabric, decreeing it to be a success in terms of both satisfaction from citizens and high economic revenue [6]. This is the case of Azalea Park, a small area within the city of San Diego in California, where residents have chosen to work together to clean up, reinvest and promote this small neighborhood - lying in extreme difficulty due to a high crime rate - in order to create a community identity that revolves around a rich system of creative expression and public art [8]. The affordable prices and the extremely positive climate emanating from the district have led to the rapid repopulation of the latter by young creatives who have completely changed the neighborhood's destiny while maintaining a fruition of the working class and managing to avoid a process of gentrification. In the city of Milan, a significant case is the one proposed by the Isola district. The ductility of Milan in the twentieth century transformed the city into a living laboratory to test the new and frenetic models of contemporary metropolises. The cultural districts are born on the Milanese area as prototypes of a continuously changing community,

and the case of Isola is perhaps the first example of a self-propulsive model aimed at the birth of a creative microcosm. The name of the neighborhood derives from the particular morphological characteristic of having long been cut off from the adjacent city reality due to the construction of architectural barriers such as bridges and railways. This condition has left intact in the area a feeling of a small town that has allowed the maintenance of a strong identity capable of combining innovation and tradition. The progressive rehabilitation of the neighborhood is due to the relationship generated between a group of new arrivals, attracted mainly by profitable economic-commercial opportunities, and the inhabitants, stimulated by the hint of a positive change [5]. In more recent times, to counteract a progressive distortion of the district in conjunction with the latter's expansion towards the neighboring areas, Isola's creative community has generated some association (such as Island Art Center and Isola Social Center) that through collective and entertaining activities has triggered a thriving artistic production with a high social impact [5]. However, the driving force of creativity recorded even in the context of the Isola neighborhood has, as in many other cases, unintentionally implemented that fast process of gentrification and social inequality shown in the crisis of contemporary cities [9].

2.1 The context of NoLo

Differently from the experience of Isola, the NoLo district is an effervescent testimony and still in the midst of its natural development process. The district (now recognized by the administration itself) is an area in transformation composed of promising spaces, artisan laboratories, bars, ethnic and antique shops, art galleries, graphics and design studios [10]. It takes shape in a complex system that tries to connect enormous contradictory elements: from the architectural variety to the different ethnic groups, from the care of urban furnishings to the difficult social situations. The area is a frenetic and immaterial entity compressed between urban boundaries that are not yet completely defined and therefore constantly changing [10]. The rebirth of the area takes place thanks to the agglomeration of artists and new activities established in a particularly stagnant urban context. Everything is generated by a fortuitous encounter between native communities and migrant entities that have operated an energetic system of sometimes difficult cooperation (the enthusiasm also brought to the creation of a social district which, through a dense network of participants, attracts a large number of inhabitants).

Within these less traditional realities was born and develops a strong sense of *communitas*, especially among young people who, attracted by the extremely favorable prices and by the dormant potential of the area, have appropriated abandoned and unused spaces by activating a process of re-contextualization of cultural character that is attracting with magnetic fervor more and more individuals [10]. In fact, the first spaces born in conjunction with the idea of NoLo are galleries and associations that make art and culture their primary purpose. The birth of these spaces of creativity has not created places for their own sake but real platforms for exchange and sharing where it is possible to lead an active cultural and social life. In this case, the social district's tool has succeeded in spurring even faster (thanks to the weaving of an efficient virtual exchange network) the creation of cultural events in the territory. Neighborhood breakfasts and dinners, social activities in cultural spaces and cinemas are some of the examples of the effective system put in place for the development of this promising district. The proliferation of these new cultural and leisure activities has succeeded in putting in place an evolutionary process - typical of the bottom-up model - led only by creative forces of the single individuals. However, if this process of creating a new urban fabric proved to be extremely effective among the younger actors who were able, thanks to the potential of ICT (Information Communications Technology) to weave a network of social exchange, not the same can be said for the older community of historical presence in the neighborhood and immigrant citizens from non-European contexts and difficult integration.

The role played by the university activity of the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano has been configured in this sense as an essential tool both for the social mapping of the neighborhood and for the aggregation of different social/commercial/working contexts. As indeed argued by John Pløger [11], citizen-led democratic planning must explore and give visibility to the many different possibilities of action more than solve political-administrative problems. In this case, students and academic staff of the university course have tried to intercept the different wishes of the local communities to generate a further greater awareness among the individuals themselves by placing the district, and its problems in search of a resolution, in the spotlight of the municipal administration.

3 OBJECTIVES

Starting from the background presented above, the objective of this paper is to retrace a planning process previously faced as a student to extrapolate a basic personal reference methodology to be used in similar contexts. Although in recent years the theme of the reactivation of urban contexts through co-design practices has become extremely important in the scientific community, it is interesting to repeat, through the example that will be explained later, what were the basic characteristics of reading and interpretation of such a complex process that incorporates different actors, themes and contexts. As stated by De Rosa [12] *“the design education approach employed between the university environment and the social one is a strategy that enables community synergies”* and therefore requires the most hybrid use of different design disciplines that contribute to the satisfaction of specific challenges. From the use of well-established systems of co-design, we have tried to develop a methodology that would include and interpret those more visceral and direct elements to understand the contexts of action. The theme of co-designing urban and cultural spaces has been widely addressed during *“ARNOLD – Art and Design in NoLo Social District”*, the MSc Interior Design Final Studio held by Davide Fassi, Laura Galluzzo, Anna Meroni and Xiaocun Zhu at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano in the academic year 2016/17. The 54 students of the studio, divided into 11 groups, were called to manage a design concept from its conception and birth, through an exploration phase of the urban context, up to the prototyping and the subsequent insertion of the same in the context of belonging. Throughout the research process, we have tried to maintain a continuous involvement between the stakeholders and the community of citizens (traders and residents) in order to produce prototypes of art spaces that are as focused and effective as possible. The expressive abilities offered by art, and the widespread presence of artists in the NoLo district, were excellent start points to start to face the design path.

4 METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, it is important to activate a type of path that manages to understand the will of the citizens to activate a process of improvement of the territory. The challenge undertaken by the studio required the definition of a path that could draw from different fields of design, integrating them into an innovative approach, especially regarding the field of belonging of the students (interior design). The whole process of the five-month studio (from October 2016 to February 2017) required the students to undertake a design strategy consisting of on-field social experimentation activities, the use of dialectic systems in social contexts with integration difficulties and the creation of context-based data collection tools. In the case therefore inherent to the path faced in the district of NoLo the use of a process of co-design implies *“bringing together the different actors connected to the development of an urban space in a collaborative process of imagining and prototyping the future use of the space”* [13]. The methodology used is differentiated below among the actors involved in the whole process (those who have designed, guided or supported the entire process) and the actual design process divided into thematic and consequential phases. The third section, on the other hand, represents what the personal cognitive experience used in parallel with the design process planned by the course was.

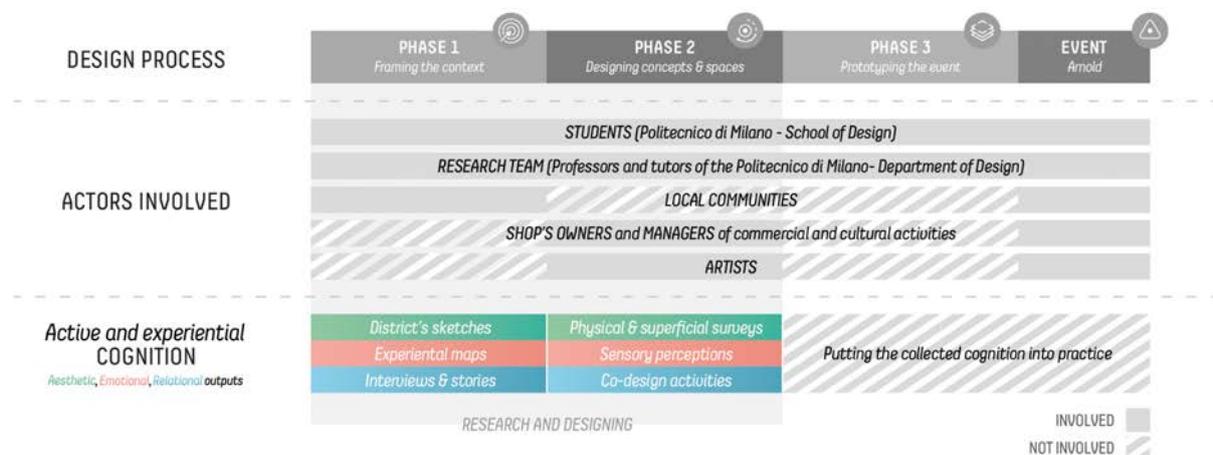


Figure 1. Diagram of the methodology used.

4.1 Actors involved

In order to implement a co-design path made of complex services and scenarios, it is necessary to request the participation of many different actors both from the public and private spheres, be they experts or non-experts [14]. Co-design is not connected to a specific set of methods or techniques but is, in fact, an approach to urban development that emphasizes the inclusion of a variety of actors in the imagination and development of new urban scenarios. In this case, therefore, we tried to give as much emphasis as possible to what we can define as the creation of a network among the various users affected by the project. The actors involved can be divided into two main groups:

4.1.1 Core Actors

- Academic staff (3 professors and 2 tutors of the Polimi DESIS Lab – a research team working on social innovation and social inclusion project from the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano)
- Students (54 people divided into 11 groups, each one with a conceptual theme, from the MSc Interior Design Final Studio of the Politecnico di Milano)

Core actors of the project are those who have created and managed the design process and those who have outlined the various proposals for action and planning. Students and academic staff of the studio have acted, with different methods related to their academic role, in all the different phases of the course.

4.1.2 External Actors

- Local communities (inhabitants and members of the NoLo Social District)
- 22 Shop's owners and managers of commercial and cultural activities
- 22 Artists (all connected to the NoLo district)

External actors followed each other in the various phases according to their involvement. If local communities needed for the discovery of the neighborhood were found and involved by students in the first phase, space managers and artists have entered in the design process for next steps. While the local communities were sought and involved independently by the groups, space managers and artists were researched before the studio started by professors and tutors and later matched together according to a scale of preferences drawn up by the students.

4.2 Design Process

The methodology of the course is based on the possibility of integrating different disciplines of the vast sphere of design into the design process. The students were asked to integrate elements of interior design, urban planning, service design and event design in a path structured in three main phases designed precisely to allow the consequential activation of all these elements. As expertly recounted in the book by Fassi and Camocini dedicated to the experience carried out in the context of NoLo [15], this holistic approach also embraces key aspects borrowed from social science methodologies to intertwine them with specific and contextualized design tools created ad-hoc [12]. The various project phases, briefly illustrated below, were structured by the academic staff of the studio to allow students to understand the use of the different disciplines clearly.

4.2.1 Phase 1 – Framing the context

The first phase allowed a deep immersion by the students in the main physical context of the project. The neighborhood – and its broader context - was defined according to its aesthetic and social qualities in order to verify, through the collection and articulation of qualitative and quantitative data, the different and contradictory nature of the neighborhood and its intrinsic design potential.

4.2.2 Phase 2 – Designing concepts and spaces

All the data collected in the previous phase were put in place to guide a strategy refined to the work context. After abandoning active research on the district, further data collection work was initiated through co-design tools and activities with space's owners and artists, both of which are necessary for the subsequent design of the art exhibition. The work of data collection and design was managed by each group independently in close contact with the reference users.

4.2.3 Phase 3 – Prototyping the event

The final phase of the studio was intended for the actual prototyping of the event scheduled for June of the following year. Students were asked to define a concept to be carried out in its entirety and to construct an action strategy to mend the baggage of actors and spaces involved in all 11 groups. At the end of the course, it was also required to organize a mini event (PoliNoLo) to be carried out in the spaces assigned as a taste of the next, and more structured, summer event.

4.2.4 Event

The actual event entitled "ARNOLD - Art and Design in NoLo Social District", lasting 3 days, took place from 9 to 11 June 2017 in the same art spaces designed during the studio. The event has been a big sharing moment for the neighborhood, letting local communities, citizens and curious people to join in the discovery of the different exhibition spaces.



Figure 2. Pictures taken during the 3 main phases.

4.3 Active & Experiential Cognition

Being spaces related to art and containing different social and design typologies, a very simple system of cross-disciplinary reading was defined to interpret the different phases and the different actors involved. Although the interpretation seems elementary, reducing everything to a grammar composed of three elements has proved to be extremely important to keep the whole process under control. Discovering, investigating and experiencing a place means to make an articulated and in-depth knowledge on different levels. The authentic spatial experience is a complex experience, which is realized in the dialectic of multiple sensitivities or in the field of a total sensory apparatus [16]. This type of experience cannot, therefore, be enclosed in a single category or a single narrative. Getting in touch with an extremely variegated context like a neighborhood in moments and with different goals gives rise to different perceptions and considerations, sometimes dictated by the analytical eye of the designer, sometimes by the designer's critical eye, or by the feelings of the urban flâneur and by the human relationships triggered with the social context of reference. These more or less precise objective visions that make up the soul of the place are therefore essential to deconstruct and better understand the context to characterize the subsequent project proposal effectively [17].

To complete a co-creative design process - following the previously described phases - it is necessary to activate a set of senses to intercept all the elements that can be found and designed. The subsequent design elaborations illustrated - and composed of the three macro-categories theorized and used along the way for maximum assimilation on different cognitive levels - are the result of a synergic work carried out by the team composed by the undersigned with Minghong Ou, Irene Sarlo, Martina Sciannamè and Andrea Soderò.

4.3.1 Aesthetic factors

This section, mainly derived from the first experience of the neighborhood, bases its analysis on a type of careful observation that is strongly focused on the objectivity of what the viewer can perceive. The considerations are conveyed through physical and superficial surveys, fundamental for the correct interpretation of the spaces.

4.3.2 Emotional factors

“Physical settings - simple or complex - evoke complex human responses in the form of feelings, attitudes, values, expectancies and desires, and it is in this sense as well as in their known physical properties that their relationship to human experience and behavior must be understood” [18].

The experience of a place is not only based on objective factors. On the contrary, the relationship between space and human being is strongly influenced by the subjectivity of the latter; this is why Donald Canter [19] speaks of a psychological place construct, while Debord and the other exponents of the Situationist International outline the profiles of psychogeography. Letting ourselves be carried away within the place, we find ourselves making the acquaintance of a different entity according to the time and the individuality of each one. Therefore, the approach to the project is less scientific and analytical, but more guided by a sensorial and personal perception.

4.3.3 Relational factors

Another way to collect information and define a different picture of the place analyzed is to observe the context through the more profound experiences of those who live in the neighborhood from and for a long time, sharing with them moments of everyday life. The observations and reflections are collected during experiences and group work, co-design activities, ad-hoc events created for the production of synergy in order to identify and design a system aimed at the correct and valid resolution of the project.

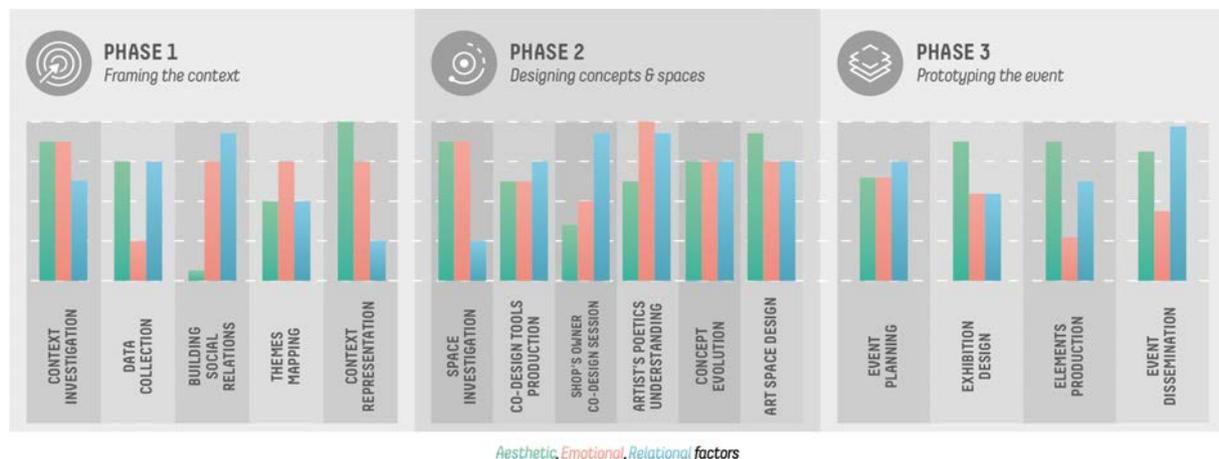


Figure 3. The Active & Experiential Cognition involved through the 3 phases.

5 RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

As for the actual organization of the course, the difficulties of managing the whole system were considerable. The critical aspects of the system have been tackled above all in the first phase of project dissemination and in the actual management of the resources to be obtained through sponsorships and external patronages. As regards the first point, the sensitivity of the social context was not so acute to allow a natural collection of information and the explanation of the positive aspects that this kind of paths could have benefited the community. However, the effectiveness of the proposed teaching model was confirmed by the various actors involved, and the results of the studio were tested directly in the final phase linked to the event.

Regarding the principles of the Active & Experiential Cognition, they have established themselves as a transversal interpretation and general simplification of extreme utility in keeping the project under control. If the three concepts were useful for the sensory collection of information, in the subsequent phases of prototyping they set themselves as key restitution elements for the final designed output. Through the phases has been created a narrative not only of a design nature (the concept) but also of a sensorial-methodological one, maintaining high attention also on the emotional elements that are usually overshadowed by a qualitatively scientific design path. The effectiveness of the system was subsequently re-proposed recently as a tutor in the studio “Contest Design Studio” in the MSc Interior Design Final Studio held by Davide Fassi, Laura Galluzzo, Anna Meroni in the academic year 2018/19. Although the project context this time has been limited to the redevelopment of the entire

architectural artifact of a former municipal market in the same neighbourhood, the 3-phase methodology experimented in the pilot course has been reused for the management of the project path. In the dialogue with the students, attempts were therefore made to stimulate the principles of the Active & Experiential Cognition by extending it also to the whole sensory sector defined by sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste.

Using a more visceral interpretation can be extremely important in managing the various dynamics related to this type of research. While being always in contact with a broad territorial, social and administrative context, it is essential to keep in mind a simple and intuitive practice. Each of these analysis tools used during the studio allowed us to understand better the objectives to be achieved and how to represent and return them effectively. The research and analysis on-field of a varied methodological package with an effective planning structure is extremely important to respond to the needs required by current social problems. Universities interested in the issues of social inclusion and social innovation must place themselves at the forefront in promoting a series of projects to embrace external communities, placing themselves as a key element in the expansion of urban realities and becoming a center of geographic, cultural and economic relevance [20].

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