The University as a Third Space for Collective Reading and Designing Intermediate Territories

PEER REVIEWED

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1.   The University between Local and Transcalar Dynamics.

The manifold crises and general instability related to European and global socio-political turmoil have increased inequalities in our territories, revealing latent fragilities and unexpected territorial dynamics.[2] The unprecedented condition affecting cities and territories has resulted in the return of urban buzzwords[3]—such as proximity, resilience—and the need to pursue strategies capable of building sustainable territorial systems. However, when these concepts are applied to physical space and its transformation, they require keys and tools proper to the disciplines of city and territorial design, which are called to redefine their role and build synergies within and for the territory.[4]

The university and its research infrastructures are not immune to these mutations. Educational processes are radically changing and there has

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[2] Simone Tulumello, Laura Saija, and Andy Inch, "Planning amid Crisis and Austerity: In, Against and Beyond the Contemporary Conjuncture," *International Planning Studies* 25, no. 1 (2020): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563475.2019.1704404; Alessandro Coppola et al., *Ricomporre i divari. politiche e progetti territoriali contro le disuguaglianze e per la transizione ecologica* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino spa, 2021).

[3] Jason Palmer, Ian Cooper, and Rita Van der Vorst, "Mapping out Fuzzy Buzzwords–who Sits Where on Sustainability and Sustainable Development," *Sustainable Development* 5, no. 2 (1997): 87–93.

[4] Valentina Orioli and Martina Massari, *Praticare l'urbanistica. Traiettorie tra innovazione sociale e pianificazione*, Urbanistica (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2023), 18

been a return to the discussion of the institution's active role within territories. Perhaps the most unexpected and radical outcome resulting from the recent urban crises is the resurgence of the territory's prominence. However, this is not merely in terms of a geographic entity, but rather as a situated manner of co-operating for the creation of a context capable of multiplying common resources.

In this moment of transition, the university—and the knowledge ecosystem it is able to coagulate around it—can be a strategic player in promoting and activating innovative cultural, social and technological actions and policies from close to and within the territory. In particular, minor institutions and more peripheral poles, are asked to redefine their roles and functions to prevent their gradual limitation. The idea is to turn the university into an "agent of territorialization"[5] that actively engages with the city and surrounding territories, effecting change and fostering processes and practices that address the challenges about sustainability, social inclusion and urban regeneration. Within these concepts, the university can grasp the aspects that are useful to the urban planning and design discipline and the possible leading action vis-à-vis a discipline subject to a necessary deviation from the scope of action, tools and research horizons.[6]

The university is confirmed as the place whose activities are increasingly characterized by dynamics of transcalarity and interconnection with global inputs, but at the same time it is located in a territory with which it interacts, contributing to change it. The reciprocity between the university and the territory is the driving force behind the necessity of engaging with the regional and local context, particularly in medium-sized cities and with detached campuses. This engagement fosters meaningful partnerships between knowledge institutions and local actors.

These reflections have matured over time in successive re-positionings of the activities proposed by peripheral university poles, particularly by departments dealing with project disciplines (engineering, architecture, design), which increasingly take the form of research-intervention. Indeed, a way of doing research is taking shape that reversibly tests hypotheses (projects, transformations) and multiple solicitations directly in the realm of the city and the territory. An approach oriented to constructing knowledge through the recognition of the value of unexpected, unanticipated effects that become design solicitations. It involves the direct participation of the researcher in opening the field to the imagination of multiple possibilities that can produce tangible consequences.[7] Within the framework of these methodologies of

[5] Michela Lazzeroni, *Geografie dell'università: esplorazioni teoriche e pratiche generative* (Milano: Mimesis, 2021):31.

[6] Pier Luigi Crosta and Cristina Bianchetti, *Conversazioni sulla ricerca* (Roma: Donzelli editore, 2021).

[7] Orioli and Massari, *Praticare l'urbanistica. Traiettorie tra innovazione sociale e pianificazione*.

investigation, there are therefore paths of potential engagement with territorial actors through the operational experimentation of project hypotheses in the study contexts, initiatives for the active involvement of students in accompanying local authorities in the drafting of plans and projects focused on development actions at the local and regional scale. The outcomes of these initiatives often translate into anticipations of reality,[8] capable of acting as a system, also fulfilling the role of a hinge between the new generations in training and the territories in which they live, with a view to usable knowledge[9] to promote renewed synergies that also affect the labor market dynamics of the territorial reality.

The Romagna context,[10] made up of a diffuse network of small and medium-sized towns, practical skills, and professionalism acquired in manufacturing, advances in production processes, social relations, and ways of using natural ecosystems,[11] presents itself as a rich case study to record this synergy and test it with some research hypotheses.

2.   A Territorial Campus.

The history of the de-territorialized headquarter of the University of Bologna, in Cesena (FC) represents a rather significant experience with respect to the topic the contribution seeks to interrogate. The birth of the University dates back to 1504 by Julius II who granted the formation of the Cesena Law College. The history of the Study of Cesena, however, came to an abrupt halt in 1800 when the privileges on which the right to *addottorare* was based were declared forfeited, in favor also of the surrounding major universities, such as the nearby University of Bologna, which became a mandatory reference in the regional context. With the traditional structure of the corporate professional colleges having lapsed, Cesena no longer had the ability to re-propose with convincing arguments the reactivation of its university, until the establishment of the Bachelor of Science in Information Science in 1989 as a branch of the University of Bologna. Over the years, the University of Bologna has invested, in collaboration with local authorities, in the development of the local Pole, until the establishment in 2001 of the Scientific-Didactic Pole of Cesena, which would later become a Campus, in order to allow the diffusion of

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[8] Laura Saija, *La ricerca-azione in pianificazione territoriale e urbanistica*, Metodi del territorio (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2017).

[9] David Adams, "Usable Knowledge in Public Policy," *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 63, no. 1 (March 2004): 29–42, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8500.2004.00357.x; Sebastian Jilke, Steven Van de Walle, and Soonhee Kim, "Generating Usable Knowledge through an Experimental Approach to Public Administration," *Public Administration Review* 76, no. 1 (January 2016): 69–72, https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12488.

[10] Romagna is a historical, geographical and linguistic region that for almost its entirety forms together with Emilia the administrative region of Emilia-Romagna.

[11] Enrico Brighi, Valentina Orioli, and Stefania Proli, "Il progetto urbano ai tempi della rigenerazione: esperienze sul campo nei centri minori della Romagna," *EcoWebTown-Journal of Sustainable Design*, 2019.

the educational offerings and the activation of a stable research reality in the area.[12]

This renewed need probably stems from the emergence of unprecedented processes of productive specialization that affect the territory of the province of Forlì-Cesena[13] and give rise to a new economy that is both globalized and locally specialized, requiring a local accumulation of knowledge and expertise. What Bagnasco calls a "territorial amalgam of economy and society"[14] that needs the presence of the university to fuel its production processes. A process that is reinforced by the Law n. 168 "Ruberti", which allows the budding of large Italian universities that trigger interesting processes of dialogue with early urban regeneration processes, as in the case of the Bologna university with the regeneration process of the former sugar factory in Cesena.

The evolution of the history of the Cesena's Pole provides an idea of how the university is a (s)object closely linked to its context of reference, in the opportunities and criticalities of its social and cultural contribution and to the forms of spatiality related to its presence and action in the territory. A relatively peripheral university reality that lends itself to be analyzed in its role within the ecosystem of local learning and innovation, both as a "geographic object, whereby the evolution [...], of its development models and its presence in the territory is read in response to the processes of change taking place at different scales"; and as a "geographic subject, that is, as a potential protagonist of the general socio-economic and cultural development."[15]

2.1   Cesena University Pole as a 'Third Place' for Research and Innovation.

The Cesena Campus already in its architecture and because of the position it occupies in relation to the historic city has gradually positioned itself as an activator of processes of territorialization and urban change, and is still engaged in the search for and definition of its own place[16] made up of relations with society and the surrounding area. Important activations in view of its peripheral location, which become an opportunity to define itself as part of a community and a network of local actors, able to contribute to the design of strategies in and for the

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[12] Information, further summarized, on the founding and development of the University of Bologna's Cesena Pole can be found on the institutional website of Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna, which can be accessed at the following link: https://www.unibo.it/it/campus-cesena/presentazione-e-organizzazione/la-storia-del-campus-di-cesena.

[13] Brighi, Orioli, and Proli, "Il progetto urbano ai tempi della rigenerazione: esperienze sul campo nei centri minori della Romagna."

[14] Arnaldo Bagnasco, "Città in cerca di Università. Le Università regionali e il paradigma dello sviluppo locale," *Stato e Mercato* 24, no. 3 (2004): 455.

[15] Lazzeroni, *Geografie dell'università: esplorazioni teoriche e pratiche generative*, 8.

[16] Thomas Bender, *The University and the City: From Medieval Origins to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press on Demand, 1988).

territory, to offer opportunities for meeting and exchange with and for the local citizenship.

The hypothesis is that the campus could follow a trajectory of transformation of university space and networks toward a "third place" configuration—referring to the notion proposed by Oldenburg—[17]that is, an inclusive institutional context suitable for stimulating the contamination and circulation of knowledge, a local node in the knowledge network[18] and a meeting point between different territorial scales. The transformation in the third place could take place on two registers: a spatial one, which is concerned with opening and making porous to the outside the physical spaces of the university (e.g. laboratories, university libraries), making them places of information community;[19] a cognitive one that involves sharing moments of knowledge production (conferences, meetings with local bodies and actors, public and private), thus enhancing the generative and usable[20] component of knowledge.

It is in this perspective that the CARTA Laboratory—City Environment Networks Territory Actions—of the Department of Architecture of the University of Bologna proposes to work, as part of the teaching activities of the Urban Planning Laboratory of the Department of Architecture in Cesena.

3.   Laboratorio CARTA in the Provincial Territory.

The Laboratory was born from the collaboration of the teachers and researchers of the Urban Planning courses activated at the University of Bologna, Cesena campus, Master of Architecture degree course. Established in 2006 as a space for the preservation and distribution of cartographic materials, over time CARTA has been configured as a place for sharing knowledge and practices and for experimentation aimed at the territory and conducted in collaboration with students.

The look that the CARTA workshop proposes fits between the theoretical dimension of explaining phenomena and practices, that is, the processual components considered the basis of a renewed principle of project effectiveness. The activities of the research group are oriented on the one hand to update and implement the cognitive supports instrumental to planning, and on the other hand to experiment with and integrate

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[17] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day* (Paragon House New York, 1989).

[18] Bruno Monardo and Martina Massari, "A New Generation of 'Urban Centers': 'Intermediate Places' in Boston and Bologna," *Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48279-4_87.

[19] Donald Beagle, "The Emergent Information Commons: Philosophy, Models, and 21st Century Learning Paradigms," *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 6–7 (2012): 518–37.

[20] Colin Talbot and Carole Talbot, "Usable Knowledge: Discipline-Oriented versus Problem-Oriented Social Science in Public Policy," *The Palgrave Handbook of Public Administration and Management in Europe*, 2018, 1213–34.

techniques of representation in order to explicate and enhance the latent identities of contemporary places.

CARTA's mission is to make the university a protagonist and promoter of forms of synergy between institutional representations and local communities for the creation of networks capable of activating innovative and integrated policies on the territory. An "agent of territorialization and urban transformation"[21] whose reference context is the province of Forlì-Cesena. A territory that presents varied dynamics: from those affecting the more peripheral portions of urbanized territory, to the morphological and geographic vulnerabilities of the inland areas of the Romagna Apennines, to the forms of expansion and contraction of the Adriatic conurbation of Romagna and the city-region of the Via Emilia.

The University of Cesena can count on a rather dynamic territory to which it belongs, both from the point of view of public policies, private investment dynamics and a varied district production model, made up of small and medium-sized enterprises but also of large companies, which have shown in recent years a propensity for innovative industrial research and a willingness to invest in human capital training.

This is a context that opens up numerous research directions that transcend the local scale by becoming an element of interconnection between different territorial scales. Thus, the role to which the city of Cesena could aspire is that of a node of interconnection between different territorial scales.[22]

Hence the question arises, about the potential for research specialization, or at any rate research for specific objectives, which would have the advantage of strengthening joint projects between universities, local entities, public actors and businesses. A path ultimately oriented toward making the Campus a reference point capable of polarizing interest and networking with other national and international research centers.

On this the CARTA Laboratory, on the basis of the experiences gained in the area in the field of teaching and research activities, is building its identity and its role as a transversal subject of interface between local and national and international realities.

Significant in this regard was the experience developed during the academic year 2021-2022, as part of the teaching activities of the Urban Planning Laboratory. The study area proposed to the labs, identified in the Ronco-Bidente valley in the Province of Forlì-Cesena, was well suited to be an area for the experimentation of regeneration strategies and new territorial trajectories that would take into account the role of the smaller centers in the territory. The proposal to work in this area started from the suggestions of some local administrators, who were committed to building a vision to strengthen collaboration among municipalities.

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[21] Lazzeroni, *Geografie dell'università: esplorazioni teoriche e pratiche generative.*
[22] Jan Youtie and Philip Shapira, "Building an Innovation Hub: A Case Study of the Transformation of University Roles in Regional Technological and Economic Development," *Research Policy* 37, no. 8 (2008): 1188–1204.

Among the goals of the administrations was the creation of a Landscape Observatory of the Emilia Romagna Region, the network for slow mobility in the valley, the creation of a Biodistrict, and in general the enhancement of the river shaft and the surrounding naturalistic areas. The contribution requested of the university was to play the role of a mediator between the different interests in the field, capable of expanding the network of actors involved and operationally developing a cognitive framework of the valley until obtaining—building from the results of the laboratory—thematic layers capable of systematizing the broad territory and the characteristics of the individual municipalities to bring out their potential. An operational collaboration has emerged from the lab's work, embedding the CARTA lab in a process of accompanying provincial administrations and in a network that promotes knowledge and enhancement of the valley.

This, as well as previous experiences involving other transects of the Romagna territory—such as the stretch of the Via Emilia that runs through it and the coast—have allowed for the acquisition of a widespread and deep-rooted knowledge of the territory that has increased the recognition of the role played by the university as an agent and not just an observer. The Province of Forlì-Cesena has therefore requested the involvement of the Department of Architecture in the formation of the Area Territorial Plan (PTAV) for the development of the cognitive framework and thematic insights. In the context of the Framework Agreement, the research contribution of the University is being made explicit in the investigation of the contents of the cognitive framework of the PTAV, through exploratory tools[23] proper to the teaching activity. Already in the academic year 2022-2023, the laboratory is working on the provincial territory having as its focus urban ecology and the construction of resilient settlement systems, with the aim of providing the Province with cognitive tools to support strategies such as:

- curbing land consumption: protecting land as a producer of ecosystem services;
- urban regeneration: efficiency in the use of energy and physical resources, containment of CO2 emissions, promotion of infrastructure and services for sustainable mobility;
- the protection and enhancement of the natural environment and biodiversity, agricultural land, different areas of the landscape, and historical/cultural elements of the regional territory.

These inquiries constitute the background for the work that the CARTA Laboratory continues to pursue for the definition of a Knowledge Framework that has as its reference horizon the transition of the territory of the Province of Forlì-Cesena into a sustainable territorial ecosystem.[24]

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[23] Crosta and Bianchetti, *Conversazioni sulla ricerca*; Alberta Giorgi, Micol Pizzolati, and Elena Vacchelli, *Metodi creativi per la ricerca sociale Contesto, pratiche, strumenti* (Società editrice il Mulino, Spa, 2021), https://www.pandoracampus.it/lending/10.978.8815/367013.

[24] Rocco Scolozzi, Elisa Morri, and Riccardo Santolini, "Pianificare Territori Sostenibili e Resilienti: La Prospettiva Dei Servizi Ecosistemici," *TERRITORIO* 60, no. 1 (2012): 167–75.

An ecosystem capable of holding together environmental system and human society in an attempt to ensure a socio-ecological transition, more equitable in distributing costs and benefits of transformations among the different 'geographies' that define the provincial territory. The PTAV, thanks to its nature as a strategic plan that orients choices at the local scale on recognized and shared quality objectives, allows for experimentation with new models of actors involvement to reach towards the satisfaction of new social interests. The university, through action-research, becomes the medium for recognizing these needs, organizing and building relationships between different actors within a unified direction, ensuring shared planning between local, sectoral and market actors, between public and private interest. The work carried out so far and still in progress, therefore, started from the recognition of five 'Territories' (Territory of Living, Territory of Production and Logistics, Rural Territory and Agribusiness, Territory of Tourism and Natural Territory) for which it is intended to build a mapping of planning and best practices and a table of critical synthesis that will then guide the construction of the guidelines and coordination of the plan and the identification of the actors to be involved in permanent tables for the development of shared project scenarios to support the drafting of planning at the local scale.

4.   CARTA as a Workshop for Reading and Designing the Territory.

In its position as a territorial agent of transformation, CARTA position itself as a platform for reading and unraveling the latent aspects of territories, building relationships and reciprocity between subjects—even unintentional ones—and co-designing urban policies. The design action concurs at the same time to the ambition of providing a new identity oriented towards the characterization of the territorial pole of the University of Architecture, a process in the making that the campus shares with the territory in which it is inserted.

The work done over the years also constitutes an attempt to lay the groundwork for moving beyond the traditional role of the university researcher as an advisor to the public body to a mutually reinforcing partner role. In this way, the university becomes an active agent in urban transformation, while the administration of the city and territories becomes an investigative process and not a mere application of policy decisions. This is especially necessary if we read the role of the university in achieving the goals of the Urban Agenda, the success of which is highly dependent on the action and collaboration of all actors in the territorial, institutional and socio-economic system.

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