

# New Forms of Relationships Between the University and the City: Padua, the UnicityLab Project, and the Idea of an Urban Center

PEER REVIEWED

**Michelangelo Savino**

**University of Padova**

*michelangelo.savino@unipd.it*

**Patrizia Messina**

**University of Padova**

*patrizia.messina@unipd.it*

**Lorenza Perini<sup>1</sup>**

**University of Padova**

*lorenza.perini@unipd.it*

## 1. Exploring a Medium-Sized City with a Large University.

The Italian medium-sized town of Padua, in the Veneto region, represents one of the most emblematic examples of an urban context, in which the presence of the University is crucial, since it assumes a leading role in the creation of an identifying image of the city, underlying the influence of the institution in the development of the economy, as well as in the implementation of the transportation's facilities, involving also the social relations among the different populations that share the same urban space. Although the social and economic reality of the city is partly balanced by the presence of other productive activities and institutions besides the University, in recent years the academic organization has been growing a lot, gaining relevance both in terms of students enrolled, researchers involved, staff, and functions performed (beyond the traditional activities of teaching and researching), and also in terms of a conjunctural downsizing of other productive sectors that, in the recent past, had significantly affected the city's growth and its spatial organization.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author.

In short, the University today determines the overall functioning of the town.

However, with some surprise, during the researches performed within the UnicityLab project, what we have discovered is that, beyond the 800-year history of the University in the city, the reality of the institution and the urban condition of the student population, as well as of all the personnel who in the University and with the University work, is, on the whole, very little explored. Most of the inferences between the two spheres are still unknown or not considered, almost absent is any reference to them in major programmatic or planning documents, either by the University institution or by the local authority.

Just to give an initial idea of the size of the two contexts in comparison, we can point to some data: despite the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, that have profoundly challenged the University – in its structures, its functioning and also in its social role – in the a.y. 2020-2021 the University of Padua (considered a large University in the Italian rankings), had registered the enrollment of 69,240 students, with an increase of 6.4% over the previous academic year.<sup>2</sup> In addition to students, the University population currently consists of 2,369 faculty members and researchers, 4,773 doctoral students, fellows and residents, and 2,480 members of the technical-administrative staff. This large and diverse amount of people insists every day on a medium-sized city like Padua, which has a resident population of 208,881 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> These data alone should be enough to indicate the weight of the University over the city, prompting a deep reflection on the implications of this situation. However, not only the 2019 Urban Mobility Plan (PUMS)<sup>4</sup> did not pay specific attention to mobility determined by the presence of the University, but also in the more recent urban planning tool adopted by the Municipality in April 2021, the presence and the possible role of the academic institution in the urban growth processes is not even mentioned, except in a very general chapter dedicated to innovation, research and development, and much less does the document outline possible locations of new University services and facilities or strategic lines for a redesign of the already existing University locations, despite the fact that the “urgency of new spaces” for students in the city has long been discussed.

Thus, as absurd as it may sound, according to the urban policies of the city, the University appears to be neither a problematic factor nor a strategic element of development; the topic is not thematized at all and the relationship between the two institutions appears to be formalized

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<sup>2</sup> Worth to note that 9.7% of the enrolled students were of foreign origin (Università di Padova, Ufficio statistico, 2022 <https://www.unipd.it/dati-statistici-immatricolati>).

<sup>3</sup> Comune di Padova, Ufficio Statistico, <https://www.padovanet.it/informazione/la-popolazione-padova>

<sup>4</sup> Comune di Padova, *Piano Urbano della Mobilità Sostenibile*, 2019 <https://www.padovanet.it/informazione/piano-urbano-della-mobilit%C3%A0-sostenibile-pums-di-padova>

and consolidated only at the the cultural level, where various collaborations are ongoing for a long time, while it is completely absent in other fields, showing a complete lack of a common vision for the urban future of the city.

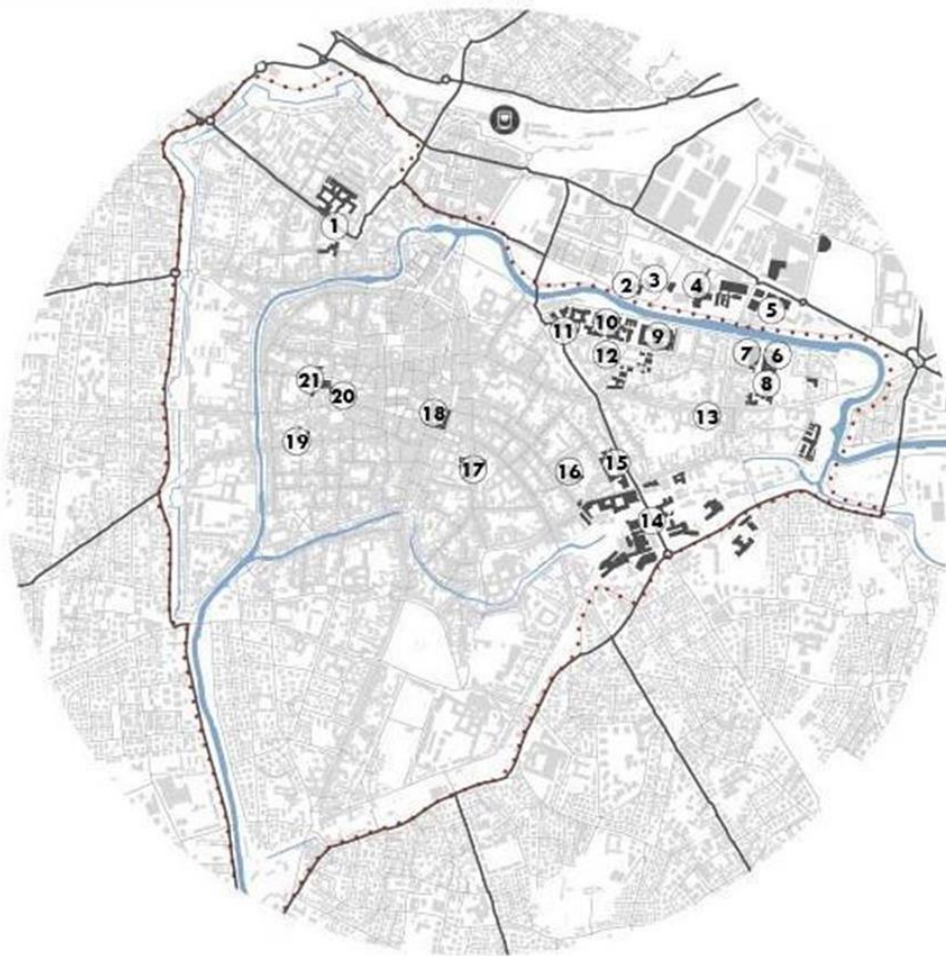
## 2. A Territorial Campus.

If we look at the historical distribution of the University's activities in the city map, we can gather some very useful elements, in order to recognize some specific features of Padua's urban layout. However, at the same time, this intersection results in a number of non-irrelevant and sometimes problematic issues. Starting from its foundation (1222) to the present, the University of Padua has established itself in a specific part of the city: around the Bo Palace (the first ancient site of the institution) and towards the Botanical Garden. It was not until the end of the XIX Century that the first expansion of the University was planned within the XVI Century walls, in the surroundings of the Piovego river, filling an area that had hitherto remained uninhabited.<sup>5</sup> The expansion was then strengthened by the Hospital hub (*Ospedale Giustiniano*),<sup>6</sup> which from the original core established in 1764 abutting the historical city center of the town, now occupies an area of almost 44.479 acres with exclusive functional specialization [Figure 1]. In the next few years the hospital hub is scheduled to move from the center to the eastern outskirts of the city, where construction will open soon on an area of nearly 126,024 acres, and at the moment there is a huge knowledge gap about the future of this area from both an urban planning and road system perspective, since the complementary services and facilities built or gradually installed in buildings and structures undergoing regeneration, essentially follow the same settlement logic expressed so far, namely, of no dialogue between the University and the city [Figure 2].

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<sup>5</sup>Pietro Del Negro, et al., *L'Università di Padova nei secoli: (1222-1600): documenti di storia dell'Ateneo*. (Treviso, Antilia, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> *Il Giustiniano: il nuovo Ospedale degli infermi di Padova*. Azienda Ospedaliera, 1998.



## DIPARTIMENTI E SEDI UNIVERSITARIE

### LEGENDA

■ Edifici universitari

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| ① Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari                | ⑧ Dipartimento di Ingegneria dell'Informazione          | ⑮ Dipartimento di Medicina Molecolare                                     |
| ② Dipartimento di Matematica "Tullio Levi-Civita"              | ⑨ Dipartimento di Ingegneria Civile, Edile e Ambientale | ⑯ Dipartimento di Scienze Statistiche                                     |
| ③ Dipartimento di Scienze Economiche e Aziendali "Marco Fanno" | ⑩ Dipartimento di Scienze del Farmaco                   | ⑰ Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche, Giuridiche e studi internazionali    |
| ④ Dipartimento di Biologia e Scienze Biomediche                | ⑪ Dipartimento di Scienze Chimiche                      | ⑱ Scuola di Giurisprudenza  |
| ⑤ Dipartimento di Psicologia                                   | ⑫ Dipartimento di Fisica e Astronomia                   | ⑲ Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche, Geografiche e dell'Antichità          |
| ⑥ Dipartimento di Ingegneria Industriale                       | ⑬ Dipartimento di Neuroscienze                          | ⑳ Dipartimento di Filosofia, sociologia, pedagogia e psicologia applicata |
| ⑦ Dipartimento di Geoscienze                                   | ⑭ Dipartimento di Medicina                              | ㉑ Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali   |

Figure 1| Distribution of Unipd sites in the urban area.

Credits: Michelangelo Savino, Patrizia Messina, Lorenza Perini for UnicityLab.



## SERVIZI PER GLI STUDENTI

### LEGENDA

-  Ufficio Carriere Studenti
-  Biblioteche
-  Mensa
-  Residenza universitaria
-  Aule studio



L'Università mette a disposizione di studentesse e studenti e di tutto il personale, un vastissimo patrimonio bibliografico e informativo reso accessibile dalle biblioteche e dalla Biblioteca digitale che costituiscono il Sistema Bibliotecario di Ateneo.



La ristorazione universitaria a Padova - RistorESU - ogni anno, attraverso 3 ristoranti e 16 strutture convenzionate dislocate sull'intero territorio regionale, garantisce circa 1.500.000 pasti, rivolgendosi a tutta la popolazione studentesca dell'Università di Padova.



Alla residenzialità degli studenti fuori sede provvede l'Esu, l'Azienda regionale per il diritto allo studio universitario: in 14 residenze sono più di 1600 i posti letto a disposizione, 230 dei quali riservati a studenti Erasmus, a cui se ne aggiungono altri 900 offerti in convenzione con istituti privati senza finalità di lucro.



Le aule sono ambienti indispensabili per la vita quotidiana dell'Ateneo. Sono a disposizione di studentesse e studenti aule studio di diversa capienza e dotate, quasi tutte, di rete wifi; ma anche sale di consultazione e aule informatiche dislocate nei punti strategici della città.

Figure 2| Distribution of the Unipd services and facilities in the urban area.  
Credits: Michelangelo Savino, Patrizia Messina, Lorenza Perini for UnicityLab.

In this scenario, the processes affecting the city due to the growth of the University seem to follow more or less these three paths:

- the strengthening of a central core (the historic buildings of Bo and Liviano, the administrative hub of Palazzo Storione);
- the gradual occupation of various locations in historic as well as in new buildings throughout the downtown area;



- The expansion beyond the sixteenth century city walls and along the Piovego river in the northeast part of the town, suggesting the intention to create a “University citadel,” with the implementation of new facilities, the redevelopment of some warehouses located on the site of the “Padova Hall” (*La Fiera*) in the eastern outskirts of the city, and the construction of brand new buildings on vacant land.

At the same time, there are also other operations – already established and ongoing – to relocate the University to peripheral areas: for example the Pediatric Research Institute “Città della Speranza” established in the Industrial Zone of Padua (ZIP), or the Environmental Engineering Centre in the nearby neighborhood of Voltabarozzo, or, again, the headquarters of the School of Veterinary and Agricultural Medicine (“Agripolis”) in the municipality of Legnaro, six miles away from Padua where the National Institute of Nuclear Physics (INFN) and the National Laboratories Research (CNR) are located as well.

This scenario clearly outlines a typically Italian structure of a “widespread campus”,<sup>7</sup> a definition that underlines a situation of “ordinary disorder,” which has little to do with the strategic creation of an organic University system and in which problems are exacerbated both inside the enclosure and outside the enclosure.<sup>8</sup> While the “inside” (the University) continues to suffer from a general insufficiency and inadequacy of spaces, the city “outside” (the surrounding city) increasingly manifests the discomfort produced by congestion of different activities, determined by functional destinations that are not always compatible, accessibility that has become more unease, and conflicts between residents and city users (not only students) on the agenda.

In recent years, the University has also started the expansion of its headquarters on Via Beato Pellegrino, with the redevelopment of the former Geriatric Hospital, creating within it the Department of Human Sciences. It has also acquired from the State Property Office the former “Piave Barracks” (located in the western part of the historical area of the city) for the realization of the new Social Sciences Department. As for other disused areas scattered throughout the city, there are ideas for possible acquisition and reuse by the University, but without an overall vision or strategic plan. It seems clear that we are dealing with a particularly complex system, the implications of which, both on the spatial structure and on the functioning of the city, are easy to guess. Meanwhile, an image of the University as a real estate developer has been clearly spread over the last few years.

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<sup>7</sup> Nicola Martinelli, *Spazi della conoscenza. Università, città e territori*. (Bari, Mario Adda Editore, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Patrizia Messina and Michelangelo Savino, “UnicityLab. Un’esperienza di ricerca a Padova per agire sulle relazioni tra Università e Città,” *Regional Studies and Local Development* 3, no. 3 (2022): 331-354. DOI: 10.14658/pupj-RSLD-2022-3-15.

### **3. The Knots of a Challenging relationship: Mobility, Housing, and Services.**

#### **3.1 Mobility.**

In relation to the scenario above mentioned, it is clear that many aspects of this intertwined structure of “city with University” and/or “University within a city,” have yet to be fully understood, in order to grasp the rich variety of inferences and the complexity of the issues involved. First, the issue needs to be analyzed from the point of view of the mobility: such a “diffuse” system certainly creates problems of accessibility and travel, in a city already plagued by an underutilized public transport system, unable to limit the use of private vehicles-both because of the high number of incoming commuters and city users, and because of the reduced capillarity that the urban structure allows, with few relevant road axes, and the existing ones already saturated and all converging towards the city centre, which is now configured as a hypertrophic historical core of activities and services.

Rail and bus stations, nearly coincidental access points for most students and workers, appear eccentric to the distribution of major University sites, facilities and laboratories, not infrequently creating widespread discomfort [Figure 3]. Where the remedy seems to be the private vehicle, beyond peak hour congestion, there is no shortage of difficulties in finding sufficient surface area for parking, in addition to the dramatic increase in Pm10 emissions (which makes Padua one of the most polluted cities in Italy). Pollution, congestion, difficult co-existence between cars, bicycles, and new means of electric locomotion (used mostly by students, less so by residents), insecurity, and inadequate routes have become a new emergency that neither the University's Mobility manager nor the Municipality's Mobility manager have thought to address jointly.



**SERVIZI PER GLI STUDENTI**

**LEGENDA**

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-  Le aule sono ambienti indispensabili per la vita quotidiana dell'Ateneo. Sono a disposizione di studentesse e studenti aule studio di diversa capienza e dotate, quasi tutte, di rete wifi; ma anche sale di consultazione e aule informatiche dislocate nei punti strategici della città.

Figure 3| Pedestrian routes of the Unipd population within the city of Padua.  
Credits: Michelangelo Savino, Patrizia Messina, Lorenza Perini for UnicityLab.



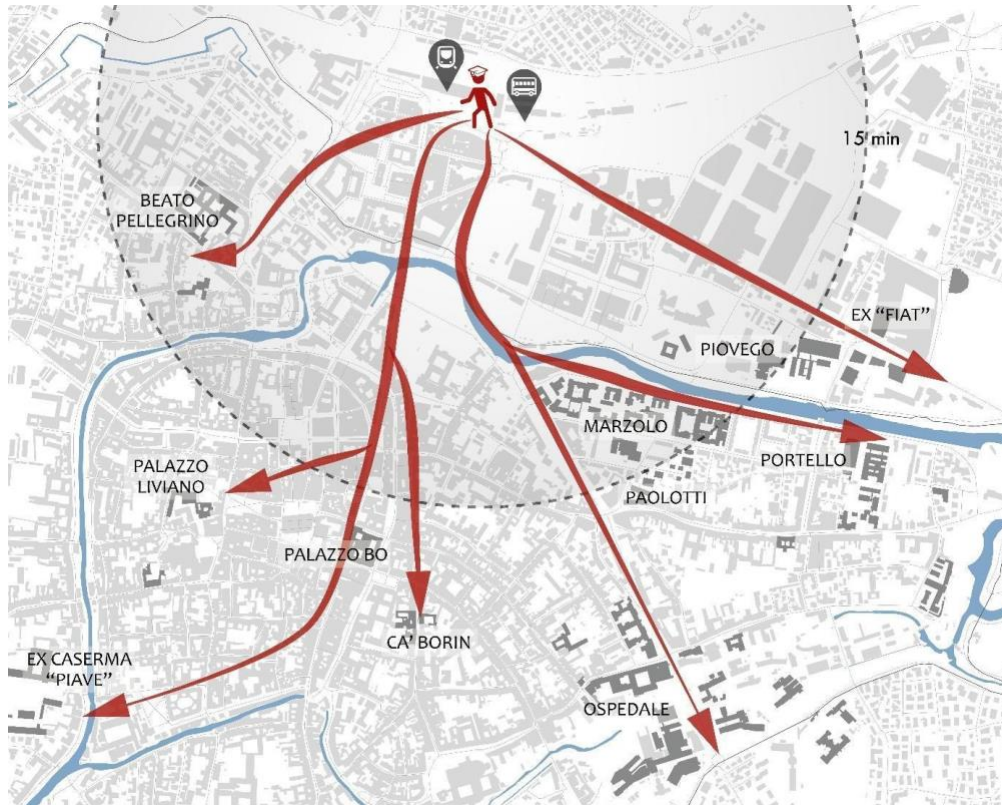


Figure 4| Students' main routes to Unipd sites.

Credits: Michelangelo Savino, Patrizia Messina, Lorenza Perini for UnicityLab.

### 3.2 Housing.

In this context, the student housing emergency, not perceived in the city before the strong student protests in the summer of 2022, denouncing the lack of housing facilities and the exorbitant rent costs, was a surprising discovery for the city's main institutions [Figure 4]. In fact, if a “student issue” had emerged in the past months and years, it was understood only in terms of public order and safety, imputed to the excessive student nightlife in the Portello University district, prompted by residents' protests, and thus addressed as a specific and local issue, so much so that the University did not feel involved in such a clash, intended as one of the many disputes between residents and municipality. The housing shortage, thus, emerged out of the blue, with the discovery of a very large number of students seeking an accommodation in town, which led to the identification, unambiguously and for the first time, of a problem that required specific attention [Figure 5]. On the other hand, the numbers of students enrolled in Padua seeking accommodation, according to some surveys, are fluctuating and unreliable, and if one looks at the data related to the commuters both short distances (5-40 miles and 15'-60' average travel distance) and long distances (40-90 miles and 61'-90' average travel

distance),<sup>9</sup> it is possible to note that in many cases, either because of the need to take some particular courses or due to a choice related to other factors, students residing in municipalities very close to Padua, choose to reside at least for a defined period in the city. More stable are the numbers of the off-campus students, coming from other regions (although, during the pre-Covid years, there had been a sharp decrease coinciding with the decline in enrollment in the Law and Medicine schools, now in strong recovery). In this scenario, even less known and not considered is the issue of the international student population, composed of those who are attracted by Erasmus flows and by foreign students regularly enrolled at Unipd. This population has increased in recent times due to some generous welcoming policies put into place by the University toward student refugees and toward those who have fled war scenarios. Beyond the difficulties of these types of students in finding affordable housing, what is important to note is that, in many cases, there have been strong forms of discrimination against them.<sup>10</sup>

As anticipated, it is surreal that in a University city like Padua, surveys of student housing conditions are non-existent and housing demand has never been investigated and the data available we owe them all to the local press.<sup>11</sup> Detailed surveys of the local housing market are also lacking,<sup>12</sup> even in light of the first phenomenon of alternative tourist accommodation, marked by the increase of B&B and tourist rentals in other University cities, where tourists turn out to be real competitors to students in the search for housing.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, with great difficulty, the real housing demand in the city is inferred (in its exclusive quantitative dimension), which also shows opacity in the data collection of both the regional office for the right to study (ESU) and the religious institutes, whose presence is significant in the city.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, among the causes of this difficulty in monitoring there is the nonavailability of data regarding the number of off-site students who decide to find accommodation outside Padua, in the nearby towns of Mestre or Vicenza for example (as would appear from some interviews). Beyond this scenario, what remains

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<sup>9</sup> An off-campus student is defined as a student residing in a municipality or locality more than 50 miles away from the university site or requiring travel time of more than 80 minutes, and who for this reason is staying on a paid basis with a regular contract at the university site for a period of not less than 10 months. A student residing in a municipality or locality more than 50 miles or more than 80 minutes away from the university site who does not take lodging on a paid basis is considered a commuter (<https://www.unipd.it/borse-studio-alloggi>).

<sup>10</sup> Dario Lucchesi and Vincenzo Romania, "L'Università di Padova tra internazionalizzazione e pandemia: l'impatto del Covid-19 sulla comunità studentesca internazionale," *Regional Studies and Local Development* 3 (2022): 89-116. DOI: 10.14658/pupj-RSLD-2022-3-5.

<sup>11</sup> "L'aumento di case per turisti "inguaia" single e studenti," *Padovaoggi*, August 7, 2023 <https://www.padovaoggi.it/economia/aumento-case-turisti-inguaia-single-studenti-7-agosto-2023.html>

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Antonietti and Elena Botton, "Flussi studenteschi e mercato immobiliare: il caso dell'Università di Padova," *Regional Studies and Local Development* 3, no. 3, (2022): 139-160.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Gainsforth, *Oltre il turismo. Esiste un turismo sostenibile?* (Roma, Eris edizioni, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Diocesi di Padova, <https://www.diocesipadova.it/uffici/pastorale-della-cultura-e-delluniversita/collegi-universitari/>

is the private market, which is largely definable as irregular: a system that probably, until recently, ensured adequate supply to meet demand, and which has now also entered a crisis.

The scarcity of real estate has undoubtedly been influenced by fluctuating market trends, but also by the increase in student demand for the reasons mentioned above.<sup>15</sup> The press, reporting some data from different sources, indicates for the month of August 2022 an average cost of a single room in Padua of at least 458 Euros, with an increase in value over the previous year of 42.2%, the highest in the country:<sup>16</sup> a situation that could depend on the one hand on the reduction in supply, but also on the speculative processes determined as a result of student demonstrations.



Figure 5| Unipd students' protest for housing (October 2022).

*Credits: Michelangelo Savino.*

### 3.3 Services.

As regards to “services,” they should be understood in a broader sense. In recent years, in fact, many Italian universities have begun to equip themselves with a series of spaces and facilities intended not only for students, but for the whole academic population. In many cases, this has resulted in an intervention to improve comfort and reception facilities (i.e. study rooms, meeting and gathering places), as well as in the upgrading of existing conventional endowments (libraries, canteens, equipped refreshment areas, equipped open spaces, sports facilities). In some cases the improvements are related also to the improvement of working conditions (i.e. welfare measures for the academic staff). Many

<sup>15</sup> “Posti letto nelle città universitarie: effetto Covid sui prezzi, in discesa dopo anni di rialzi,” <https://www.immobiliare.it/info/ufficio-stampa/2021/posti-letto-nelle-citta-universitarie-effetto-covid-sui-prezzi-in-discesa-dopo-anni-di-rialzi-2197/>

<sup>16</sup> “Stangata sulle stanze per gli studenti: a Padova i rincari più alti d’Italia,” [https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/padova/cronaca/22\\_agosto\\_24/stangata-stanze-gli-studenti-padova-rincari-piu-alti-d-italia-d9c96a08-238c-11ed-a0c3-ae9646f5ccac.shtml](https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/padova/cronaca/22_agosto_24/stangata-stanze-gli-studenti-padova-rincari-piu-alti-d-italia-d9c96a08-238c-11ed-a0c3-ae9646f5ccac.shtml)

universities in Italy seem committed to increasing these kinds of spaces (both quantitatively with more places and more facilities, and qualitatively with greater design care, especially after the pandemic), or to providing new services (co-working places, fab-labs, incubators or innovation hubs) in order to change the traditional idea of “University space” and change the way in which University buildings are usually conceived.

However, this is not the case in Padua. In Padua this new trend has not yet been grasped, and the response-when there is one-is more conventional (increase in study rooms, extension of library access hours) and wholly insufficient, even for services that have long been part of the University offer (for example, the University Sports Centre-CUS) and that in Padua are little used because, like some student halls, they are located in peripheral areas poorly served by public transportation. Needs are thus met by resorting to the public services the city offers – not infrequently creating conditions of antagonism with residents – or to spaces with little or no facilities.

Within this framework, Padua (understood both as a municipal administration and as the governance of the University, and in some ways also as a community) – lagging far behind other cities that have tackled the problem (e.g., Bologna, Milan, Turin) – does not yet seem to have understood either the dimensions of the problem and the extent of the discomfort that affects the University population (because those seeking housing are not only students, but also faculty and researchers who come from other cities or countries), or how housing discomfort can be translated into a change in the choice of University to study or do research. Above all, it is not understood how the demands for housing and services of the University population, residents, or new incoming populations are intertwined and face the same difficulties requiring effective and strategic responses.

All of this confirms that the attractiveness of a University also depends on the quality of urban services offered by the “University city,” not only to the residents and the inhabitants, but also to all the city users in terms of services and facilities.

#### **4. The UnicityLab Project: a Starting Point.**

In this context, the Laboratory on University-City Relations of Padua (UnicityLab)<sup>17</sup> was launched in 2018, as a multidisciplinary observatory at the University of Padua attentive to urban development processes involving the University, but also as a proactive “service” to the University and the City, wanting to open also to the contributions of strategic actors of urban development, who are involved in the research path with the aim of working on the construction of a *cohesive University city*. The first

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<sup>17</sup> The website of the project: <https://www.unicitylab.eu/>

attempt, when six research departments participated in the activity, was primarily to solve the lack of information on the impact of the University on the city. In the following years, research developed different issues, enlightening the complicated inferences between the two realms. Today, UnicityLab is a permanent research hub that not only offers an understanding of the processes and relationships that are created between the city and the University, their impacts and thus the effects produced by mutual influences, but also constitutes a space for comparison and connection and co-design of joint policy interventions for the strategic development of Padua as a “University City.” A laboratory, therefore, at the service of the University-city, characterized by the interweaving of multi- and interdisciplinary knowledge, gathered through the contribution of researchers interested in participating in collaborative work beyond the usual departmental barriers. To this end, there is a clear need to obtain and process up-to-date data, quantitative and qualitative information, reflections, studies, and evaluations on the dynamics that are triggered by the presence of a large University in a rather small urban structure, as well as the need to develop evaluation and measurement tools useful for the promotion of social cohesion within the different spheres of interaction that are determined in such a particular context.

UnicityLab's research methodology, therefore, favors an open approach, strongly marked by applied research, appropriate to the University's “Third Mission,” in order to explore different fields of observation, fostering dialogue between different but complementary disciplines, unaccustomed to working together, as often happens in the Italian system. The goal is to arrive at the identification of actions and strategies that can ensure that the University can effectively assess the impacts (and perverse effects) of its interventions, enhancing the benefits not only for the academic community but also for the city, ensuring the degree of knowledge useful to activate policies and concerted actions involving public institutions, private actors, profit and nonprofit sectors, as well as resident citizens. UnicityLab would also increase academic awareness of being a strategic element of social and economic urban development and an affecting actor of urban changes, an influential player in the public policy process.

UnicityLab wants to pursue the fostering of shared responsibility among all the actors involved in this process, with the intention of acting as a generator of territorial social capital, understood as a resource of primary importance for an integrated and sustainable development of the territory; it wants to strive to strengthen a strategic alliance between the University and the city, starting from the awareness that the attractiveness of a University also depends on the quality of services, understood as “collective goods for development,” that “its” city is able to offer.



In this scenario, it becomes clear that the laboratory's objective is to produce not only “knowledge,” but also “relational goods,” making available important information and data to plan urban development policies, develop and share medium to long-term strategic actions, and generate shared urban development projects that hope to be networked with other Italian and international experiences. Therefore, UnicityLab has set out to become a real place of meeting between the University and the city, where to develop applied research, design and public policy proposals, but also an opportunity to co-design events and occasions for comparison, exchange, and collective participation for a common action to be shared with the city of Padua and other “University cities.” The need for a place where University impacts can freely and usefully be discussed about urban issues, where University contribution to social and economic growth of the city is taken into account properly is strongly evident and, beyond the complex articulation of “networked” research, it is important to emphasise that the intent of the Lab is not only to explore problematic issues in the local context but rather to promote a strand of research within the University, integrated and shared by a concretely multidisciplinary and interdepartmental community. Always stated and pursued, in fact, is the desire of the research group to contribute to the solution of certain urban problems; to support the formulation of more appropriate urban policies; to foster policy confrontation and inter-institutional cooperation; to improve and intensify the forms of relationship of institutions with citizens; and to be able, finally, to guarantee, above all, a contribution to the construction of strategic visions for the future of the city and its territories.

## **5. From the UnicityLab to the Urban Centre: a New Perspective for the Future.**

After these first three years of intense interdisciplinary research, based on the persuasion that a push toward a public policy formulation center is necessary, the action of UnicityLab, which aims to involve institutions in a support structure in the formulation of strategic lines and urban policies for shared interventions, turns out to be crucial. The idea – discussed also with some components of the Municipality board – is to establish a shared place for the up-to-date collection of data to be provided to a steering committee that would address the critical nodes of urban development in the University City of Padua, with the indispensable contribution of the University, but also of the main stakeholders who could constitute themselves, in this case, not as stakeholders (partisan stakeholders) but as community holders – i.e., stakeholders of the city community.

Such a space/place can be a valuable informative support on the processes taking place not only in Padua, but also in other University cities, as a strategic factor for policy orientation and for the

implementation of innovative projects, through an open and transparent confrontation, both for the different actors involved in the planning process and for the administration to be able to conceive scenarios that are more adherent to the local reality. For example, the role of the University in the development of the most innovative economic sectors (research, innovation, technology, knowledge-based, etc.) but also to identify the University students as a possible resource for the demographic growth of the residents (thanks to their rootedness in the city once they have completed their studies) and of greater dynamism of the local labour market.

In this scenario, the urban centre seems to be an important and necessary “tool” to foster the development of a system of virtuous relationships that will ensure social cohesion, economic, and cultural growth of the area with a perspective toward the internationalization, but also able to enhance the resources and values of the local community. Thus, the idea of an urban centre includes actions at both the city and the regional level, and in this second case, in particular, UnicityLab could be an important factor in favor of a “Regional University City” strategy, something that is completely lacking in the Veneto region.

In order to boost research in a wide variety of fields (of which health care is among the most heartfelt issues in the territory) and by pushing technological innovation, the City Region University could establish a federated and integrated academic system of universities with differentiated competencies, according to the system of local preferences, rather than an omnibus decentralization like the one that is present today and that has reintroduced, in its evolution, a “photocopy” educational system, in the sense that each University has tended to offer, in a progressive expansion, the same educational offerings that the large generalist universities do.

Various experiences inform about some similar places – actual and sometimes also virtual – in which public policies take shape trying to be progressively adequate to the social demand of urban communities, but also to the increasingly rapid changes of the city:

- organization where the focus is on the transformation processes of the city, but where the ‘narration’ of what happens is intended as an opportunity for a public debate on the objectives, on the impacts, but also on the possible changes to be introduced in the projects to encourage an effective improvement of living conditions in the city (such as Urban Lab in Turin);<sup>18</sup>
- multidisciplinary research centers but above all a meeting point for interactive communication on urban transformations that are strongly aimed at ‘building the future imaginary of the city’ with the explicit intention of ‘playing a driving role’ in relations between public

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<sup>18</sup> UrbanLab, Torino <https://urbanlabtorino.it/urban-lab/>.

administration, universities, firms and the ‘third sector’ and local communities (as the *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* in Bologna);<sup>19</sup>

- a permanent working group aimed to encourage and promote events of confrontation, communication and collaboration between public institutions, managers, and citizens concerning the local development, to innovate and increase inclusion in region and city management and development practices, ensuring constant exchange of information and having incentives to collaboration (such as the Urban Digital Centre - Innovation Lab in Rovigo).<sup>20</sup>

Three experiences, in which the University is directly involved, in some cases also as promoter of these initiatives, show a very effective change in some public action aimed at city development. UnicityLab, as the next step and the upcoming goal, points out the activation of such an urban centre capable of sustaining knowledge-based public policies and university-supported public participation.

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<sup>19</sup> Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, Bologna:

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<sup>20</sup> Urban Digital Centre, Rovigo: <https://urbandigitalcenterrovigo.it/it/content/chi-siamo> .

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