

Regenerating Fragile Territories through the University. The Case of the New University Campus in Scampia, Naples

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1. Introduction.

In recent years, the third mission has mobilised university staff at all levels: rectors, deans, heads of departments and individual lecturers have all been trying to make universities more competitive against the evaluation criteria of the ANVUR—the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes—and to improve their reputation and relations with the local community. As is known, while teaching and research remain the main social function of universities, the latter have to commit to the third mission and public engagement: that is, the set of non-profit activities organised by a university—departments or individual researchers—with an educational, cultural and social development value, aimed at a non-academic public.

These are actions that require interaction and listening to build a different and stronger social relationship between the institution and the community. There are many types of actions: the organisation of cultural events, making spaces and facilities available, scientific dissemination, support of public benefit initiatives held in the local community, and so on.

However, to evaluate universities, we must adopt a very rigid scientific approach that looks at both social reporting and impact, drawing on well-documented and reliable data on third mission activities. After an initial assessment by the ANVUR through a learning workshop for universities to better understand how to regulate themselves and provide guidance to the many researchers, the universities are now working to help lecturers identify and select actions that can be easily documented with measurable impact indicators. Considering the broad spectrum of possible activities, some of which many universities have been promoting for years, especially on the cultural side, the universities' orientations are very diverse, also in terms of the components that are most easily identified: engineering schools and the faculties of medicine, science, agriculture, economics, etc., which tend to be closer to the business world than those in the humanities.

More generally, some fields of architecture, engineering, sociology and other social sciences have a long-standing inclination to study territorial contexts, often prompting students to explore social phenomena that are rooted in space and put territorial dynamics at the centre of their research.

Over the past few decades, several scholars have turned their attention to the developmental effects of the establishment of new university campuses in the very contexts of their location¹.

It is only in more recent years that a specific strand of action and reflection has emerged concerning the values that the location of workshop activities in fragile territories can embody. For territorial scholars, the best-known cases are those that have been developed over a number of years within the framework of public policies (for example, neighbourhood contracts), or those that have identified specific public housing estates as a privileged place to involve students and tackle certain processes—such as urban regeneration—from the inside, applying an integrated approach and creating opportunities for decision-making or a more adequate implementation of necessary neighbourhood services².

2. Workshops in Fragile Neighbourhoods.

For a couple of years now, some universities—or individual departments—have opened offices or sent staff to laboratory-type facilities in “fragile” areas, usually social housing districts (for example, San Siro in Milan and Corviale in Rome). In addition, many universities have gathered in the APEnet network, which was created to support universities and research organisations in sharing public engagement projects, goals and joint initiatives.

These are very interesting practices for those who, like me, have been working for decades on an integrated approach to regeneration and the implementation of services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, located in historic centres or public housing areas. In recent years, many researchers have been involved in mediation workshops as part of the regeneration activities described in neighbourhood contracts, within the framework of agreements with municipalities³.

Subsequently, starting from initiatives developed among colleagues from DaStU Dipartimento Studi Urbani del Politecnico di Milano a space for

¹ Nicola Martinelli and Michelangelo Savino. “L’Università italiana tra città e territorio nel XXI secolo - Parte Prima.” *Urbanistica*, 149 (2012): 4-67; Nicola Martinelli and Michelangelo Savino. “L’Università italiana tra città e territorio nel XXI secolo - Parte Seconda.” *Urbanistica*, 150/151 (2013): 10-43; Nicola Martinelli and Michelangelo Savino. “Università/Città. Condizioni in evoluzione?” *Territorio*, 73 (2015): 58-59; Nicola Martinelli and Piero Rovigatti. *Università, città e territorio nel Mezzogiorno* (Milano: FrancoAngeli editore, 2005).

² Ida Castelnuovo, and Francesca Cognetti. “Mapping San Siro Lab: Experimenting Grounded, Interactive and Mutual Learning for Inclusive Cities.” *Transactions of the Associations of European Schools of Planning*, 3, 1 (2019): 37-54.

³ AA.VV. “Dossier su Crocetta.” *Territorio*, 70 (2014); Claudio Calvaresi and Linda Cossa, *Un ponte a colori. Accompagnare la rigenerazione di un quartiere della periferia Milanese* (Rimini: Maggioli editore, 2011).

listening, mediation, observation and social enabling was activated in San Siro, led mainly by Francesca Cognetti and Liliana Padovani⁴.

3. The Case of Milan: from Neighbourhood Contracts to the Urban Living Labs.

The Politecnico di Milano launched the first Off Campus space in the San Siro district in April 2019, and a second space in the Nolo district in September 2020. Two more spaces were opened in 2022: one in the San Vittore prison and another one in a farmhouse on the outskirts of the city. In these structures, teachers, researchers and students alike engage in activities aimed at promoting innovative teaching, with a focus on the development of new skills, obtained through work in real contexts; responsible research, seeking to develop inclusive processes of knowledge production; and planning in collaboration with local groups and institutions to implement interventions rooted in the dynamics of the local context.⁵

The creation of these spaces is part of didactic and research pathways that, here as in other universities, have seen the commitment of staff—mainly from the departments of Urban Studies, Planning, Architecture and Social Sciences—in the local community. Within this institutional and university framework, the Milanese programme has strengthened initiatives that were initially run by individual lecturers or research groups. The activities of Off Campus San Siro, for example, are as follows:

- research: the role of the Living Labs in marginalised contexts; educational poverty and segregation in multicultural contexts; housing policies and projects;
- education and culture: territorial citizenship workshops; Caffè San Siro (cultural events); educational seminars and workshops; curricular internships;
- co-design: the reactivation of empty, public and communal spaces; skills training for migrant women; working group on future neighbourhood regeneration projects;
- neighbourhood archive: a collection of texts and materials, also from the inhabitants' private archives;
- coordination of the Sansheros Local Network, a network of local groups active in the neighbourhood.

Furthermore, Off Campus San Siro hosts a legal and legality education desk run by the Bocconi University. In fact, collaborations with other

⁴ Francesca Cognetti and Liliana Padovani. *Perché ancora i quartieri pubblici. Un laboratorio di politiche per la casa* (Milano: FrancoAngeli editore, 2018). In this paper, it is not possible to include a historical analysis that considers the evolution of the concept of neighbourhood laboratory, from Renzo Piano's experience in Otranto at the end of the 1970s to the more recent ones, which generally fall within the Living Lab approach.

⁵ I wish to thank Professor Francesca Cognetti, delegate of the Rector of the Politecnico di Milano for social responsibility for the territory, and a researcher in the Off Campus San Siro project, for giving me this information.

Milanese universities have been strengthened over time, at San Siro mainly with the Bocconi University and the University of Milano-Bicocca.

4. The Corviale District in Rome.

Another important initiative that has been underway for some years is that of the Corviale City Laboratory. Here, too, the personal commitment of individual researchers who are more sensitive to the problems of social exclusion—for example, that of the Roma community⁶—preceded the initiative. In particular, the case of Corviale, which is supported by the ATER Azienda Territoriale per l'Edilizia Residenziale is part of a longer and more articulated affair in which university researchers are employed as mediation professionals to facilitate the implementation of the works and the transfer of families, and to liaise between the assignees and ACER.

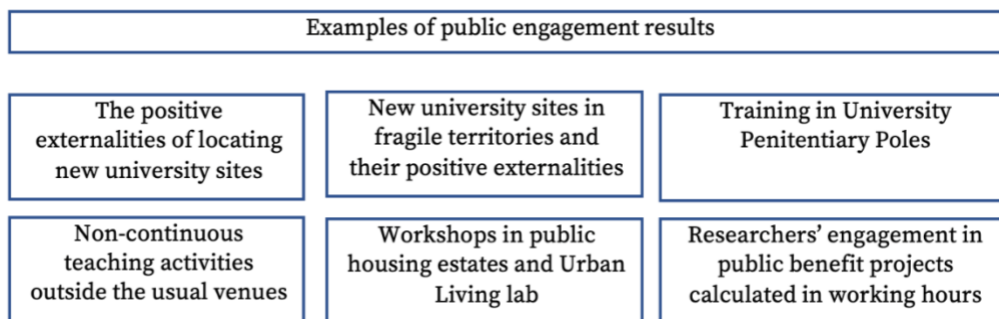


Figure 1| Examples of public engagement results.
Credits: Giovanni Laino.

5. The Shift from Individual Volunteering Outside University Walls to Professional Engagement in Projects funded by Universities.

Like some of my colleagues, I have long combined my professional commitment with volunteer work for a well-established and well-rooted third-sector organisation, planning, building partnerships and implementing and coordinating activities, especially for socio-educational services. In recent years, however, I have come to think differently about my personal commitment. Since 2020, with the permission of my university's Departmental Council and in compliance with the employment regulations for lecturers, I have requested that the hourly cost of the time I spend on some projects owned by non-profit organisations be considered as co-financing of the DiArc Dipartimento di Architettura, provided that the department acts as a formal partner of the relative projects. I think this is a unique and extremely useful way of having researchers and lecturers, paid by the university, providing services to local communities. One of the values of this approach is that it enables a real insertion into the nervous system of the projects, that is, the complex interaction between intentions, objectives, constraints,

⁶ Francesco Careri, *Stalker-ON / Campus Rom* (Matera: Altrimedia edizioni, 2017).

resources, opportunities, learning, conflict and subsidiarity. Like a trauma centre for an orthopaedist, community service projects—which are increasingly hinged on urban regeneration programmes—are like a clinic for me. In my opinion, the study of planning theories and public policies would be very sterile and exposed to the risks of abstraction without a direct and emotional involvement in these experiences. Here, however, I want to focus on a different issue.

6. The Neapolitan Context.

Five major universities operate in the metropolitan area of Naples. Thanks also to the location of its campuses, the Federico II University is embedded both in the urban centre and on the outskirts of the city. In addition to being very central, fully inserted in the urban context and part of the Unesco area of the historic centre, some neighbourhoods⁷ have an extraordinary symbolic value due to their particular living conditions: in these parts of the city, there is still a very lively environment, characterised by diversity and movement, two primary elements that are embedded in an ancient urban grid that is open to activities and residents from the better-off classes. More recently, some new structures have been built in Giovanni a Teduccio and Scampia, two districts that are known for a particular concentration of public housing and social classes living in relative or absolute poverty. While the now renowned experience of the San Giovanni campus is growing, in October 2022, that is, 15 years after the implementation of the relevant policy, the university campus of Scampia was finally launched. For years, various departments (Architecture, Social Sciences, Humanities) have done research on and organised events aimed at the integrated regeneration this district, which has been overexposed in the media⁸.

6.1 The San Giovanni a Teduccio Site.

In 1998, Rector Fulvio Tessitore signed an initial memorandum of understanding in support of the decision to move some of the classrooms used for courses with an ever-growing number of students to the site of the former Cirio factory. The latter is located between the working-class districts of Barra and Sangioanni, in the first suburbs of the eastern part of the city, 15 minutes by scooter from Via Toledo and about 30 minutes from the central stops of the old underground line. It was thus decided to create a new teaching facility in the eastern suburbs to complement the western one where, in addition to the engineering buildings, the new

⁷ In particular, mixed neighbourhoods such as Montecalvario, San Lorenzo and San Giuseppe are very popular suburbs.

⁸ AA.VV. *Oltre le vele. Rapporto Scampia* (Napoli: Fridericiana Editrice Universitaria, 1999); Giovanni Laino, "Italy: the Scampia district in Naples." In *Neighbourhood housing debate*, edited by Daniela Ciaffi (Milano: FrancoAngeli editore, 2005); Enrico Martinelli and Massimo Santoro. *Periferie. Vele Scampia programma di riqualificazione urbana* (Napoli: Gruppo Associati Publitalf, 2004).

Economics and Business School had been located. This was a positive experience, mainly because of the correct and rapid use of European funds, which is a rarity in the Campania region – and even more so in Calabria and Sicily. From an architectural point of view, a project was chosen that had to be carried out in multiple stages, depending on the actual availability of funds, with the aim of creating a facility without any perimeter walls. It was also decided not to build refreshment facilities on the premises to encourage students and lecturers to use the bars and restaurants in the surrounding area. Local citizens have begun to accept and appropriate the spaces—with newlyweds even doing photo shoots at the site—, but for those who, like me, go there to teach, the anthropic and spatial landscape mostly presents itself as a large set of classrooms, generally designed in a traditional way—also in view of the anticipated number of students—, with pleasant but not very anthropised outdoor spaces.

Ever since its conception and initial implementation, the process has undergone a very significant evolution: thanks to a series of unforeseen opportunities, part of the space in one of the buildings was used as the headquarters first of the Apple Academy and then of various other important academies, attracting hundreds of young people—also from abroad—and creating a very innovative activity that was closely connected with major economic actors.

The city and the metropolitan area of Naples have many peculiarities: the spread of the spread of the informal sphere; the entrenchment of the working classes not only in the suburbs but also in large areas of the city centre, which is unique in Europe owing to the particular housing conditions—among other things—of at least 40,000 people living in the so-called *bassi* (very small homes with only a ground floor); a peak in the number of illegal constructions in parts of the second suburb, which are causing problems that seem impossible to solve; and a public housing stock (over 40,000 housing units) that is among the largest in Italy. Naples also has outer suburbs that are scattered across the municipalities of the metropolitan city, with tens of thousands of people living in deep poverty. Furthermore, the city has a large number of housing estates and buildings (120 of which have already been mapped in a GIS) that have lost the function they had until the end of the 20th century. This is why in Naples, more than anywhere else, there is an urgent need to regenerate—rather than simply reuse—some hundred buildings. This theme will undoubtedly be on the agenda for at least the next 50 years of urban history and is repeatedly associated with policies for the building of university campuses or, more recently, housing for university students and staff. Moreover, research into common goods has been ongoing for some years now, for which Naples presents itself as a Mediterranean centre of legal and social innovation. Although the city has a unique historic centre (extensively delimited by the general land use plan) in terms of its dimension and is experiencing a prolonged, intense wave of

touristisation, it does not seem to be affected by the same degree of gentrification as other large Italian cities, partly as a result of a private building heritage with a very peculiar consistency and use, and the now structural presence of migrant communities.⁹

Finally, the data on deficits in childcare services, school failure and the various types of dropouts are notorious. In some areas of southern cities, these are at very critical levels compared to European cities, not to mention the situation of those who are no longer in the education system and neither working nor training for work (NEETs), which concerns the future of large parts of the new generations.

In this context, it is clear that many researchers and university lecturers have long felt the need to develop—or strengthen—a commitment to improving living conditions in the city, without compromising their allegiance to the university's main mission: to do research and train qualified young people.

6.2 The Nursing Sciences Campus in Scampia.

After several years of work and political vicissitudes, the new nursing centre of Scampia opened on 18 October 2022, in a beautiful building designed by Vittorio Gregotti, initially intended as the headquarters of the National Civil Protection.¹⁰

In addition to the great contribution that medical professors and researchers will undoubtedly make, the campus offers a huge potential for public engagement initiatives that promise to be well-structured and not improvised, and which will prove even more innovative if focused on the regeneration of immaterial enabling services for local communities (residents, schools and third-sector organisations).

Scampia's social stratification is more articulated than the stereotypes in the media would have us believe.¹¹ This was already documented in a study on the neighbourhood commissioned by the rector and coordinated

⁹ In a survey conducted over the past two years, we collected data from the Chamber of Commerce on more than 6,500 people registered as traders, predominantly pedlars (Laino, 2022), and we also produced very interesting maps thanks to the geolocalisation of addresses via a simple GIS.

¹⁰ Previously conceived as the headquarters of the regional civil protection service, this cylindrical building was designed and modified by Vittorio Gregotti. It is a seven-storey building (six above ground) with many ribbon windows and no balconies, reserved for the School of Medicine and Surgery's Health Professions courses and with outpatient clinics to be opened six months from now, intended for nutrition and endocrinological disorders, with an anti-diabetes centre and a blood collection centre. The classrooms will accommodate a total of 2143 students but currently contain 660 seats, with another 200 planned for the next semester. There is also a library, a large lecture hall with 519 seats, 32 laboratories, 50 offices, 5 student areas, a garage with 95 parking spaces and 30 motorcycle parking spaces. It has a medium- to long-term history, as it was formalised with a protocol signed back in April 2006. The initial plan was to locate a Faculty of Agriculture in Scampia, but the faculty members refused to be relocated from their historic site in Portici. In 2006, after the demolition of Sail H, the decision was made to build a Medicine and Surgery campus in Scampia. The construction site was opened in 2009, further funding arrived, some changes were made to the initial project and, finally, in July 2022, the building was finished and furnished, although some furnishings are yet to be completed.

¹¹ Cfr. Giovanni Laino and Daniela De Leo, *Le politiche pubbliche per il quartiere Scampia a Napoli* (Napoli: NEHOM, 2003).

by Enrico Pugliese in 1999, to assess the impact of the opening of a new university campus. Various populations coexist in Scampia.¹² Some of the “residents” live mainly in private parks; they are the relative majority and usually go out for work every morning, so they spend little time in the neighbourhood. These middle-class workers resemble those living in many suburbs of European cities, and a small part of them is involved in activities in schools, parishes and the headquarters of third-sector organisations in the neighbourhood. Next, there are the actual “inhabitants”: those who experience the neighbourhood to the full, having fewer opportunities for work and life in the external areas. They mostly live in brick high-rise buildings and a minority of them are families who used to live or still live in the Sails, in areas where the poorest or most precarious population is concentrated (Lot P, where the P stands for *Puffi*, the Smurfs) or in towers, almost always living in intergenerational poverty. Only a proportion of these residents are involved in clearly illegal activities. Other than this group, we must also consider the inhabitants of ROMA origin, who in many cases are de facto Neapolitans, with local identity cards and decades of residence, having lived in Scampia for three generations. An issue that has long been postponed is that of the Cupa Perillo camp: while acknowledging that some of its members commit crimes, the camp contains about one hundred families who have a legal right to public housing, but no administration has seriously considered offering it to them¹³. Then there is a further category of “inhabitants”: teachers and public service and third-sector workers who, despite living in other areas, run the neighbourhood’s daily socio-educational activities. In addition to hundreds of teachers, coordinated by highly committed educational directors, there are workers from other public services and about forty third-sector organisations, of which only a few were mentioned in a report published in the local issue of the newspaper *La Repubblica: Coop. L’uomo e il legno all’APS Chi Rome e Chi No, Kumpania, Dream Team, Le suore della Provvidenza* and many others.¹⁴ In addition to recognising the commitment of these organisations, we should note that, for years now, they have been successful in attracting resources that amount to hundreds of thousands of euros by winning local and national tenders. These funds make it possible to provide at least some basic services and avoid the worst in terms of the lack of basic rights for large sections of the neighbourhood's population. In some cases, these institutions try—with good results—to make innovations in socio-educational, welfare and cultural services in a neighbourhood with a particular social need.

¹² I here use some of the arguments presented in a newspaper article published in *La Repubblica Napoli* on 13.09.2022.

¹³ Giovanni Laino, “Superare i campi Rom: cosa e come fare.” *Autonomie locali e servizi sociali*, no. 1 (2016): 45-64.

¹⁴ Antonio Di Gennaro and Giuseppe Guida. “Scampia, l’università è pronta le lezioni partono fra un mese.”, in *La Repubblica Napoli*, 11 september 2022, 2-3.

The launch of the new Federico II campus in Scampia is therefore a great occasion that raises many expectations, but the effectiveness of the investment—in terms of making it an Engaged University—cannot be taken for granted. A lot depends on one decision: whether the medical stronghold will be a collection of nursing and body care activities or, starting from the idea of health as an all-encompassing social fact, it will be combined with other interventions to combat vulnerability and poverty among children, women and the elderly, some of which are already active in the neighbourhood.

To do this, the rector and senior referent of the Faculty of Medicine—in agreement with the mayor of Naples—aim to promote a local development coalition that will be hosted on the premises; this could be an opportunity to rationalise, relaunch and develop the mixed welfare system that effectively operates in the district. In this sense, the launch of the new training and health service centre could also act as an authoritative request to reinforce a local development coalition that the third sector and the municipality alone have, in fact, never managed to establish for over twenty years. This coalition represents the true qualitative leap that, together with the worthy commitment of local individuals and groups, can overcome a very spontaneous, often disjointed and ineffective phase of public investment, even if this quality improvement has not yet been clearly articulated.

To conclude, in Scampia, the Federico II University cannot repropose a model like that implemented in San Siro by the Politecnico di Milano (Urban Living Lab) or in the Corviale district in Rome (a mediation and support desk for the implementation of a relocation policy for families in upgraded housing). Rather, this new opportunity could launch a more advanced and challenging model. Without looking too far ahead, I believe it is essential to start a serious preliminary investigation that would allow the university to also allocate resources to a small group of motivated young researchers who, under the supervision of senior lecturers, could conduct action research that would be of great interest from this perspective. I have already proposed to set up a small working group and convene the most qualified actors for a sort of neighbourhood social committee that, together with referents from the municipal administration, would stimulate (or force) municipal departments to work in an integrated manner. This committee could also run new internal and external services, always ensuring transparency of resource allocation. A similar negotiating table could urge and support the most qualified actors of the third sector to create a local development coalition, tempering competition and trying to build a climate of social dialogue—one that does not seek to eliminate conflict—for the evaluation of social needs and their best possible treatment thanks to policies of different scales and innovative practices aimed at improving the effectiveness and protagonism of the involved actors.

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