

The City/University Link beyond Proximity: a Learning Experience between Climate Adaptation Strategies and Civic Activism

PEER REVIEWED

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1. Introduction.

This contribution starts from interpreting the relationship between the university and the city as an interaction between several non-unitary actors, which becomes a learning practice.² It draws on a small education—and research—activity carried out in Verona, the “CLIM-ACT! In azione per il clima” Project—focused on bottom-up urban regeneration practices for climate adaptation—with the aim of developing some reflections about the geographies of ‘social engagement’ of universities as well as about the notion of social engagement itself, by beginning from the following question: What can we learn about the university/city relationship ‘following’ research practices even beyond the boundaries of territories which universities assume as ‘their territories’?

Research and education activities carried out by universities in interactive contexts can be considered to be relevant learning experiences for all the actors involved: «... knowledge is 'practical' not only because applied, but also because it is produced during the action,

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² Pier Luigi Crosta, *Politiche. Quale conoscenza per l'azione territoriale* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1998), 355.

by all the actors who interact».³ In the view of Dewey, experience is the basis of knowledge, and «The attainment of knowledge of some things is necessarily involved in common sense inquiries [...], and not [...] for its own sake».⁴ So the knowledge occurs in «the environment in which human beings are directly involved, the common sense environment or "world," and inquires that take place, in making the required adjustments in a behavior common sense inquires,⁵ so where the problems arise in situations of interaction in the world in which individuals live, and they can become the object of inquires. Furthermore, if we assume the pedagogical approach proposed by Freire and, more generally, a problem-posing education approach, knowledge is not a passive act. It is praxis, composed of reflection and action (Freire, 1968). It's a dialogic and cooperative process, transformation-oriented, led by a humble attitude, that requires a relationship with the context. This statement means identifying in the interaction with local contexts the possibility of activating innovative training strategies and understanding education not as mere teaching but as the outcome of learning processes (Crosta, 1997-1998). This opens up the possibility of investigating the forms of knowledge produced in the interaction between the actors involved from the point of view of both research and training.

Moreover, as far as sociospatial relations are concerned, if one «questions the privileging of a single dimension of sociospatial relations» in favor of the acknowledgment of «polymorphous organization of sociospatial relations in multiple forms and dimensions⁶ new interpretations of the territories of universities emerge, which do not give for granted the boundaries of such territories. In general, «our experiences tell us that our social worlds, even of daily interaction, may stretch well beyond the area of a particular city, and that the webs which matter to us may be quite different to those of our neighbors».⁷

According to Jessop, Brenner and Jones,⁸ not only were places increasingly understood as relationally constituted,⁹ but the connections between four distinct socio-spatial concepts - that have been developed by social scientists over the last thirty years—territory, place, scale, and network—and their dimensions have to be all considered for the investigation and the understanding of the contemporary transformation of sociospatial relations.¹⁰

³ *ibid.*, 363, authors' translation.

⁴ John Dewey, *Logic: the theory of inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1938), 60-61.

⁵ *ibid.*, 60.

⁶ Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner and Martin Jones, "Theorizing sociospatial relations," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008): 389-401.

⁷ Patsy Healey, "A Planner's Day: Knowledge and Action in Communicative Practice," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 58 (1992) (1): 9-20.

⁸ Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner and Martin Jones, "Theorizing sociospatial relations," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008): 389-401.

⁹ Dooren Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

¹⁰ Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner and Martin Jones, "Theorizing sociospatial relations," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008): 389-401.

This contribution is divided into four sections in addition to this introduction. In the first section, a literature review concerning the university/city relationship in Italy is carried out. In the second one, the peculiarities of the CLIM-ACT! Project are framed within the climate adaptation and bottom-up regeneration debate, with an in-depth look at some relevant Urban Innovative Actions experiences. In the third section, the activities, the knowledge involved, and the local actors engaged in the project are described in detail. The last paragraph contains conclusive reflections, opening some points for developing a research agenda¹¹.

2. University and the City.

The role played by Iuav University within the CLIM-ACT! Project can be understood within the broad scientific debate developed in Italy on the City/University relationships,¹² which has been progressively followed by the experimentations of several research and teaching activities developed in interactive contexts where Universities share knowledge with urban and territorial actors. Put differently, cities have increasingly become a fundamental resource for Universities.¹³

This phenomenon is undoubtedly linked to the changing dynamics of knowledge production within the evolving new set of activities within the so-called Third Mission of the University, which can be considered a critical dimension of university activities.¹⁴

In the Italian case, Cognetti,¹⁵ referring to the Ministry of the University and Research documents, singles out within the Third Mission activities: activities related to knowledge transfer to enterprises; activities concerning the role of the University as an urban actor involved in urban regeneration/new developments strategies; and the social engagement activities, concerning knowledge sharing in social interaction contexts and the participation to cultural life.

Although the field of Third Mission activities is broad and multidisciplinary, if one observes it from the specific point of view of

¹¹ This paper derives from the joined work and the lively discussion among its authors in the last phases of the CLIMACT Project implementation. Authors' main contribution may be singled out as follows: Carla Tedesco: introduction and first section; Stefania Marini: second section ("Main features of the CLIMACT project" sub-section) and section 3 jointly with Klarissa Pica; Klarissa Pica; second section ("In between UIA" sub-section) and section 3 jointly with Stefania Marini. The first part of the second section and the 4th section were jointly written by all authors, review & editing were jointly carried out by all authors.

¹² Michelangelo Savino (ed.), "Città e università - università vs città," *Archivio di studi urbani e regionali* (1998 1997): 60-61.

¹³ Nicola Martinelli, "Università e territorio in una diversa competitività," *Urbanistica* 149 (2012): 6-11.

¹⁴ Philippe Laredo, "Revisiting the Third Mission of Universities: Toward a Renewed Categorization of University Activities?," *Higher Education Policy* 20 (2007) (4): 441-56.

¹⁵ Francesca Cognetti, "La third mission dell'università: lo spazio di soglia tra città e accademia," *Territorio* 66, (2013) (3): 18-22.

urban and regional planning schools, the most significant dimension of Third Mission can be identified with social engagement activities.¹⁶ The assumption that through interaction with "their communities," universities can contribute to the economic, social, and cultural development of the regions in which they operate is widely accepted.¹⁷ However, the relationships between the performance of universities in research and training and the economic development of the regions in which they operate are somehow given for granted: the idea is that knowledge spillovers occur in areas that are in close geographical proximity to efficient universities.¹⁸ On the other hand, it is the same ministerial documents relating to the social segment of the third mission refer to the «context factors» in terms of «geographical proximity».¹⁹ If one changes perspective, what are the territories of universities about social engagement activities becomes a research question. Although the universities are located within large networks of national and international relationships, in fact, the attention of scholars, with particular reference to the social engagement segment of the third mission, seems to have focused mainly on how the university/city relationship is configured in the local context where the University is located, which is taken for granted and not investigated starting from the multilocal trajectories of research practices. Only in some cases have the social activities of the universities been interpreted broadly, aggregating the initiatives aimed at themes of international cooperation and those related to social engagement in local contexts.²⁰

3. CLIM-ACT and Bottom-up Climate Adaptation Initiatives.

The CLIM-ACT Project was promoted by a local partnership involving third-sector actors, the Iuav University of Venice, schools, the municipality of Verona, young people associations, consultants, and local businesses. It was led by a local environmental association called Rete Verso-Verona Sostenibile-. The project aimed to involve young people in civil activism initiatives for climate adaptation in urban areas.

The approach adopted for CLIM-ACT! put into tension the possibility of contributing to the construction of bottom-up actions in a policy field,

¹⁶ Robin Hambleton, "Purpose and Collegiality in Planning Education: An International Perspective," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 26, 1 (2006): 107–17.

¹⁷ Tommaso Agasisti, Cristian Barra and Roberto Zotti, "Research, Knowledge Transfer, and Innovation: The Effect of Italian Universities' Efficiency on Local Economic Development 2006–2012," *Journal of Regional Science* 59 (2019) (5): 819–49.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 820.

¹⁹ Anvur, *La valutazione della terza missione nell'Università e negli enti di ricerca- Manuale per la valutazione. Nota integrative* (2015): 6.

²⁰ Alessandro Balducci, "Polisocial, un progetto di responsabilità sociale del Politecnico di Milano," *Territorio* 66 (2013) (3): 46–48.

Laura Montedoro, Alice Buoli, and Alessandro Frigerio, *Towards a Metropolitan Vision for the Maputo Province. An agenda for an integrated and sustainable territorial development in the South of Mozambique* (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli, 2020).

such as the environmental one, where expertise is central, albeit eroded by conflicts.²¹ The project as a whole involves the simultaneous experimentation of multiple actions, all based on the idea of building knowledge through experience.

The action developed by the Iuav University of Venice—called CLIM-ACT! Academy—focused on building competencies for young people on bottom-up practices for ecological transition, at the intertwining between actions to adapt cities and territories to climate change, and creative urban regeneration processes.

The organization of education activities came along with a literature review and a review of ‘good practices’ aiming at framing the CLIM-ACT! Project within the increasing number of similar national and international activities. This allowed to interpret the Academy experience as a research experience concerning the social engagement role of the University.

The rhetorical ambitions of co-production, networking, participation, and conflict resolution pervade the current context of planning. However, the profiles and roles of planners within these processes still need to be analyzed in detail: some forms of expert knowledge, in fact, still emerge as hierarchically superordinate compared to others.²² Furthermore, the current context should be seen from the perspective of longer-term dynamics. In the last thirty years, on the one hand, a progressive acquisition in the scientific debate of awareness of the plurality of expert—and non-expert—knowledge which are at play in planning processes and which planners themselves possess emerged;²³ on the other hand, the change in the understanding of planning as processes of multiple interactions²⁴ in which the roles of planners and other actors are perceived differently occurred.

In the specific field of climate adaptation, the recent scientific debate and the numerous studies at the national and international levels that have focused on the impacts of climate change on the built environment and the risks for settled populations have declined the topic of knowledge in planning in a peculiar way. In particular, attention has not only been placed on the relationship between climate change and territorial planning and on the need to overcome consolidated approaches and ‘institutional traps’ that undermine the ability to shape decisions in the direction required by current challenges in favor of innovative responses

²¹ Luigi Pellizzon (ed.), *Conflitti ambientali. Esperti, politica, istituzioni nelle controversie ecologiche* (Milano: Il Mulino, 2011).

²² Mike Raco and Federico Savini (curated by), *Planning and knowledge: How new forms of technocracy are shaping contemporary cities* (1^a ed. Bristol: Policy Press, 2019).

²³ Patsy Healey, “A Planner’s Day: Knowledge and Action in Communicative Practice,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 58, (1992) (1): 9–20.

Luigi Mazza, “Attivista e Gentiluomo?,” *Archivio di studi urbani e regionali* 48 (1993).

²⁴ Pier Luigi Crosta, *Politiche. Quale conoscenza per l’azione territoriale* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1998).

able to manage the conditions of uncertainty;²⁵ but reflections also emerged on the relevance of participatory approaches in the fight against climate change: the involvement of communities with the activation of capacity building paths, social learning and co-planning for adaptation is at the center of numerous reflections and projects.²⁶ In particular, nature-based solutions—understood as solutions offered by nature to environmental challenges, capable of generating environmental, social, and economic benefits to promote resilience—assume a prominent role in this sense,²⁷ identifying themselves as ready-made answers, helpful in making cities more resilient.²⁸ On the other hand, it is widely recognized at the institutional level that citizens play a crucial role in climate action.²⁹ The importance of third-sector organizations as connectors capable of creating spaces to promote a more concrete involvement and move from awareness to action has been underlined.³⁰ This move occurs above all through co-production and co-design processes, involving citizens and potential and actual users of the spaces from the early stages of the adaptive design and transformation process.

Within this framework, the CLIM-ACT! Project presents itself as an opportunity for reflection on knowledge sharing in a specific field of planning, bottom-up regeneration initiatives linked to climate adaptation, as it cross-cuts these issues.

²⁵ Leonora C Angeles, Victor D. Ngo and Zoë Greig, “Inert Resilience and Institutional Traps: Tackling Bureaucratic Inertias Towards Transformative Social Learning and Capacity Building for Local Climate Change Adaptation,” *Planning Theory & Practice* 22 (2021) (1): 51–71.

Heather Campbell, “Is the Issue of Climate Change too Big for Spatial Planning?,” *Planning Theory & Practice* 7 (2006) (2): 201–30.

Francesco Musco and Laura Fregolent, *Pianificazione urbanistica e clima urbano* (Padova: Il Poligrafo casa editrice, 2014).

Robert Wilby, “A Review of Climate Change Impacts on the Built Environment,” *Built Environment* 33 (2007) (1): 31–45.

²⁶ Leonora C Angeles, Victor D. Ngo and Zoë Greig, “Inert Resilience and Institutional Traps: Tackling Bureaucratic Inertias Towards Transformative Social Learning and Capacity Building for Local Climate Change Adaptation,” *Planning Theory & Practice* 22 (2021) (1): 51–71.

²⁷ European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, H. Bulkeley, S. Naumann, Z. Vojinovic, C. Calfapietra, K. Whiteoak, T. Freitas, S. Vandewoestijne and T. Wild, *Nature-based solutions: state of the art in EU-funded projects* (Publications Office of the European Union, 2020).

²⁸ European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Towards an EU Research and Innovation Policy Agenda for Nature-Based Solutions & Re-Naturing Cities: Final Report of the Horizon 2020 Expert Group on 'Nature Based Solutions and Re Naturing Cities'*, 2015. Valerie MacKinnon, Kathy Sobrevila and Claudia Hickey, *Biodiversity, Climate Change, and Adaptation: Nature-Based Solutions from the World Bank Portfolio* (Washington D. C.: World Bank, 2008).

²⁹ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 513. Climate Change Report*, 2020.

³⁰ Patrizia Nanz and Miriam Fritsche, *La partecipazione dei cittadini: un manuale. Metodi partecipativi: protagonisti, opportunita' e limiti* (Bologna: Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2014).

4. Main Features of the CLIM-ACT Project.

Recently, at the national and international levels, research projects, territorial cooperation projects, and exchange of experiences initiatives on climate adaptation in a participatory perspective multiplied. To highlight the peculiarities of CLIM-ACT, focusing, in particular, on the role played by the University, a literature review, and a review of 'good practices' circulating in the international context—in particular within programs fostered by the EU—and focusing on climate adaptation from a bottom-up regeneration perspective was carried out. In particular, initiatives within the Urban Innovative Actions program promoted and funded by the EU through ERDF funds with the aims of scalability and replicability, were focused on. In particular, the survey focused on multi-actor experiences involving the University, promoting participatory processes including the younger generations and students. Most are ongoing projects, which can be explored and articulated through several criteria and related to universities for the role, contribution, and knowledge mobilized.³¹

The first criterion concerns the promoters of the initiative. Based on this criterion, it is possible to identify experiences promoted by research institutions/universities and/or local bodies, the third sector and/or private subjects, in which the involvement of young people and school students is part of broader participatory processes, aimed at involving other populations as well. The second criterion concerns the contents of the projects. In most of the projects explored, the students are engaged in theoretical training courses aimed at increasing knowledge and awareness of the younger generations on these issues and sometimes go so far as to create dissemination tools to raise awareness of the risks of the changing climate or the benefits of answers such as nature-based solutions for the restoration of natural ecosystems. In other projects, however, students are actively involved in implementing transformative actions, through co-planning and playful co-creation of nature-based solutions, especially in the spaces pertaining to the school or in its proximity. Therefore, the school becomes a trigger, an outpost from which to start to counter the impacts of climate change on cities, recognizing the school building pertinent spaces as a «climatic refuge for socio-ecological regeneration». In these experiences, the University is supposed to be an expert actor responsible for knowledge transfer through training courses and for making available the know-how of scientific research concerning good practices and the exchange of experiences developed in other contexts.

A third criterion for describing the cases examined concerns the production of knowledge at the interweaving of different expertise and

³¹ Stefania Marini, Klarissa Pica, Carla Tedesco and Julie Pellizzari, "Adattamento 'dal basso'. Primi esiti di una sperimentazione a Verona," *Urbanistica Informazioni* 306 (2022): 298–300.

various disciplinary fields, as well as the relationship between expert and local knowledge. Indeed, in some projects, citizens' knowledge, perspectives, and perceptions are identified as valuable resources for local adaptation. From this perspective, the role of Universities becomes significant - sometimes leaders, other times partners in initiatives - whose activity is often limited to training or the evaluation of experiences and rarely goes so far as to experiment with concrete actions to re-design and transform places.³²

5. In-between UIA.

Within this literature and projects investigation, some relevant experiences developed within the third call of the UIA-Urban Innovative Action and relating to the theme of climate adaptation have been singled out. In particular, the attention was placed on two parallel projects: OASIS - Schoolyards: Openness, Adaptation, Sensitisation, Innovation, and Social ties: Design and transformation of local urban areas adapted to climate change, working jointly with users in Paris and GBG_AS2C - Blue, Green & Grey_Adapting Schools to Climate Change in Barcelona.

In both projects, climate change adaptation measures were implemented in schools and, in particular, in the outdoor spaces of school courtyards, experimenting with nature-based projects and promoting participatory processes with the involvement of educational communities.³³ In these experiments, the external space of the schools finds a physical and social centrality within the neighborhoods, becoming an opportunity for community aggregation.³⁴ Within these experiences, several different actors established broad partnerships: municipalities, educational institutions—in particular, some primary schools—, and other institutional and public service actors linked to the promotion of public health and the water cycle in the case of Barcelona and the study of meteorological phenomena in the case of Paris. Both projects, through the involvement of schools, aim to address climate challenges by helping to raise awareness and cohesion of the communities involved.

In these cases, the partner universities of the project have mainly had the role of monitoring and evaluating the actions and the social and environmental impacts of the interventions, putting in place the expert skills to identify, describe, and disseminate to a broad audience of policymakers and practitioners the lessons learned. These projects aim at

³² *ibid.*

³³ Francesc Baró, David A. Camacho, Carmen Perez del Pulgar, Isabel Ruiz-Mallén and Pablo García-Serrano, "Nature-Based Climate Solutions in European Schools: A Pioneering Co-Designed Strategy Towards Urban Resilience," *Urban Resilience to the Climate Emergency: Unravelling the Transformative Potential of Institutional and Grassroots Initiatives*, ed. Isabel Ruiz-Mallén, Hug March and Mar Satorras (The Urban Book Series. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 125-46.

³⁴ Valentina R Zucca, "Un sasso in uno stagno. Le scuole come spazio di centralità sociale e culturale in contesti in transizione nella Sardegna meridionale," *Archivio di studi urbani e regionali* 132 Suppl. (2021): 138-15.

possible scalability and replicability at the European level, promoting innovative practices in tackling the challenge of urban space re-design for climate adaptation.

6. A Workshop Open to Knowledge Interactions.

The Academy program was built through the intersection of different disciplinary perspectives—from ecology to planning to the arts—. It consisted of three webinars³⁵ and three workshops held in Verona. The latter focused on the shared analysis of vulnerability maps and the design of strategies and devices for mitigation/adaptation to climate change—nature-based solutions—to be implemented in a participatory manner. Starting from Verona's relationship with its river, considered, from a historical perspective, as a connecting element as well as an ecological corridor and biodiversity reserve, a number of areas vulnerable with respect to the risk of flooding and heat waves were selected, with particular attention to socio-economically marginal neighborhoods. Comparing the maps based on the perceptions of high school³⁶ students and the maps of vulnerability - with the assessment of areas exposed to heat waves and heavy rains in the entire Verona area³⁷ - realized by the university research staff³⁸, allowing an initial identification of target areas.

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³⁵With the aim of strengthening and building interdisciplinary knowledge on the understanding of the territorial impacts of climate change and participatory processes of urban regeneration. This is the articulation of the themes and the lecturers involved: "Cities in transition: the process of adaptation to climate change" (Denis Maragno); "Ecosystem services: concepts and good practices"(Daniele Brigolin); "Bottom-up urban regeneration projects and practices" (Carla Tedesco and Stefania Marini).

³⁶ These are the Engim Veneto Vocational School, located in the Chievo district, and the Messedaglia State Scientific High School, based in the historic center. They are involved in another project action through workshops run by the Energie Sociali social cooperative, one of the partners.

³⁷ In the first case, the evaluations were developed through the Land Surface Temperature map: land use data and the ratio of paved area to the permeable area were compared, producing a classification based on the heat wave vulnerability of the Verona area. In the second case, on the other hand, through the use of DTM (digital terrain model), simulation of water path, and comparison with data on soil permeability, the territory was classified for vulnerability to urban flooding by indicating the different factors of water accumulation and how soil characteristics may or may not feed surface runoff processes.

³⁸ Elaborated by Denis Maragno (Planning Climate Change Lab, Iuav University of Venice).

economically marginal neighborhoods. Comparing the maps based on the perceptions of high school students and the maps of vulnerability - with the assessment of areas exposed to heat waves and heavy rains in the entire Verona area - realized by the university research staff, allowing an initial identification of target areas.

During the workshop, many hotspots particularly vulnerable to both of the impacts mentioned above were identified in the first step. In a second moment, participants were able to get closer to these vulnerable contexts through a site survey that made it possible to gain direct experience of the places, observe urban practices, interact with local actors promoting significant experiences of activism, and reflect on how some informal practices turn out to be ready-made solutions for adaptation, according to the nature-based solutions approach. The survey focused on the "Adige River Park" areas north and south of the city. They reached through specially designed bicycle and pedestrian paths to immerse themselves in the river landscape and perceive the relationship with the neighborhoods bordering the river. These experiences were opportunities for discussion and confrontation based on the interweaving of expert knowledge and diverse backgrounds of professors and students—ecology, planning, design, economics, the arts, photography—.

During the site survey, students had the opportunity to meet with some local actors who carry out urban practices that often turn out to be ready-made adaptation solutions to climatic variations. Knowing bottom-up experiences along the Adige River and its surrounding areas allowed them to understand and valorize the inherent project-based dimension of some civic activism practices.³⁹

The Canoe Club Association, founded for the dissemination and promotion of canoeing, now also promotes knowledge of the history and landscape features of the Adige River through educational and cultural activities and public awareness. In the South Adige Park area, the association Amici del Lazzaretto [Figure 1], founded as a result of a mobilization action of the FAI for the preservation of the historic Lazzaretto area, promotes cultural and social activities and intensive environmental education efforts; furthermore, it promotes actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change and to foster biodiversity. Finally, La Folaga farm promotes the l'Orto Al Porto association, which encourages the care of social relations through community vegetable gardening and cultural and social events.

All identified grassroots practices move at the intersection of cultural, social, and educational promotion, focusing on environmental sustainability and new lifestyles related to a fair trade economy.

³⁹ Carlo Cellamare, *Progettualità dell'agire urbano: processi e pratiche urbane* (Roma: Carocci, 2011).



Figure 1| Survey and meeting with Arch. Anna Braioni (“Amici del Lazzaretto” Association).
Credits: Stefania Marini.

The immersion in the area made it also possible to intercept some informal practices, such as in the case of the small beach along the river called "Catena Beach": a place where residents can enjoy a natural space, which becomes a natural space of climatic adaptation, as a shaded refreshment point compared to the areas subject to the heat island phenomenon present in the nearby neighborhoods [Figure 2]. Urban practices observed also designed informal everyday paths between the neighborhoods and the embankment of the river, marked by passing through uncultivated areas to connect with the pedestrian street that runs along the river from the Ponte Catena area to the Chievo district [Figure 3].



Figure 2| Informal practices along the Adige River.
Credits: Klarissa Pica.



Figure 3| Informal paths connecting marginal neighborhoods and the Adige embankment.
Credits: Chiara Lievore.

Following the site survey, in a cross-reference between the analysis of expert maps, narratives of the experiences of local actors, and the observation of places, participants were guided to reflect on the areas explored in the river's northern region, particularly around the Arsenal. Unlike the one in the south of the city - already involved in a participatory

workshop experience in 2013⁴⁰—this area is characterized by more critical issues and less presence of civic activism. By crossing the perspectives of the students involved—from different backgrounds—design, urban planning, architecture, and economics—and the knowledge produced during the interaction with local actors, nature-based solutions strategies were constructed. In particular, the student groups were stimulated to look for solutions to connect the city's adaptation to climate change with promoting social cohesion. In this sense, the area along the Adige River may represent strong potential for the nearest neighborhoods.

The three student groups then selected three different areas on the right bank of the Adige River and differing in historical development and socioeconomic composition of the population: a connection area along the river between the Arsenal, the San Zeno district, and the Navigatori district, with solid mobility issues; a place in the so-called "Orti di Spagna" in the San Zeno district, which has suffered a significant demographic and economic change in recent years; and finally, an area in the Saval neighborhood, characterized by large portions of land designated for community services—which now appear as unused and/or lightly equipped through paving that is difficult to maintain—and numerous public housing estates that accommodate a population with socioeconomic solid fragilities.

Subsequently, the Academy's workshop course aimed to identify design strategies and a plan of activities to intercept/support/encourage the activation of citizenship and especially young people—including through synergy with other projects present in the city and enhanced with the CLIM-ACT! project—through the co-construction of climate change adaptation devices, including from existing informal practices to be recognized and enhanced.

The cross-disciplinary production of knowledge promoted during the Academy was also stimulated by reflecting on the role of artistic practices in raising awareness of environmental issues. Some students also developed a photographic research project; the outcomes of this project gave rise to an exhibition of the site-specific installation "Let's Degrade in the City." This photo installation is based on a game of associations and dissonances, in which images of the environmental "degradation" encountered along the Adige River during the surveys relate to the graffiti on the wall of the Arsenal, where the Academy and the final exhibition of the projects took place.

The workshop's conclusion was characterized by a public presentation that prompted much reflection among the experts, project partners, and local administration representatives [Figure 4].

⁴⁰ Liliana Padovani and Nico Cattapan, "Partecipazione e coinvolgimento dei cittadini nella progettazione e gestione del verde urbano," in *Spazi verdi da vivere il verde fa bene alla salute*, ed. M.R. Vittadini, D. Bolla and A. Barp, (Saonara: Il Prato. 2015), 257–83.



Figure 4| Public presentation of the projects and the photographic exhibition "Let's degrade in the city".

Credits: Stefania Marini.

7. Concluding Remarks and Open Issues for a Research Agenda.

In this contribution, a research and training practice related to the social engagement role of the University was 'followed' in a twofold manner. On the one hand, the involvement of Iuav University in a specific training activity carried out within a broader social activation project was described in detail. On the other hand, this activity was framed within the scientific debate through a literature review and a review of good practices and innovative actions to focus on the peculiarities of this specific case. These research activities allowed to develop some reflections and to raise some questions for a research agenda.

First, concerning the micro research/teaching experience within a larger social activation project, some strengths and critical issues emerge. The learning experience allowed students to experience an interactive and dialogical approach to planning, being dropped into a concrete interdisciplinary planning context oriented to promote place transformations by implementing low-cost NBS. Students and tutors were, therefore, able to challenge their knowledge in a potential factual context of action that is difficult to find within the rigid university curricula. The short temporality of the project and the episodic nature of this educational approach in the university context, however, have, on the one hand, contributed to disregarding some of the expectations of the project partners who would have wished to turn young students into activists with the possibility of engagement for the implementation phase of the projects; on the other hand, they have made it challenging to consolidate the collaboration between the university and local

associations. Within standard educational programs, this type of experience tends to be occasional: the short research/teaching experience, and the lack of continuity of action, within a context of limited resources—and of continuous competition for resources—have partially undermined the creation of activities with a strong impact and solid learning chains, which can have spillovers at the local level, or manifest themselves in other places as well, given the multi-locality induced by contemporary living.⁴¹ Indeed, such short-term experience is challenging to evaluate regarding student learning and its impact on the local context. These weaknesses point out how this planning educational practice should be more widely adopted in university programs to be more effective and add value in knowledge and multiple learnings for the students, the researchers, and the local actors involved.

Second, coming back to the territory where the public engagement role of the University is played, first of all, it is possible to highlight that the starting of this project is due to initial contacts with a network of local associations by a researcher from the Iuav University, who is an activist in the Verona context. As pointed out above, the University's social engagement context cannot be defined a priori. Still, it emerges through urban and territorial practices—not only academic—of its researchers. Even so, in this specific case, although the local University—University of Verona—does not deliver urban and regional studies courses and the city, where the CLIM-ACT! Project was held, is located in the same region where the IUAV University of Venice is located—the Veneto region—, it is not possible to easily frame this region as a whole in terms of “geographical proximity”. However the issues raised are certainly broader: the urban and territorial practices of researchers—as well as those of students and other university workers—are not limited to the local area. They are neither defined by administrative boundaries nor based on the geographies considered in ministerial documents for evaluating universities. The breadth of these «territories circulatoires»⁴² concretely affects the possibility of activating social engagement initiatives. It gives us a particular perspective of the universities' territories.

If we assume a notion of city and territory as «the use that is made of it» and practice as «what people do»⁴³ by following the research practices—of researchers—beyond both the cities—and territories—in which the universities are located and the modes in which each specific university 'labels' its third mission activities, it is possible to develop some reflections on the university/city relationship from a different

⁴¹ Carla Tedesco, “Negli intestizi delle azioni innovative di rigenerazione urbana,” *Archivio di studi urbani e regionali*100, (2011): 82-98.

⁴² Alain Tarrus, “Territoires circulatoires et espaces urbains : Différentiation des groupes migrants,” *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 59-60 (1993): 51-60, quoted in Pier Luigi Crosta, *Pratiche. Il territorio è «l'uso che se ne fa»* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2010), 119.

⁴³ (authors' translation) Pier Luigi Crosta, *Pratiche. Il territorio è «l'uso che se ne fa»* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2010), 7.

perspective. In other words, it is possible to shift the focus to the University's role concerning scientific dialogue with society, no longer taking it for granted that this is one confined to a predefined territorial context (where the university is located): if territories are not «a datum,» but are «constituted by the forms of social interaction, overlapping, but never coinciding, always interfering with each other»,⁴⁴ investigating what the territories of universities are becomes a research strategy.

From a different perspective, the peculiar interactive approach assumed by the CLIM-ACT! Project carried out through the involvement in a network of local actors can be considered within the 'micropolitics of planning' and how people interact even with objects to establish mutual understandings.⁴⁵

Not only understanding the distinction between a site as «the place being planned,» a context as «the socio-political, cultural and economic conditions ... that shape the planning process» and the «place of practice» embodying actors as well as the materiality of the settings of the planning process⁴⁶ is essential for planning education, but this distinction also allows us to recognize that the places where researchers carry out social engagement activities and the connections thereof design geographies which deserve investigation as they constantly build up the territory of the University as a place of–planning education and research–practice.

Third. A further element for reflection concerns the strongly bottom-up nature of this initiative. The project promoter is neither a research institution nor a local authority but a non-profit association. Despite operating mainly through collaborations with other associations in proximity networks, it managed to involve both the municipal administration and the Iuav University of Venice, going beyond the narrow administrative boundaries of the municipal territory. By acting as a facilitator between schools, universities, and the third sector, the lead association encourages interaction and the exchange of knowledge: although the role of expert knowledge bearer on the subject cannot be recognized ex-ante, it succeeds, through the collaborative nature of the project, in creating a multi-actor network in which subjects capable of producing knowledge interact during the action. Consequently, the expertise the University brought to the project was as important as the capacity to interact with all partners, particularly with the lead partner, following procedures and tacit rules utterly different from those used within research networks. Researchers had to adapt their research routines to this new context.

Ultimately, the university and territory relationship is no longer between two given elements but becomes a relationship built in and through action. From this perspective, the experimentation that was activated

⁴⁴ (authors' translation) *ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁵ Robert A. Beauregard, "Planning with Things," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 32 (2012) (2): 182–190.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 9.

through the CLIM-ACT! Project is a circumscribed experience, but it makes it possible to question what we are talking about when we talk of both the social engagement of universities and universities' communities of reference.

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