# SUPERTRENTO: A Practice-Led Design Process for Urban Transformation

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**Abstract.** The end of the Modern era represents the beginning of a new phase for city development that requires urban planners, policy makers and civil servants to experiment with open decision-making processes, contributions from disciplines beyond urbanism to face the increasing complexity of society. Although in recent years many Western cities become laboratories open to innovation and contamination, very few studies focus on analyzing participatory processes in large urban transformation and the management of their legacy. The contribution presents a detailed and reflective account of *SUPERTRENTO – Participatory Urban Scenarios for Ecology and Regeneration*, an experimental participatory urban planning process initiated by the Municipality of Trento in collaboration with the collective Campomarzio. The focus lies on describing the practice-led, research-through-design methodology developed to engage citizens in the urban transformation of a major railway area slated for undergrounding. Combining results with existing literature, it draws conclusions on how participatory urban planning becomes spaces to learn and exercise democracy and concludes on the relevance of research through design ways to institutionalize the legacy of these practices to serve as mines of knowledge on the city and places to improve urban policy design.

**Keywords:** participatory planning · urban transformation · research through design

## 1 Introduction: Urban Transformation as a Lab in Complex Contexts

The end of the Modern era represents, for most of the cities around the world, a variety of challenges that must be addressed. Between many other changes, digitalization and the transition from an economy based on industrial production to one centered on service production began to challenge the twentieth-century city model.

Until the late 1970s of the past centuries, cities had developed productive sites, railway areas essential for transport and trade, and zones designated for storage, production, and commerce in strategic locations. The centrality of industry, craftsmanship, and commerce made these areas not only crucial for the urban economy but also for the daily lives of its inhabitants. In Italy, due to the socio-economic condition of the south, a large migratory process affected northern cities' development [1] and their enlargement. Since

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industrialization then, urban issues have always been related to expansion, and it is only starting from the late Sixties that things began to change. The crisis of the economic model on which Western societies were based forced to change, and the face of cities started to transform. Since then, urban issues have come to be related to the new demands of the contemporary city that shift from the culture of urban expansion to the culture of transformation [2].

Starting from this awareness, new sensibilities arose where the knowledge of the urbs and its physical characteristics has decisively taken on a guiding role for understanding and controlling the structuring aspects of the city [3]. "Transformation and requalification" took place before being occupied by "expansion and development", leading cities to ask for regeneration processes [4].

Alongside the need to rethink vast urban areas left vacant by industrial complexes following delocalization, city governance must also address the demands of an urban population that is growing numerically and becoming increasingly complex. Different social classes, diverse cultural backgrounds, and highly varied living needs coexist with competing forces: on one hand, movements advocating for development models that minimize environmental and social impact, and on the other, actors promoting speculative approaches that cater exclusively to certain social groups. This challenging new era leads research in urban planning to an experimental phase in which the definition of new strategies and the search for new tools, make public spaces as the fundamental of society again at the core of the debate [5].

Addressing these challenges effectively requires municipal administrations to experiment with new decision-making processes, to open themselves to contributions from disciplines beyond urban planning, and to seek support in understanding and managing the very complexity that these changes are bringing to the forefront.

To develop new models of collaborative governance in which public and private actors work collectively in distinctive ways, using particular processes, to establish laws and rules [6] for the provision of urban transformations, cities worldwide have become potential laboratories [7].

These laboratories promote collaboration between municipal administrations and university researchers, as seen in some North American cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Atlanta. In Europe, hybrid initiatives in cities such as Barcelona and Zurich contribute to a growing field of research and experimentation. The goal is twofold: to bring human needs back to the center of political and administrative decisions [7] and to innovate strategic urban planning models.

Alongside major urban conglomerates, small and medium-sized Italian cities are also facing these challenges. Among them, in addition to the well-known Bologna and Torino, the city of Trento stands out as an interesting context for innovation (Fig. 1).

### 1.1 SUPERTRENTO: A Laboratory for Practice-Led Innovation

Although Trento, since the early 2000s, had planned several major transformations, it is starting from the end of 2022 that the city has begun to shape new approaches in response to the need to address significant urban challenges.

The Variant to the General Regulatory Plan, drafted by the Catalan urbanist Joan Busquets and approved by the Council of Municipality of Trento in 2001, with his



**Fig. 1.** Former Scalo Filzi and northern part of the Area to be undergrounded. Ph. Nicola Cagol

envisioning about the undergrounding of the railway within the urban area, initiated a phase of reflection and debate. However, by the late 2010s, the construction of the freight railway bypass—an ancillary project for the southern access routes to the Brenner Base Tunnel—provided new momentum and concrete implementation opportunities for the undergrounding plan, which had remained purely conceptual until that point. Thus, in 2022, a new phase of experimentation began. Unlike the early 2000s, this process was not led by a single urban planner but instead aligned with the approach taken by major European cities: placing people at the centre of administrative policies and, consequently, at the core of decisions concerning large-scale urban transformations. As in other medium-sized cities, Trento also faces an urban transformation concerning its railway area, which has the potential to impact the entire city. When an urban master plan involves a district of a large city like Milan or Barcelona, its effects reverberate through the surrounding areas but rarely have a direct impact on the entire city. However, when a city with a population of one hundred thousand, such as Trento, decides to intervene and transform an area of 16 hectares, the changes in terms of functions, mobility, and new attraction hubs influence the dynamics of the entire city. For this reason, the experiments currently taking place in large cities to engage citizens in urban planning are interesting, but even more so, due to the effects they generate, are those initiated in medium-sized and small cities, where transforming an area means reflecting on the entire city.

*SUPERTRENTO – Participatory Urban Scenarios for Ecology and Regeneration*, a participatory process aimed at defining the guidelines for future design competitions for the railway area, fits within this framework.

The initiative was promoted by the municipal administration in collaboration with the multidisciplinary collective Campomarzio. The process involved a cross-sectoral engagement of the Mobility and Urban Regeneration Project, the Urban Planning Department, the Department of Culture, Tourism and Youth Policies, as well as the Cabinet and Public Relations Office, alongside two engineers, three architects, and me from the collective. The final goal of the process, launched in December 2022 and concluded in March 2024, was to produce a new kind of policy design-based document (referred to as the Guidelines) to consolidate the expectations, visions, concerns, and recommendations expressed by the participants throughout the process.

## 2 SUPETRENTO, a Practice-Led Design Process

Limited availability, alongside the diversity and disparities among existing similar practices on the involvement of citizens in addressing urban transformation, represents one of the first issues for Practitioners-Researchers [8] that lead the process. The research on similar cases to refer to has yielded fragmented results, whose analysis has proven to be more relevant for defining the reference framework in urban planning terms rather than for developing a working methodology. For this reason, what ultimately guided the phase-by-phase work was the definition of clear objectives to be achieved. These objectives, in turn, shaped not only the design of content but also the methodologies that gave form to the overall process.

Considering SUPERTRENTO as a process aimed at building a community willing to engage in the co-design of a major urban transformation, we first focused on identifying the key steps and dynamics that would support its creation. Participating in the co-design of an urban area's future requires an understanding of the ongoing transformation, the ability to reflect on the city's identity, and a willingness to learn from other contexts to envision better solutions to the challenges faced by contemporary cities. Population aging, gentrification, and the need to mitigate the effects of climate change are just some of the critical issues shaping today's urban discourse. Understanding, reflection, and learning were, therefore, essential steps in building the community needed to collectively shape the guidelines for the future of the underground area. The starting point was indeed a well-documented phenomenon in literature: the recognition that Trento inhabitants couldn't address or clearly define aspirations, needs, or concerns [9] about the undergrounding of the railway or the development of the newly liberated space, and after a couple of meetings, we understood the point.

Urban transformations affecting large areas are often challenging for citizens to fully grasp. The use of technical language by professionals and public administrators, combined with the difficulty of navigating and making sense of the urban fabric, creates significant barriers to public engagement in co-designing the future. To challenge this situation, one of our first objectives as a working group was to design a communication ecosystem capable of clearly conveying both the fundamental concepts of urban transformation and the explanation of ongoing developments.

In essence, we aimed to develop a process structured around the following key phases: first, fostering awareness and informed engagement through clear and compelling communication; second, identifying, during this informational stage, the issues that resonated

most and the audiences they attracted; and finally, mobilizing these groups—formed around shared interests—in the concluding phase of the process, the co-design of the guidelines.

The need to involve all stakeholders and not limit the discourse to technicians and politicians was clear to us when we designed the route therefore creating a community of citizens capable of exchanging knowledge and reflecting together on emerging problems has proven to be necessary.

Addressing this challenge, then, required to entangle with the definition of *publics* as groups of people concerned about an issue organizing themselves to address it [10] and, therefore, build upon the awareness that there must be no one community or single public but multiplicity of publics, which probably will be often controversial but, at the same time, aware and interested in the participatory process. It also requires drawing upon Binders et al. notion of *democratic design experiments* in which designers define and experiment with citizens, policymakers, and grassroots organizations on the issues with which they are concerned [11].

The work undertaken to achieve this objective has been presented in Pedretti [16]. This contribution focuses instead on analyzing the role of the dedicated Instagram channel in supporting the informational process, as well as the unexpected outcomes related to the emergence of a new and unanticipated audience for SUPERTRENTO.

### 2.1 Methodology: Drawing the Method of an Experimental Process: *Get Inform, Imagine, Engage*

SUPERTRENTO has been designed to achieve the aim of drawing a new kind of document. What we decided to call "Guidelines for the future of the area freed by the railways" is, indeed, a core of 68 pages designed to orient planning strategies and urban-related policies for the next twenty years[1]. The document, therefore, is not a strategic plan, nor a master plan or an institutional program; it is a curated summary of all the issues, visions, decisions, and open questions that arose throughout meetings, workshops, and labs.

The methodological approach adopted to develop the guideline definition process was structured into three distinct phases. These three phases were also used to compose the payoff of the branding: *Phase 1: Get informed, Phase 2: Imagine, Phase 3: Engage* (Fig. 2).

The method chosen for the first phase of the process was based mainly on qualitative tools such as in-depth interviews. Design-oriented instruments such as informal meetings to discuss ideas and prototype solutions using different scales architectural models were also planned to make themes such as public place design or new mobility strategies easier to understand for different target groups of people.

Over the initial four months, the working team planned to be flexible enough to be able to organize the correct amount of meetings necessary to engage as many people as possible. Besides the importance of this phase in making people informed about SUPERTRENTO, it also was designed to allow the designers discover the relevant issues and concerns about urban transformations as well as support them in *framing* or

[1] Final document is downloadable following the link https://www.supertrento.it/#linee-guida (Italian language only)

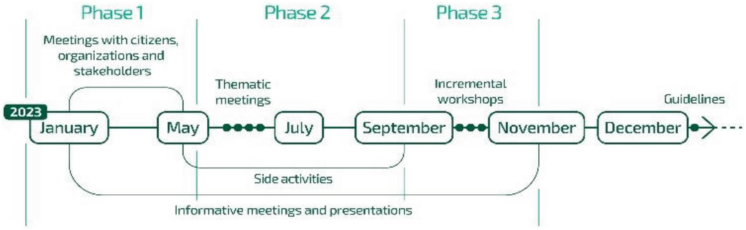



**Fig. 2.** The process SUPERTRENTO translated from the Italian version. Courtesy of Municipality of Trento and Campomarzio

in selecting the more salient aspects of the perceived reality and better define problems, causal interpretations, recommendations [12]. The methodological assumption was that this initial phase of the process, could have been the foundation upon which the following activities, contents, tools, and approaches for the second and third phase were designed and implemented.

The second part of the process was then designed to follow up on the first phase with more specific information about the relevant issues that emerged: to pursue the aim of supporting people in empowering their imagination and ideas about the future of the area freed by the railways. Drawing upon Appadurai, we decided to design the contents of the second phase (both for what concerns thematic meetings and @super_trento account) to foster imagination as a staging ground for action [13].

The four thematic meetings' objectives were initially designed to allow participants to understand how the same issues highlighted in Trento were addressed in different contexts; to dialogue with experiences from other contexts; and to co-create a shared map of expectations, ideas, and concerns. The goal of the second phase was, therefore, to initiate a process of ideation and imagination—not just to generate ideas and propose new functions. At the same time, while the first phase was valuable for engaging individuals, the purpose of this second phase was to build a community capable of raising complex questions and issues emerged from the first phase related to mobility, housing, employment, entrepreneurship, well-being, and the accessibility and production of cultural and creative activities.

The third phase of the process, consisting of three incremental workshops, was initially conceived as a series of design-based workshops centered at addressing the findings from the previous stages. These workshops, in the general overview of the one-year process, had the final scope to mediate discussions that arose between differing expectations, facilitate the negotiation of scenarios, and co-design the final structure and content of guidelines that were expected to lead the urban transformation of the 16-hectare area freed by the railways. They chose to adopt an incremental approach leading workshop by workshop, ensuring that at each meeting, the scenario developed in the previous session was refined by integrating new perspectives able to enhance step by step until the final version.

Together with the definition of the method, the steps, and the targets, the working team designed and defined the communication strategy. To support *in situ* activities,

it was decided to focus primarily on two tools: a website for disseminating general information about the process and a new Instagram account (Fig. 3).

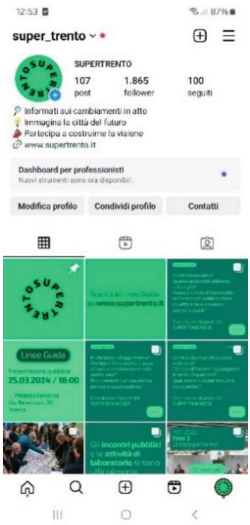



**Fig. 3.** Screenshot of the Instagram account @super_trento (March 2025)

The website's objective was mainly to inform about meetings, workshops, and urban explorations and to keep the archive of the entire process. As for what concerned the social media instead, the team decided to focus only on opening and creating graphic content and video reels for an Instagram account.

Social media allows individuals and organizations to connect with each other, upload photos and documents, and post, share, and forward messages. The wide user base, real-time, and open characteristics make it possible to engage many participants in planning processes. They have four types of support functions for collaborative planning, including information sharing, social networking, citizen participation, and communication [14].

The Instagram account @super_trento was conceived to provide information, additional content, and photos and videos of the urban transformations and of the process itself with the intent to involve a different target: people under 50 not previously interested in issues connected to urban planning.

The same content shared through @super_trento was also disseminated via the official Facebook page of the Municipality of Trento. A dedicated Facebook page for the project was not created because the main objective of the social media plan was to reach the specific target audience of Instagram. Conversely, in the case of Instagram, the choice not to use the institutional pages of municipal departments was based on insights from scholars on the role of media in fostering new forms of participation [15–17].

The social media management plan for the channel maintained an average of two posts per week over a span of more than 52 weeks. The shared content was structured according to the logic of the process itself: *get informed, imagine, participate.*

### 2.2 Leading the Experimental Process into Reality

The SUPERTRENTO process started with a press conference and a public event led by the Major of Trento on December 6th, 2023.

The process was designed to last one year, but the concomitance of the President and Council of the Province of Trento elections with the third phase led to postponing the incremental workshop and wrapping up the process by March 2024, with a three-month delay on the theoretical plan.

**First Part: Get Informed.** Beginning in January 2023, this phase engaged with 764 individuals, including citizens concerned with the city's future, third-sector entities, committees, professional associations, and businesses.

During this phase, meetings were conducted in small, homogeneous groups, primarily in person. Various approaches were used to engage interested participants, including organizing meetings in venues provided by the municipal administration; attending invited sessions at assemblies, meetings, and events organized by local entities and organizations; and offering the possibility of informal meetings for all those interested.

The general aim of the Instagram account @super_trento was also, in this first phase, to inform. Information on Instagram, however, focused on two main topics: urban planning and urban trends, using clear and simple language that foster the rise of a new public. All posts published between November 27, 2022, and April 14, 2023 were then conceived to provide additional information on the history of Trento, the ongoing transformations, and the areas involved in the changes. More specifically, two different spotlight series were created: 1. The #supercartolina to share highlights and tips on specific places by using vintage images and historical photography and 2. The #superglossario to explain key technical terms to citizens, facilitating a better understanding of the debate and encouraging participation without feelings of exclusion[2].

The dissemination of such content sought to lower the barriers to entry for public engagement in the ongoing discourse. The first category, indeed, included posts that explain definitions that may be self-evident to experts but that are not necessarily familiar to a broader audience, such as undergrounding, hypogeum, and bypass. These words have been made clear and understandable in relation to the city of Trento and its context.

The second category encompassed terms and expressions related to contemporary urban dynamics, such as social housing, community garden, tactical urbanism, and mixité. This second series of posts is intended to make people understand clearly the significance of words that scholars, designers, and policy makers use in common language that probably not have a unique and clear meaning for all citizens (Fig. 4).

As is often the case, the SUPERTRENTO process always risked being confined to a traditional audience—composed of the usual individuals in Trento who typically engage with topics related to urban planning, development, and infrastructure. This risk was mitigated not only by the post and the contents themselves but also through the diversification of language and tools employed.

The creation of short reels to show the less well-known urban areas employing a popular, engaging language, carefully designed visuals, and editing techniques reminiscent of action cinema attract audiences even without any paid sponsorship.

[2] *#supercartolina* and *#superglossario* mean #superpostcard and #superglossary where *super* is used to refer to *super Trento*




**Fig. 4.** Example of post edited and published to make citizens familiar with trends in urban transformation

Once the goal to inform people was achieved, at least for some citizens, it was crucial to support participants in imaginative processes that would help shape and make the key issues rise and tackle them.

**Second Part: Imagine.** The second part of SUPERTRENTO begins in May 2023 and lasts until the end of October of the same year. The core activities of this phase were centered on thematic workshops designed to inspire imaginative thinking about potential functions for the area liberated from the railway tracks. Thematic workshops lasted one day from 9,30 in the Morning until 17,30. They were held on the 6$^{th}$ and 20$^{th}$ of May and on the 10$^{th}$ and 24$^{th}$ of June in the Sala Carrozzeria at ex Atesina, a former bus depot specifically set up to host SUPERTRENTO.

If in the planning phase of the process we thought to limit these workshop only to the aims of envision new functions to address emerging urban challenges, inspire and mobilize individuals, as soon as we dealt with the wrap up of the first phase, we realized that we must focus also on the current situation of the city.

What emerged from the analysis of the more than 70 meetings of the first phase was general ignorance about strategies already implemented by the Municipality to deal with main urban issues and, more generally, a lack of knowledge on what already exists in terms of innovative goods and services. For these reasons, we settled on an agenda whose scope was double: to engage in imagining futures and to inform on what exists (Fig. 5).

During the workshops, a range of projects was presented, including urban landscapes thoughtfully designed to integrate corridors for sustainable mobility with recreational and sports facilities, as well as innovative residential solutions aimed at addressing the challenges of an aging population and the increasing issue of social isolation.

Projects, experiences, and practices presented were selected based on two criteria. To avoid feelings of impossibility, every case study was selected to show how, in other contexts, similar issues were faced. Indeed, the presentation of concrete solutions helps in attracting people interested in the issue and encourage them to contribute in order to assure that the process prioritizes this concern and the city can aspire in make those decisions reality [18].

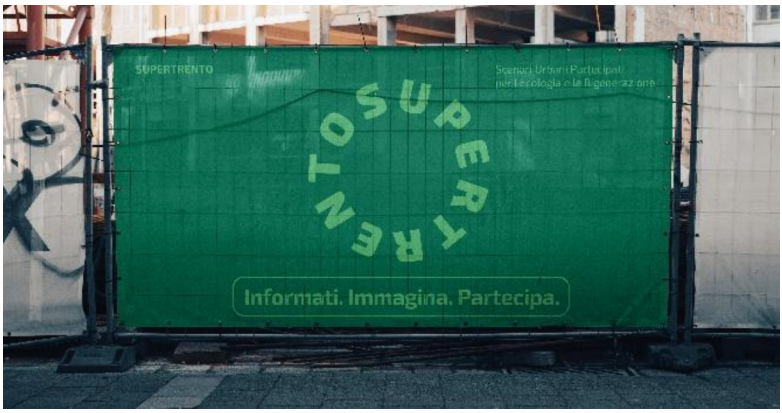



**Fig. 5.** Advertising of the process SUPERTRENTO. Ph. Pietro V. Ambrosini

The second criterion was related to the ability of the cases to act strategically and address different issues. The request arose in the first phase of the process about new public spaces were collected and found a possible inspiring resolution in case studies like the Superkilen[3] in Nørrebro, Copenhagen where culture, sports, relax and entertainment areas are melted in a 30.000 square meters area designed by a multidisciplinary group of artist, architects and landscape designers.

Testimonials invited to show practices were invited to give a lecture during the morning and to take part in the discussion in the afternoon. These after-lunch round table, which kept citizens and experts, revealed their importance in supporting people interested in the comparison between different contexts, needs, and visions. 305 people took part in the four thematic workshops where 8 Municipality managers and 16 experts presented more than 100 projects.

This phase, along with the other, was also supported by communication efforts carried out through @super_trento. The contents of the posts published between April 28$^{th}$ and October 10$^{th}$, 2023, can be divided into three main categories: 1. Reels summarizing the content of the thematic meetings through brief interviews with speakers and key interventions (Fig. 10) 2. Visually curated carousels that synthesize key emerging concepts, situating them within a broader analytical framework (Fig. 11) 3. Posts designed to inform about the final phase of the process, outlining its objectives and methodological approach.

The reels created to disseminate the key topics discussed during the thematic meetings were designed with a more journalistic approach compared to those produced in the first phase. They feature interviews with guest speakers from different contexts, along with video footage captured throughout the day. The graphic carousels, though

[3] Superkilen is a public space in Copenhagen divided into three main areas: The Red Square, The Black Square and The Green Park. The Red Square represents modern urban life with a café, music and sports, while The Black Square is a classic square with fountains and benches and The Green Park is a park for picnics, sports and walking the dog. Superkilen was designed by Superflex with BIG and Topotek1. Commissioned by the City of CCopenhagen and Realdania, Denmark.

receiving less visibility than video content—likely due to Instagram's own algorithmic mechanisms—were designed to explore specific topics in greater depth (Fig. 6).

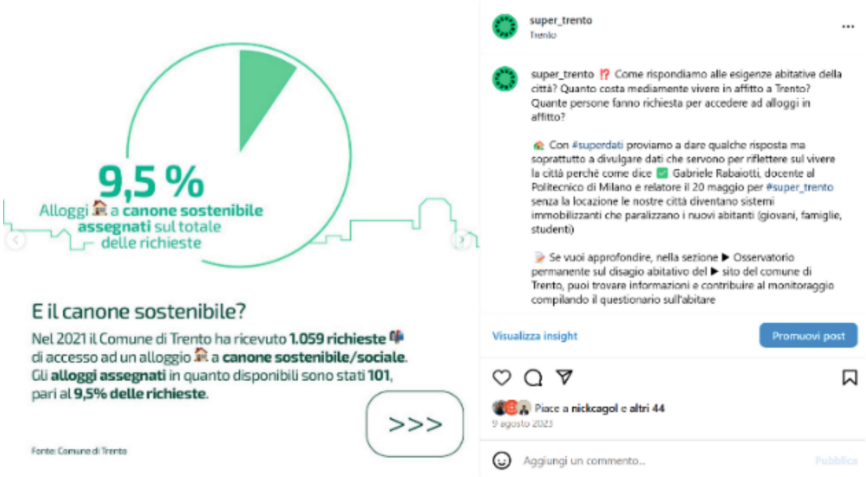



**Fig. 6.** Example of post published to introduce and wrap up discussion and themes

Following the thematic meetings, certain issues and interests emerged more prominently than others. During the summer, the carousels expanded and contextualized these key themes, aligning with the interests that resonated most with participants in the second phase. The aim was to solidify an engaged community around these topics while attracting new potential participants.

**Third Part: Engage.** The final phase of the process, dedicated to co-design and the definition of the Guidelines for the Future of the railway area freed from the tracks, consisted of three incremental workshops held one week apart. Hosted once again at the Sala Carrozzeria of the ex Atesina, on the afternoons of October 28$^{th}$, November 4$^{th}$, and November 11$^{th}$, the community built over ten months of work came together to decide which of the emerging issues, proposed ideas, and possible directions should be selected to shape the guiding document. 170 people engage in this final phase of the process, with an average of 60 participants per workshop.

The scenarios and guidelines were developed incrementally, with the different areas integrated only after the process. The co-design site was divided into three distinct areas, allowing participants to either engage in a single working group or move between discussions running in parallel across the different areas. Each group crafted an initial scenario during the first workshop session, which was then presented in a plenary discussion at the end of the day. Over the following week, these preliminary scenarios were refined in the back office, incorporating feedback and insights. The second and third co-design sessions further built upon this foundation, adding or adjusting elements based on the work carried out by participants in the previous meetings. This incremental approach ensured that the final scenario emerged as a carefully developed synthesis, shaped progressively through successive refinements.

During this phase, the Instagram account played a key role in bridging the week-long intervals between workshops. It provided updates on the emerging scenario, offered previews, and highlighted unresolved themes that would be addressed in the following Saturday's session (Fig. 7).

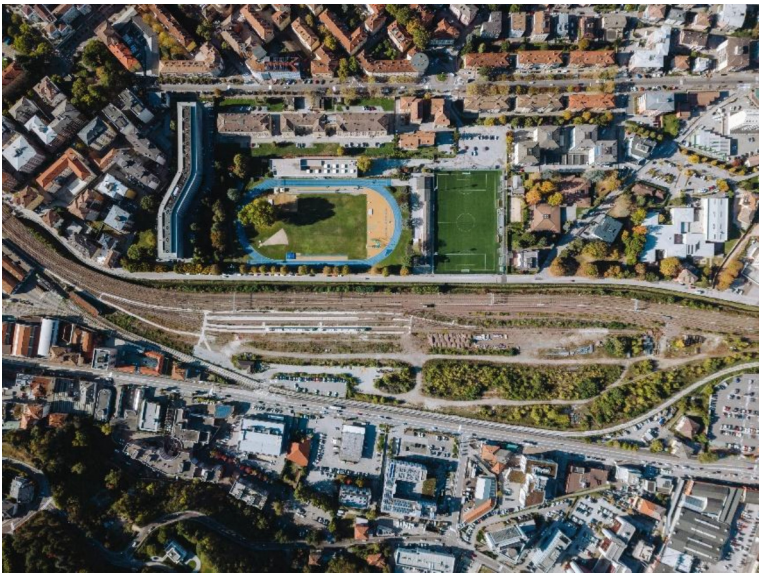


**Fig. 7.** Photo of the area used to draft and share visions during the incremental workshops. Ph. Nicola Cagol

## 3 Results: SUPERTRENTO and Its Publics

**Number of the Process.** As previously described, the difficulties in identifying similar participatory processes to draw up led to SUPERTRENTO being carried out using an experimental method.

The initiative achieved results that not only the awards won and the national recognition gained but also researchers and policymakers have deemed highly significant. However, a comprehensive evaluation based on qualitative and quantitative reflection—assessing the process based on participation numbers, interactions, and its effectiveness in engaging citizens—remains challenging due to the absence of benchmarks for comparison.

Since this contribution aims to foster a discussion that may open new perspectives, the following section presents the quantitative analysis to ground reflections inspired by the design, experimentation, and overall management of the process and further considerations for future exploration (Fig. 8).

After the conclusion of the process, the Instagram account was used only to announce the date of the final presentation of the guidelines. Today, despite recent changes to

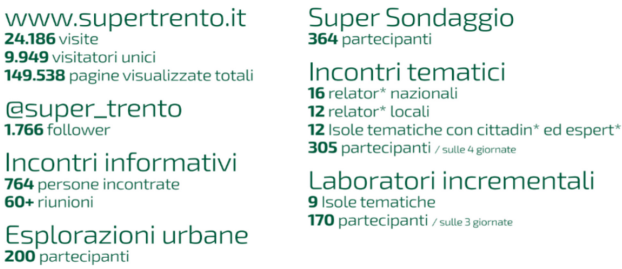



**Fig. 8.** Results in terms of website visitors, Instagram followers, people involved in the first phase of the process (Incontri informative), Survey (Supersondaggio), the second phase of the process (Incontri tematici), and the final phase (Laboratori incrementali)

Instagram's post layout—causing some content to appear misaligned, the page remains an archive of the entire project. On March 25th, 2024, the day of the public presentation of the participatory guidelines for the future of the railway area, the account had 1,766 followers. By February 2025, nearly a year later, that number had grown to 1,866.

**Results of Using Simple Language to Talk About Urban Planning.** The primary challenge faced by the working group was not merely the management of the initiative, but first and foremost the design of a process that would enable effective participation in the production of this strategic document.

Research on previous processes highlighted the lack of existing practices to draw inspiration from. For this reason, the decision was to adopt a practice-based design approach to develop the process through concepts and scenarios [19].

The team working on SUPERTRENTO established to see participation as a process of making public marginalized aspirations and needs, and not a chance to ask citizens for ideas or advice. Therefore, the process was designed to be horizontal. No specific role was assigned to technicians or professionals, and we, as the working group, conceived our role as designers capable of facilitating the circulation of information and experimenting with feedback rather than as technicians seeking ideas. This approach, in a context where participation in urban planning is not yet a widespread or well-established practice, led technicians—such as architects and engineers—to refuse to take part in the process (as we later discover, in many other cities technicians refuse to engage in participatory planning without being firstly recognized as a professional with a clear role in the process). These phenomena allow us to assert that from the perspective of technical professions, what emerges with SUPERTRENTO is that, to support urban transformations and empower innovation in the discipline of urban planning, technicians must become a practitioner–researcher [8].

From the perspective of the outcomes generated using simple language to discuss urban transformations, in addition to effectively engaging diverse audiences, it allowed the public to form different issues to emerge. Beyond these ideas—promoted by citizen groups that either emerged to voice specific demands or were already active and participated in the process to see their concerns reflected in the planning guidelines—a series of other issues also surfaced.

Although not directly related to the railway undergrounding and the reclaimed area, these issues were nonetheless significant and capable of generating meaningful impacts. These include, for example, reflections on the societal shift from viewing sports primarily as a competitive, team-based activity to seeing it as an individual practice focused on personal well-being. This transformation has important implications for the design and management of sports infrastructure in a city like Trento. Or, likewise, the declining amount of time people can dedicate to volunteer activities and its impact on the third sector and the spaces designated for community gatherings and associations.

### 3.1 Discussion

Results presented as well as reflections emerged thanks to the broad engagement of the population are not strictly related to the core topic of the SUPERTRENTO participatory process. Nevertheless, they could represent a valuable body of knowledge for the design of participatory urban policies and for these reasons are discussed below.

One of the main issues that emerges at the end of a participatory process on urban transformation is about the lack of quantitative benchmarks. It means that there are no possibilities to assess not only the overall result of the project (that can be done using even just qualitative tools) but also to reflect on the experimental method used, on the communication plan designed for the different targets included or not.

While fully aware that numerical data on participation do not inherently indicate a positive or negative outcome, we believe that tracking the number of attendees at various events, as well as the individuals, institutions, associations, and organizations involved—using common categories and a standardized classification across participatory processes—could provide a comparative basis for integrating qualitative assessments of these initiatives and a referee for scholars, practitioners and civil servants working. In other words, while numerical data do not hold intrinsic value on their own, their collection within the multitude of participatory processes in different contexts could serve as a starting point for guiding discussions toward meaningful insights. Comparing raw participation figures from a participatory process in a small town with those from a large urban redevelopment initiative may not be appropriate. However, analyzing participation rates in relation to the local population, understanding the demographic composition of these groups, and representing them statistically could provide a valuable foundation for reflection. This, in turn, could help address a common challenge across all participatory processes: the need to engage and activate underrepresented groups.

Another reflection is on the importance of understanding the impact that social media can have not only on participation as a way to be active citizens, but more precisely on the methodology drafted and on the contents presented in a particular place and time of a specific city. Beyond the verification about the effective involvement of under 50 people made possible thanks to the realization of a survey, one thing had become evident: a significant number of people were interested in the themes of the project, actively engaging with online content, and willing to dedicate time sharing their ideas. However, these individuals were not the same as those who had participated in the in-person meetings. What, then, should be done with the ideas and opinions emerging from social network-based participation?

We reflected extensively on this issue but in the end decided not to incorporate feedback, ideas, and opinion gathered through social network into the incremental workshops but instead to make them public through graphical storytelling posts on the Instagram page. This choice was driven by the awareness that our role—and, more broadly, the role of design in the participatory process—should enhance transparency and provide feedback to support advocacy practices. By making these responses visible, we aimed to empower different groups who identified with the expressed concerns, enabling them to mobilize and act [15].

### 3.2 Conclusion: The Legacy of SUPERTRENTO

SUPERTRENTO has been a successful process. The recent approvement by the City Council of Trento of the Variante al Piano Regolatore to integrate the SUPERTRENTO guidelines represent the highest achievable result. Furthermore, the review of the Cultural Strategic Plan of the City to insert the principles emerged from the participatory process represent another important – although not foreseen – result.

Drawing on Binder et al. we look at the SUPERTRENTO process as a twelve-month democratic design experiment in which designers rehearse with diverse citizens, organizations, and policymakers on how to organize themselves around issues with which they are concerned, in other words, as exercises in the craft of participation [11]. As experiments, these scenarios and their narrative joints articulate varied constellations of identities and practices that, from their side, would entail eliciting, articulating, and sharing pluralistic subjectivities as a mode of democratic inquiry into how we might differently conceive our civic conditions and experiences [20].

Even though it may seem that everything went well, today, the process is over, and the community involved, as well as all the issues mapped and made public, have been dispersed.

New participatory processes on the same issues emerged during SUPERTRENTO (housing needs, public place requirements,…) and have been started, irretrievably, from zero. Projects, suggestions, discussions, maps, and data graphics are preserved in a well-designed book that, in a short period, no one would read anymore. Losing public knowledge created and, above all, the community and pluralistic subjectivities composed, or, in other words, not having strategies or tools to empower the legacy of the participatory process for urban transformation, represents a failure not only for SUPERTRENTO, but common to many different processes carried out in urban contexts.

Research on design-based solutions to make the legacy of participatory processes long-lasting and permanently available for citizens and policy makers would therefore enable a more convincing participation. Furthermore, it would also be a mine of well-structured and thoroughly investigated issues to address, knowledge, visions, and skills to activate.

Research on this issue would even allow a different way for urban policy making and planning to develop and address the challenges of today's complex city. Participatory process in urban planning could indeed become a space for learning, dialogue, contribution to problem definition, and, not least, exercise democratic practices. Institutionalizing these spaces for participation could, at the same time, address the demand for engagement that has emerged in SUPERTRENTO, as well as in other processes, and,

again, assure the citizens spaces where they can actively contribute to foster democratic processes and shape policies to improve city life.

In the same years that state-centered democracy is increasingly questionable and people start not going anymore to vote, diverse claims to democracy and a diffuse willingness to participate in collective decisions about the future seem to be increasing in urban areas [21]. The high number of people engaged, whether in the workshops or online, certainly highlights that the city of Trento claims open democratic processes to define its future and also that a productive relation between urbanization and democracy [22] is present and vivid.

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