Comparative Analysis of Participatory Urban Regeneration in Italy: From Small Towns to Metropolitan Areas

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Abstract. In recent years, participatory urban regeneration has undergone significant evolution in Italy, consolidating itself as a key tool for territorial transformation, both at the scale of small and medium-sized towns and metropolitan areas. This process has been characterized by the adoption of innovative approaches that encourage co-design between institutions, citizens, and local associations, alongside the shared management of public spaces. These intervention models not only promote the physical and functional redevelopment of urban spaces but also create new opportunities to strengthen a sense of belonging, improve quality of life, and support local development through greater democratic participation. This paper aims to analyze the differences between the participatory urban regeneration models adopted in small and medium-sized cities, characterized by a stronger community cohesion, and those implemented in large metropolitan areas, where complex dynamics require multilayered strategies and greater integration between traditional planning and active participation. Specifically, the paper proposes a comparative analysis of two cases of "Tactical Urbanism" at very different scales to identify differences and similarities: the "Ca.Fè." initiative in San Nicolò a Tordino, a small town in the province of Teramo, where ten local associations collaborated to transform a former school into a multifunctional center for cultural, educational, and social activities, and the "Piazze Aperte" case in the metropolitan city of Milan, which stood out for the adoption of an integrated strategy combining various participatory approaches. The analysis, which seeks to identify the conditions that promote the scalability and replicability of participatory models, will conclude with a reflection on co-design practices and participatory approaches necessary to build more resilient and inclusive urban spaces at different territorial scales and under varying economic and social conditions.

Keywords: Social Innovation · Participatory Urban Regeneration · Scalability

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1 Active Participation and Social Innovation

From small towns to large cities, urban transformation processes today face multidimensional challenges: from combating climate change to reducing social inequalities and addressing housing marginality. In this scenario, the active participation of citizens has acquired a central role in public policies, no longer considered a mere accessory element but a key factor for building inclusive and resilient cities. Many Italian cities have adopted innovative tools to encourage such participation. One example is the "Collaboration Pacts" (Patti di Collaborazione), introduced by the Municipality of Bologna in collaboration with Labsus [6] and later formalized by Regional Law 24/2017 of Emilia-Romagna. As highlighted by Arena [1], directly involving communities not only enhances the quality of public spaces but also strengthens the sense of collective responsibility, fostering constructive interaction between institutions and citizens. This approach has generated concrete experiences of regeneration [6], some of which have produced innovative governance models, while others have highlighted their limitations. Active participation can be interpreted as a form of "social innovation", as it addresses needs inadequately met by traditional approaches. Social innovations, in fact, include both organizational models and collaborative processes aimed at improving quality of life, fostering inclusion, and accelerating the transition toward sustainability. A distinctive feature of such innovations is scalability, i.e., the ability to expand their impact through replication or adaptation to new contexts. As emphasized by Gabriel [13], «a social innovation achieves scalability when its impact grows to match the scale of the need». Scalability primarily refers to the number of beneficiaries, achievable through the diffusion of methodological principles or the reproduction of interventions (quantitative scaling). It requires distinguishing between "core" elements (fixed and indispensable) and flexible aspects adaptable to local contexts. It must be differentiated from replicability, which implies the faithful reproduction of an original model in different environments [15]. To explore these concepts further, the article examines two case studies that, while sharing the goal of promoting social innovation, differ in approach, scale, and territorial dynamics.

2 Case studies

2.1 Innovation from Below, Challenges fro Above: The "Ca.Fè." Case in Abruzzo

San Nicolò a Tordino (Abruzzo), located in the Tordino River valley, represents an emblematic example of participatory urban regeneration in small-to-medium-sized contexts. The transition from a rural village to a residential area, accelerated by the 2009–2016 earthquakes, highlighted the urgency for public spaces suited to socialization and civic participation. A symbol of this transition is the former Carlo Febbo School, damaged by seismic events, which was repurposed in 2022 into the multifunctional cultural center "Ca.Fè.", thanks to the involvement of ten local associations. The project, included in the "Teramo Città Capoluogo" program [4] and aligned with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), combined architectural restoration with sociocultural valorization, returning to the community not just a building but an identity space. The initiative transcended the physical dimension: the Municipality's adoption

of "Collaboration Pacts" formalized a shared governance model, strengthening the dialogue between institutions and citizens. This bottom-up model anticipated official urban policies, demonstrating the role of local associations in planning. However, challenges persist, such as reliance on volunteer work and the lack of structural funding, risking relegating the project to an isolated episode.

Key Dimensions and Institutional Challenges. A crucial step was the launch of the Municipal Urban Plan (PUC) in 2024, which introduced a participatory approach to planning, replacing the former General Regulatory Plan (PRG). Linked to this is the 2021 Referendum for the redevelopment of the historic center, promoted by local committees, reflecting a desire for active participation, encapsulated in the slogan: «The city can no longer wait […] it is the citizens' duty to demand a serious debate». The administration responded with collaborative governance tools, such as the Participatory Budget (Bilancio Partecipativo), still in its initial phase, encouraging inclusive decision-making processes. However, the Regional Urban Planning Law (LUR) 2023 has drawn criticism from the Orders of Architects of L'Aquila, Pescara, and Teramo, who denounce the lack of tools for effective public participation. The transferability of participatory models, like the one tested in San Nicolò, depends on the ability to adapt innovative tools to local specificities. In small towns, community cohesion and simplified bureaucracy facilitate direct participatory processes, but scarce financial resources and dependence on local administrations remain critical challenges. As highlighted by Montanari et al. [15], the scalability of such models requires contextual adaptability and adequate resources. A pilot-project-based approach and progressive institutionalization of processes could mitigate these limitations, transforming isolated experiences into systemic policies. In Teramo, urban regeneration focuses on the recovery of existing heritage, avoiding land consumption, and enhancing peripheral infrastructure. Concurrently, environmental initiatives aim to reduce soil sealing and expand green areas, aligning with the PNRR's climate resilience goals. The adoption of the Municipal Urban Plan (PUC) in 2024 represents a decisive step toward integrating these interventions into participatory urban planning.

A Laboratory of Participatory Regeneration. The experience of the "Ca.Fè." cultural center demonstrates how participatory urban regeneration processes, even when born in small-scale contexts, can trigger profound and lasting transformations, provided they combine community spontaneity and institutional structuring. The restoration of the former Carlo Febbo School returned to the community not only a physical space but also a collective identity, strengthened by the synergistic action of ten local associations. This case offers significant insights for the replicability of participatory models in small towns, highlighting three key dimensions. First, the value of community cohesion proved indispensable as a driver: the spontaneous mobilization of local associations compensated for the lack of economic and institutional resources, transforming an abandoned building into a cultural hub. This approach, based on the territory's social capital, aligns with the OECD 2022 recommendations on rural resilience, where trust among local actors and shared common goals are enabling factors for sustainable projects. Second, adaptability to crises characterized the entire process. The post-earthquake repurposing of the former school reflects a "resilient by design" approach, integrating physical regeneration with social regeneration, consistent with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR)

goals for inner areas. The ability to turn an emergency into an opportunity demonstrates how small towns can become laboratories of innovation. Finally, the anticipatory experimentation of "Ca.Fè." played a pioneering role: the bottom-up project inspired the adoption of tools like the "Collaboration Pacts" and influenced Teramo's new Municipal Urban Plan. This dynamism confirms what was observed by De Luca et al. (2023) in the study "Bottom-Up Urbanism in Southern Europe", where informal practices often act as precursors to structured public policies, especially in resource-limited contexts. However, to prevent such initiatives from remaining isolated episodes, it is necessary to translate local successes into systemic actions. First, by allocating dedicated funds for small municipalities, with PNRR quotas aimed at creating territorial "skill banks" (banche delle competenze), as proposed by the CNR (2023) to map associative resources, train professionals, and facilitate access to funding, overcoming current fragmentation. Additionally, adopting inclusive digital platforms, modeled on the Living Labs tested in L'Aquila [7], would enable citizens to engage in the management of regenerated spaces, even in peripheral areas, democratizing processes often dominated by Top-Down logics. Lastly, formalizing institution-community pacts, inspired by British Community Land Trusts [22], would ensure project continuity by defining shared responsibilities and transparent governance mechanisms.

From Space to Place. The impact of the "Ca.Fè." initiative transcends mere physical regeneration, touching upon deep-rooted identity and social dimensions. As evidenced by resident testimonies, the repurposing of the former Carlo Febbo School has transformed "a wound of abandonment into a laboratory of hope" (Marcattili, 2023), restoring to the community not just a physical space but a *locus* imbued with collective memory. Former students who once occupied its classrooms now engage in intercultural workshops or music events, reaffirming the value of a space that envisions the future while preserving its historical legacy. The ten associations within the ATS Ca.Fè. Consortium, from neighborhood committees to Autism Abruzzo APS, have fostered a cross-sectoral ecosystem of practices, engaging children, migrants, and athletes in sustained dialogue. Journalist Veronica Marcattili, in her project reportage, highlights how the "Ca.Fè." initiative has "restored agency to a dormitory suburb, transforming it into a living community," while Chiara Ciminà, President of the ATS Ca.Fè., emphasizes its role as an "intergenerational bridge where elders share oral histories and children teach digital literacy." The municipal administration acknowledges the project as a model of "grassroots regeneration" capable of prefiguring public policies, as demonstrated by the integration of Collaboration Pacts into Teramo's Urban Plan. The current challenge lies in transitioning this *experiment* into an enduring paradigm, where the three pillars identified, community cohesion, crisis adaptability, and proactive planning, synergistically reinforce one another, ensuring the "seed of optimism" planted in San Nicolò evolves into systemic, inclusive policies (Fig. 1).

2.2 The Complexities of Urban Regeneration in Milan

With 1.3 million inhabitants and a metropolitan area of over 3 million, Milan embodies a dual transition: from an industrial hub to a global center of finance and design, and from a centralized model to a laboratory of urban democracy. This development, however, has



Fig. 1. Map of urban regeneration interventions in the territory of Teramo and its hamlets: Teramo Città Capoluogo urban regeneration projects, revitalization of sports facilities and cultural buildings, historic heritage restoration. Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Municipality of Teramo [4, 10].

accentuated socio-spatial inequalities, requiring "hybrid" planning that integrates top-down and bottom-up approaches. At the heart of this transformation lies the Territorial Governance Plan (PGT) 2019, the result of 14 months of citizen consultations. The plan formalizes the "Milano 2030" vision, based on polycentrism, sustainability, and participation, encapsulated in the concept of "88 neighborhoods to be named", which aims to decentralize services and improve quality of life. This vision has been translated into concrete interventions such as 30 km of cycle paths and 12 new nurseries. Tools like "Collaboration Pacts", active since 2017 with over 120 projects) and the "Atlas of Urban Regeneration" (Atlante della Rigenerazione Urbana) promote public-private co-design. Examples include the repurposing of historic farmsteads into cultural centers co-designed by citizens and the "Open Squares" (Piazze Aperte) project, based on tactical urbanism, which transformed 25 spaces through tactical interventions involving 15,000 residents. Another innovative tool is the Participatory Budget, introduced in 2015 as Italy's first large-scale experiment and institutionalized in 2020 as a structural instrument of the Municipality of Milan, with €20 million annually allocated to projects proposed and voted on by citizens. Concurrently, grassroots initiatives flourish: "Social Street", a network of over 60 neighborhood groups promoting skill and resource exchanges, thrives in semi-peripheral areas but fails in the city center; "Milano da Vivere" (2021), with 10 km of pedestrianized streets during the pandemic, exemplifies how citizens reinvented public spaces, confirming Michel de Certeau's insight: "The city is practiced, not just planned".

European Models and Systemic Challenges. Milan, however, draws on European experiences, adapting them to its context with mixed results: while Barcelona's "Decidim" platform (engaging 7% of citizens in digital decision-making) inspired Milan to use open data for transparency, Turin's "Co-City" project regenerates abandoned spaces through public-community pacts in railway yards, reserving 50% of housing for vulnerable groups—compared to Milan's 15% [9]. Lisbon's BIP/ZIP program allocates 70% of funds to peripheries, financing 120 micro-projects/year, whereas only 15% of Milan's PNRR funds target marginal areas. Fragmentation among institutions, private actors, and the third sector remains a systemic challenge for Milan, despite the 2017 White Paper (Libro Bianco 2017) identifying "collaboration among diverse actors" (p. 12) as the key to an innovative ecosystem. A case in point is the "Riutilizzasi" project, launched in 2019 to repurpose 50 disused buildings into social spaces, stalled since 2021 due to governance conflicts. As Italy's first Smart City, Milan has chosen to promote social innovation as a central pillar: an intelligent city is not just one that adopts new technologies but one that leverages innovation to address socially relevant problems through novel methods. In this, Milan has demonstrated a willingness to experiment with solutions favoring community welfare, sharing economy, start-ups, FabLabs, and smart working. However, these elements form an organic whole only when they converge toward shared goals while retaining their identities. The challenge lies in transforming heterogeneity into a resource, replacing competitive logic with integrated governance.

Dynamism and Contradictions of a Smart City. Milan plays a leading role in the context of social innovation, driven by a desire to experiment and conceive innovation as a tool capable of contributing to the development of new methods for solving socially relevant problems, using technologies to support collaborative processes. "Milano che cambia" (Milan in Transition) is a concept that aptly encapsulates the city's evolution in recent years: a metropolis that has undergone radical transformation since Expo 2015, becoming an international benchmark for innovation and urban development. However, this exponential growth also brings challenges, including the need to reduce inequalities between the center and peripheries, ensuring equitable distribution of resources and services. On one hand, Milan's dynamism echoes the Futurist energy of Umberto Boccioni's "La città che sale" (The City Rises), where industrial progress was depicted through a whirlwind of colors and movement. On the other hand, the city struggles to bridge increasingly stark socio-spatial disparities. Today, Milan continues to transform rapidly, reshaping its skyline with modern towers and reconfiguring urban spaces (Panarella, 2020). The city's contemporary identity emerges from transformations in response to the Covid-19 emergency, where it reclaimed public spaces by reinventing everyday ways of inhabiting them. This practical resilience parallels Michel de Certeau's reflections in "L'invenzione del quotidiano" (The Practice of Everyday Life): cities are designed according to strategic models, but it is the daily practices of citizens that generate opportunities for freedom and creativity. The Milanese Smart City model embodies this duality: on one hand, the ambition to be a technological and social vanguard; on the other, the risk of "variable-geometry innovation" that primarily benefits already central areas.

Open Data and Hybrid Models. To become truly "intelligent," Milan must transform civic participation and inclusion from mere slogans into operational drivers, integrating peripheries into a cohesive urban ecosystem. The Milan case highlights the need for systemic actions to reconcile technological innovation and socio-spatial equity. For example: inspired by the aforementioned BIP/ZIP program, establishing a "Social Innovation Fund" with public-private co-financing mechanisms, aimed at co-designed micro-interventions; transforming the "Atlas of Urban Regeneration" into an open-source dashboard with real-time data on fund allocation and socio-spatial indicators, modeled on Amsterdam's monitoring system; adopting hybrid (online/offline) platforms based on the Living Lab model [2], with physical access points in libraries and senior centers. Such actions aim to systemically restructure urban policies by prioritizing allocative equity, social performance indicators, and structured participation. Innovation must be understood as a co-evolutionary socio-technical process [12], rather than the mere adoption of prefabricated solutions (Fig. 2 and Table 1).

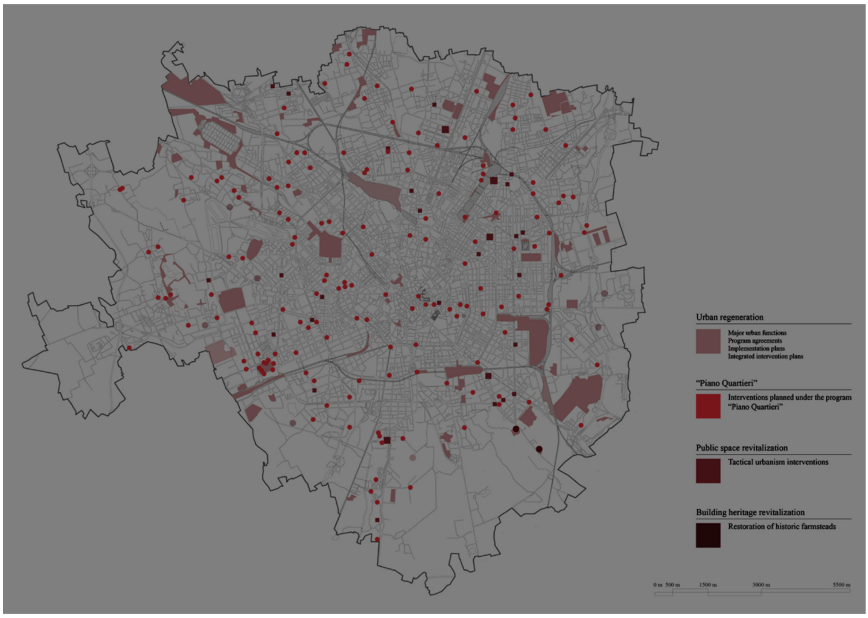

Fig. 2. Map of urban regeneration interventions in Milan: Tactical urbanism projects ("Piazze Aperte"/Open Squares), revitalization of public spaces, restoration of historic farmsteads, and geographical distribution of the "Bilancio Partecipativo" (Participatory Budget). Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Municipality of Milan [8, 9].

Table 1. Comparison of Participatory Regeneration Models in Milan and Teramo. (Source: Author's elaboration based on analyzed case studies)

Category	Milan	S. Nicolò a Tordino (TE)
Socio-territorial Context	Metropolitan area (>3M inhabitants), transition from industrial hub to global center. Center-periphery inequalities	Small town in Abruzzo, post-seismic transition (2009–2016). Need for identity spaces for a transforming community
Key Tools	• PGT 2019 and "Milano 2030" vision • Collaboration Pacts, CSR • Bilancio Partecipativo (Participatory Budget, €20M/year) • Tactical Urbanism ("Piazze Aperte"/Open Squares)	• PUC 2024 (Municipal Urban Plan) • Collaboration Pacts • "Ca.Fè." project (former school) • Citizen referendum (2021)
Social Innovation	Smart City with FabLabs, sharing economy, digital Living Labs. Public-private-third sector collaboration	Post-earthquake community resilience. Anticipatory experimentation (e.g., Ca.Fè. as a model for national policies)
Critical Issues	• Management fragmentation • Inequality in fund access	• Reliance on volunteer work • Limited financial resources • Lack of effective participation (LUR 2023)

3 Cities in Motion

3.1 Regenerating Spaces as Living Ecosystems

Participatory urban regeneration is confirmed not as a universal formula but as a process of contextual translation, where success depends on the ability to hybridize global models with local identities. The analysis of the two case studies discussed above reveals a constructive dichotomy: in small communities, a single symbolic intervention, such as the conversion of the former Carlo Febbo school into "Ca.Fè.", can catalyze identity-driven regeneration, transforming an abandoned building into a space of collective resonance. This effect, typical of small-scale contexts, is rooted in relational proximity and the community's capacity for self-organization, bridging institutional gaps through associative networks (OECD, 2022). However, such initiatives require institutional grafting: integration into the Municipal Urban Plan (PUC) and the adoption of Collaboration Pacts represent crucial steps to translate grassroots enthusiasm into structured policies supported by dedicated funding and shared expertise (CNR, 2023). In metropolises like Milan, by contrast, participatory regeneration demands a networked logic: isolated interventions, though significant, dissolve within the complex urban fabric. The Milanese model lies in an ecosystem of interconnected practices, creating a pervasive social infrastructure capable of engaging multiple actors (citizens, private entities, third-sector organizations)

in complementary processes. However, this approach is not without challenges: management fragmentation (e.g., the stalled "Riutilizzasi" project) and the unequal distribution of PNRR funds between central and peripheral areas reveal how quantitative scalability does not automatically ensure equity. Thus, replicability in metropolitan contexts must be measured not by the number of projects but by their capacity to generate synergies and correct spatial asymmetries.

The Participatory Continuum in the Osmotic Process. A key emerging element of this analysis is the redefinition of participatory continuity as a critical factor. Urban regeneration cannot be confined to the planning phase but must evolve through adaptive mechanisms responsive to shifting community needs. In Milan, tools like the Atlas of Urban Regeneration and digital Living Labs exemplify how hybrid platforms—bridging physical and digital realms—can sustain cyclical engagement, transforming citizens from users into co-managers of spaces (De Luca et al., 2023). These tools are not static but evolving prototypes, turning cities into open-air laboratories where each intervention is an iterative experiment fueled by real-time data and collective feedback. In small towns, continuity is built through relational technologies: social capital becomes a strategic resource, as demonstrated by the "Ca.Fè." project, which activated a shared stewardship of space, even anticipating national PNRR policies. Scalability can be defined as a "decomposition-recomposition" process, where model transfer is nonlinear. In Milan, metropolitan strategies must be "disassembled" into micro-actions adaptable to neighborhoods (e.g., Social Street), while small towns need to "expand" local practices through regional networks, such as the proposed "skill banks" [5]. Tools like co-design are not mere project methodologies but listening devices to decode invisible needs. The experience of Seoul and Malmö with Urban Living Labs [3] shows that adaptability thrives on continuous dialogue between technical expertise and everyday practices. Hybrid Metrics for Impact Evaluation: Beyond physical parameters (e.g., regenerated square meters), qualitative indicators—such as increased social capital and reduced decision-making asymmetries—are essential to measure transformative effectiveness, especially in marginal areas. Looking ahead, Italy's challenge lies in leveraging PNRR funds as a driver for widespread spatial democracy. For small municipalities, this means creating territorial hubs to map associative resources and facilitate funding access; for metropolises, it requires reimagining governance as a nervous system where institutions, citizens, and private actors co-design flexible responses to crises (climate, social, housing). In conclusion, participatory regeneration is not an endpoint but a permanent laboratory: a dynamic equilibrium between planning and improvisation, institutions and communities. As suggested by Michel de Certeau's legacy, cities reinvent themselves daily through inhabitants' practices. Embracing this complexity and translating it into fluid policies is the only way to build resilient, vibrant cities capable of transforming vulnerabilities into collective opportunities.

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