

Design for Social Protagonism. A Reflection from Quarticciolo, Rome

If the city was born as a socially constructed work grounded in use value – an outcome of layered processes and interactions, material and immaterial– the modern city tends toward the expropriation of the inhabitants' design and creative agency (Lefebvre, 1968). Within neoliberalism, the withdrawal of politics and institutions and the erosion of welfare state abandoned the city to commodification. This process deepened inequalities, leaving outside the meshes of “development” and ‘urban regeneration’ those territories that cannot (yet) be commodified: public housing neighborhoods. In this context, however, bottom-up spatial practices resist, gaining increasing strength and attention. In Quarticciolo – public housing neighborhood in Rome – a network of self-organized groups has been transforming abandoned spaces into places that confront social and spatial injustices. Through a project carried out in Quarticciolo, this contribution investigates the role of architectural and urban design within such a scenario. The proposed design and research methodology is based on «what already exists»¹ (Olcuire & Pontoriero, 2025), starting from the inhabitants' ideas, projects, and demands, from the constraints but also from enhancing the energies and self-organization capacities present in the place. These constitute a resource both for developing appropriate and effective design actions, and for achieving transformations despite limited resources. Architectural and urban design can be imagined, thus, as a tool for social protagonism. To do so, designers need to embrace an «integrated approach» (Cellamare, 2025), capable of holding together different scales and dimensions of space, becoming an «interpreter of that disorder [...] typical of our species and of its relationship with the environment» (Ward, 2016, 90).

Keywords: *Bottom-up processes, public housing, integrated design*

Introduction: Marginal territories and informal spatial practices

Public housing neighborhoods, often regarded as marginal contexts affected by urban fragilities, represent in most cases unresolved territories and, therefore, places in transformation, charged with dynamism and the potential for change.

It is noteworthy that public housing neighborhoods have traditionally constituted “given” contexts: territories conceived from above, regulated in both form and use, but also spaces whose narrative is equally “given” – stereotyped and stigmatizing.

The absence of long-term public policies, the lack of maintenance and care, and the persistent neglect by public institutions, together with the progressive dismantling of the public welfare system over recent decades, have led to the chronicization of socio-economic problems and the worsening conditions of exclusion and segregation affecting these places. This slow process of deterioration advances silently until the severity of the situation eventually attracts media attention. Only then does the public actor intervene, adopting a purely emergency-

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from non-english sources are the authors' own.

1 based approach to address systemic and gradually developing issues, whose nature
2 differs substantially from the traumatic events that typically trigger emergency
3 responses. «Not only politics, but institutions themselves have become
4 progressively more distant from territories, to the point of raising questions about
5 the real and full citizenship of the inhabitants of many urban peripheries»
6 (Cellamare, 2019, 8). This distance produces not only spatial and social
7 vulnerabilities but also a «profound mistrust and disillusionment towards public
8 administration and institutions in general, exacerbated by the repeated corrupt and
9 corruption-inducing practices that continue to be revealed and that will be extremely
10 difficult to overcome» (*ibid.*).

11 Yet, within this climate of mistrust and disillusionment, a “taken” space
12 emerges within and in opposition to the “given” one: a space appropriated by the
13 communities that inhabit it and that, through practices of reappropriation and self-
14 organization, resist abandonment by transforming space through its use and
15 meaning. Alongside protest and the claim for rights, alternative models are built in
16 an attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of the public sector, giving rise to
17 genuine laboratories of social experimentation and innovation.

18 It is therefore an «induced vocation» (Olcuire & Pontoriero, 2025, 63) that
19 leads inhabitants to implement a series of “substitutive informal strategies” (Davoli,
20 2020, 40): mechanisms of mutual aid and self-resolution of problems – often
21 involving practices that operate outside formal legality – which function as a
22 genuine social safety net (*ibid.*). In these practices it is possible to recognize the
23 «signals of the future» described by Claudio Calvaresi (2019): forms of innovation
24 capable of redefining the boundaries between the public sphere, the economy, and
25 society, thereby outlining an alternative and desirable future.

26 Starting from these premises and considerations, this contribution poses a
27 fundamental question: in the face of such social and spatial vitality, how can
28 architectural and urban policy projects engage with processes of bottom-up urban
29 regeneration? How can design be carried out together with communities,
30 reconciling “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches?

31 More specifically, the paper investigates what happens when public funding is
32 allocated to contexts where a form of planning and project-making – organized and
33 purposeful, although informal – already exists. How do resources introduced from
34 above interact with a vision developed by those who inhabit the spaces affected by
35 such investments?

36 To explore these issues, the case of Quarticciolo is particularly emblematic.
37 This public housing neighborhood in Rome is characterized by a vibrant and
38 proactive network of self-organized initiatives. In recent times, the neighborhood
39 has attracted national attention after being included in the Emergency Decree (D-L
40 No. 208/2024), a security-oriented and repressive measure aimed at addressing
41 problems of crime, social conflict, and urban decay in seven areas of the country.
42 The neighborhood responded to this measure through strong opposition,
43 formalizing its intentions and needs in a genuine masterplan that constitutes a
44 generative and forward-looking alternative to the Emergency Decree.

45 The current situation – critical yet rich in «sparks of change» (Nardis, Olcuire
46 & Fortuna, 2022, 46) – opens up possibilities for new forms of dialogue between

1 local associations and public institutions. It is precisely within this space of
 2 negotiation that the project attempts to position itself, as a possible tool of
 3 appropriation as well as of translation and mediation between “top-down” and
 4 “bottom-up” dynamics.

5 The contribution is structured as follows. The present introduction is succeeded
 6 by two main sections. The first one consists of a literature review and a discussion
 7 of relevant case studies, while the second one presents the research context,
 8 Quarticciolo, and the project developed there. The first three paragraphs (1.1, 1.2,
 9 and 1.3) discuss, respectively, the emergence of practices of spatial reappropriation
 10 and resignification in the contemporary city, the role of architecture and design
 11 within this scenario, and three case studies that resonate with these themes. The
 12 second section begins with paragraph 2.1, which introduces the research context of
 13 Quarticciolo in Rome; paragraph 2.2 outlines the methodology and approach
 14 adopted; paragraphs 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5 describe the project at the urban scale and its
 15 two focal areas, *Piazza del Quarticciolo* and *La Fabbrica del Teatro*. The
 16 conclusions summarize the main findings and reflections, synthesizing theoretical
 17 insights and fieldwork outcomes.

18 19 *Re-appropriation and re-signification of space in contemporary city*

20
21 The consequences of the neoliberal development model for the contemporary
 22 city, together with the rise of informal bottom-up practices of space production and
 23 transformation, have generated a wide debate on the relationship between urban
 24 space, power, and inhabitants’ spatial agency.

25 In *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968), Henri Lefebvre first pointed out that capitalist
 26 urbanization had progressively transformed the city from an *oeuvre*, collectively
 27 produced and grounded in use value, into a commodity, subordinated to exchange
 28 value. This entailed an increasing alienation of people’s role in shaping urban space.

29 David Harvey in *Rebel City* (2012) describes how this process has intensified
 30 in the neoliberal era, resulting in a highly financialized city, governed by market
 31 logics, where the economic sphere prevails over the political one (Cellamare, 2019,
 32 8). The neoliberal economic development model, since the 1980s, has translated
 33 itself into the withdrawal of politics and institutions from local territories and the
 34 erosion of the public welfare system, leading to deeper social and economic
 35 inequalities in the urban fabric: in contrast to wealthy, well-served and integrated
 36 neighborhoods, marginal territories increasingly become places of poverty,
 37 stigmatization and social exclusion (Wacquant, 2016).

38 Public housing neighborhoods particularly suffer from these dynamics. If
 39 “urban regeneration” has widely expanded over the last twenty years, requalifying
 40 numerous urban areas once considered deprived, it is now clear that these programs
 41 often consist of different forms of real estate value extraction and speculation (Vicari
 42 Haddock e Moulaert, 2009; Cellamare 2025, 11-22). Consequently, public housing
 43 neighborhoods are left out, since their status as public assets does not allow them to
 44 be commodified (yet).

45 In this scenario, as a response to the imposition of private economic interests
 46 on one side and institutional abandonment on the other, informal spatial bottom-up

1 spatial practices are increasingly spreading in cities all over the world (Hou, 2010).
2 Such processes of (re)appropriating and (re)signifying space, along with practices
3 of spatial self-production, have always existed, but in the last twenty years they have
4 progressively gained attention both in the academic debate and from institutions.

5 If in the (recent) past the self-organization practices were mainly linked to the
6 right to housing or to occupied community centers (Macarone Palmieri 2014), today
7 they assume various forms, being rooted in very different conceptions of “communal”
8 and “public”: some examples are housing and recreational squats, self-built and self-
9 managed settlements, rehabilitated green spaces and resocialized streets or squares,
10 self-managed spaces for coworking or sport, community workshops and productive
11 activities, temporary uses of abandoned spaces, solidarity initiatives.

12 On one hand, such forms of self-organization respond to practical needs and
13 frequently try to substitute for inadequate institutions - for example, providing
14 services or taking care of abandoned pieces of the city -, on the other hand there is
15 an existential dimension. There is indeed a profound link between place and
16 communities, an identitarian relationship: people “inhabit” when they can orient
17 themselves within and recognize themselves in the space (Norberg-Schultz, 2003
18 [1979]). Space is a category and a modality of experience (Simmel, 1998 [1908])
19 and “space” becomes “place” when people attribute symbolic values to it
20 (Cellamare, 2019, 13), making it an «expression of our way to stay in the world»
21 (Coppola Pignatelli, 1992, 15).

22 Architecture – broadly understood as the production and transformation of
23 space – is an «social act» (Friedman 2003, 13) not only because it is produced by
24 collective culture and activity (Lefebvre, 1968), but because it is a manifestation
25 itself of community (Till, 1998, 68). If once architecture existed «without architects»
26 (Rudofsky, 1964), in modern times architects – understood in the conventional sense
27 as specialized figures – contribute a part of the production of space, but never the
28 whole (Till 1998, 68). To inhabit, in fact, is a form of adaptation to one’s own space
29 of life and this has in itself design implications (Cellamare, 2019, 12): inhabitants’
30 direct action always plays a role in production of space, even in formally designed
31 places and even more in informal contexts. Inhabitants, Jonathan Hill states, are
32 «illegal architects» (1998, 3) and space is produced by their action as much as by
33 that of the “legal” architects (*ibid.*, 79). Therefore, the “informal” city can be seen
34 as a city “in formation” (Cellamare, 2019, 123): a place of possibilities, free from
35 institutional control and consolidated social and economic models. Beyond any
36 romanticized reading or any simplistic label of either good or bad, we recognize in
37 the informal city a high degree of complexity and contradictions, a place where there
38 are often poverty and despair, conflict and criminality. However, it is also where
39 practices of self-organization and re-appropriation of space often take place:
40 occupations of abandoned buildings for housing or recreational aims, self-built
41 structures, self-managed green areas or squares, unexpected uses of buildings and
42 public space are just a few of the informal practices through which citizens
43 collectively re-build the relational dimension of space. Such practices foster social
44 and solidarity relationships among inhabitants themselves, they are a means of
45 representing local claims and mediating between territories and institutions, they
46 adapt the form of space to its uses, but mostly they nurture an empathic and symbolic

1 relationship between community and place (*ibid.*, 144). Moreover, processes of re-
 2 appropriation and re-signification of space take shape as «freedom practices»
 3 (Foucault, 2001), which allow communities' self-determination and empowerment
 4 (Gangemi, 2019, 21) and produce an environment that responds to the real needs of
 5 the inhabitants, improving individual and collective wellbeing (Paoella, 2024, 108).

7 *Community as foundation of design*

9 What has been described so far represents a value and a resource for developing
 10 an approach to design that is sensitive to the true demands – material and immaterial
 11 – of communities and aims at co-production of space. This leads inevitably to
 12 questioning the role of the architect: from a highly specialized figure invested with
 13 an ordering role (Paoella, 2017, 146), to an «interpreter of that disorder [...] typical
 14 of our species and of its relationship with the environment» (Ward, 2016, 90).
 15 Already in 1972, Giancarlo De Carlo stated that architecture should be «less the
 16 representation of who designs it and more the representation of who uses it» (2013,
 17 38-39). This means valuing and starting from «what already exists» (Olcuire &
 18 Pontoriero, 2023), to recognize the capacity of people's creative action (Hill, 1998,
 19 80), offering them architect's expertise and technical knowledge. In this perspective,
 20 the architect assumes the «role of *mediation*» (Biraghi, 2025, 68) among different
 21 instances and becomes the figure able to interpret and synthesize them in space,
 22 conceived as multiscalar and multidimensional.

23 Nevertheless, while a co-design approach that starts with spontaneous uses,
 24 ongoing initiatives, and the desires and needs of residents is essential, moving
 25 toward a true co-production of space requires a project that includes users
 26 throughout the entire life cycle of the building (or other space), providing for their
 27 direct involvement and harnessing their existing skills and energy. A project that
 28 «expands the possibilities for the future without destroying the resources on which
 29 life is based and the environment in which we interact» (Galuzzi, 2025, 181).
 30 Architecture, then, is not a finished object but a process that must remain open to
 31 the participation of its users (Kroll, 2001 [1996]). In addition, this applies not only
 32 to architecture narrowly defined: since space is not just material, but it has also
 33 immaterial dimensions – social, economic, environmental –, it is important to
 34 consider all of them in an «integrated approach» to the project (Cellamare, 2025).

35 Active participation of inhabitants is essential not only to conceive adequate
 36 projects, but also to give them strength and groundedness in reality (Cellamare,
 37 2025, 32). This is particularly valuable in marginal contexts where resources are
 38 scarce and institutions are weakly present, like public housing neighborhoods:
 39 involving inhabitants could be the key to enhancing the success of a project.

41 **Designing together: three case studies**

42
 43 We present now three case studies that, although differing in modalities,
 44 contexts, and historical periods, value and enhance users' action, considering both
 45 the physical and immaterial dimensions of space. They appear in chronological
 46 order.

1

2 *La Mémé by Lucien Kroll (1969-1982)²*

3

4 The first project is a historic and emblematic one: “La Mémé”, by Lucien Kroll.

5 In 1968, a group of medical students at the University of Louvain protested
6 against the master plan proposed for the campus, that appeared cut off from the rest
7 of the urban fabric, with clearly separated functions. They claimed that residents’
8 opinions were to be taken into consideration and they wanted a campus more
9 integrated with the neighborhood and with more fluidly connected spaces. They
10 wanted to get involved in the design of their future place of life and study, and, above
11 all, to put into practice and implement, through architecture and urban planning, a
12 vision of society and values they shared: equality, communitarian living but also
13 autonomy and freedom. The University allowed them to modify only the masterplan
14 of their “social zone”, designated for housing, community facilities and leisure ones.
15 They had also permission to choose the architect. They chose Lucien Kroll and a
16 long participatory process began (1969-1982), involving resident students, builders
17 and all the different users.

18 Firstly, Kroll and his team proposed to carry out the masterplan of the site and
19 collectively define the arrangement and combination of the functions, the layout of
20 the various buildings, and the connections between them. Through meetings and
21 working sessions – models were an important tool – they gradually gave form to an
22 organic, porous, hybrid whole. After the master plan, Kroll co-designed the
23 landscaping treatment, but also five of the buildings in this overall plan: La “Mémé”,
24 la “Mairie”, the university restaurant, the ecumenical center and, later, the Alma
25 metro station.

26 La Mémé is the most famous building. The building, which houses student
27 accommodation as well as several public facilities and shops, was designed as a
28 modular structure. A system of slabs – floors without falling beams, supported by
29 columns arranged in a grid – implements the structure, together with minimum
30 equipment (prefabricated stairs and sanitary facilities, water, gas and electricity
31 supplies). The facades can be arranged differently using standard but removable
32 window frames, as well as walls, which are removable and rearrangeable. This
33 allows freedom to residents, who can shape their personal space as they wish and
34 negotiate with others the arrangement of common spaces, adapting them over time
35 to changing needs.

36 La Mémé is thus an example of open architecture, which was born from
37 inhabitants’ desires and action but that, even after the design process, continues to
38 make inhabitants protagonists and authors of their space.

39

²The information in this paragraph is from <https://participedia.net/case/7245#> (last access 06.06.2026).

1 **Figure 1.** “La Mémé”, medical house, the house of medical students, Woluwé-Saint-
2 Lambert, Belgium, 1970.



3
4 Source: *N.B. the image will be replaced by authors' image or authorized photo*

5
6 *Quinta Monroy, Elemental, 2001*³

7
8 Quinta Monroy was an informal slum in Iquique, Chile. In 2000, the
9 government bought the land in order to build houses for the occupants, who lived in
10 the self-built settlement, characterized by very poor living conditions. Alejandro
11 Aravena's studio, Elemental, was put in charge of the project. Since economic
12 resources were limited, they developed the idea that about 40sqm could be «half a
13 house» instead of a small one. They embraced incrementality and started
14 considering self-construction not as a problem but as part of the solution.

15 The settlement was composed of buildings that did not respond to any
16 typology: they had «a house on the ground floor and an apartment on top» (Aravena
17 e Iacobelli 2016, 99), in order to have enough density to house all the 100 families
18 in the plot but also allowing both accommodations to be expanded. The innovative
19 concept was to plan and design future self-built expansions, assuring coordination
20 within the settlement, safety and quality spaces: strong structures and dividing walls,
21 well-lit and ventilated rooms, quality common spaces were things that individual
22 intervention could not guarantee. Moreover, leaving voids to be filled by inhabitants
23 enables them to personalize their space and make it their own.

24 This incremental strategy was discussed and defined together with the
25 residents, who were made active participants throughout the design process,
26 construction phase, and future life of the houses. The participatory process started
27 from informing residents of the restrictions that limited their options, in order to take
28 joint decisions about the design and identify local resources that could be

³The information in this paragraph is from Aravena, A., & Iacobelli, A. (2016). *Elemental. Incremental housing and participatory design manual*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz.

1 incorporated into the project, like existing construction capacities. During the
 2 construction, inhabitants periodically visited the site to be aware of the project as it
 3 was being realized and to supervise the quality of construction. Moreover, they
 4 receive technical education – summed up in a manual – that will enable them to
 5 modify and expand their house in the future, and they participate in meetings to
 6 discuss common issues and establish rules.

7 Since the success of Quinta Monroy, Elemental has applied the same model in
 8 other sites. These projects prove that capacity to shift perspective – fundamentally,
 9 to see the residents as a precious resource for the project instead of just beneficiaries
 10 – can be the key to successful projects even in circumstances marked by complexity
 11 and scarce resources.

12
 13 **Figure 2.** *Quinta Monroy, Elemental, 2001*



14
 15 *Source:* *N.B. the image will be replaced by authors' image or authorized photo*

16
 17 *Porto Fluviale RecHouse, 2020⁴*

18
 19 In the Ostiense neighborhood of Rome, the former Taburet Warehouse has
 20 hosted since 2003 a housing squat, together with socio-cultural spaces and services
 21 open to the city.

22 In 2020, Rome Municipality started a co-design process with Roma Tre
 23 University and the occupant community in order to materially regenerate the
 24 building - protected as a heritage asset of historical and artistic interest – while
 25 experimenting a new model of social housing and urban regeneration. The project,
 26 in fact, tries to respond to the housing crisis, to foster social *mixité* and social
 27 integration, while carrying out the legal regularization of inhabitants' housing rights
 28 and offering a new public space to the neighborhood. Porto Fluviale Rec House
 29 received public funds and works started in 2024.

⁴The information in this paragraph is from Careri, F., Finucci, F., Marinelli, D., (2022). *Porto Fluviale RecHouse. Progetto di recupero edilizio e sociale degli ex-Magazzini Taburet a Roma*. *Revista Estado da Arte, Uberlândia*. v.3, n.1, p. 323-329, jan./jun. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.14393/EdA-v3-n1-2022-63795>

1 The Planning Department of Rome Municipality has conducted an intense
 2 process of mediation between the Aeronautica Militare – former owner –, the
 3 Heritage Authority and the occupant community, with the support of Roma Tre
 4 University, Sapienza University and Luiss University. Architecture Department of
 5 Roma Tre University, in particular, had conducted for years research activities and
 6 collaboration with the inhabitant community. Thus, Professors Careri and Finucci
 7 curated the co-design process.

8 A first step was a self-conducted census, from which 56 families from 13
 9 different nationalities emerged: it is a community that, even not without conflict, has
 10 developed innovative forms of intercultural co-living and has opened many social
 11 spaces for cultural and political events, workshops, celebrations. Primary aim was
 12 to maintain the community and support its members in becoming eligible for public
 13 housing allocation, thanks to a special call. The informal groups that organized
 14 social activities were led as well towards a formalization process.

15 Several meetings with inhabitants and with representatives of the Right to
 16 Housing Movement, together with the Municipality and the Heritage Authority,
 17 together with informal conversations, site visits by professors and students and
 18 discussions of proposals and drawings led to a final synthesis that was presented in
 19 February 2021 to Porto Fluviale Assembly.

20 From an architectural point of view the major intervention was the
 21 maximization of the opening of the inner courtyard towards the city, thanks to new
 22 entrances and glass walls. The courtyard becomes in this way an actual public square
 23 – as it always had been intended to be by inhabitants – where new social and cultural
 24 activities work alongside the former ones.

25 Porto Fluviale Rec House is an example of a project where the “experts” serve
 26 an existing and operating community offering their mediation and synthesis capacity
 27 and technical knowledge to give form to existing desires, needs and energies.

28
 29 **Figure 3.** *Porto Fluviale Rec House, project*



30
 31 *Source:* *N.B. the image will be replaced by authors' image or authorized photo*

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1 *Quarticciolo: self-organization to counter abandonment and segregation*
2

3 An investigation into design in marginal contexts characterized by the presence
4 of informal spatial practices has been carried out through a project in Quarticciolo,
5 Rome, a public housing neighborhood where a rich network of self-organized
6 groups has been transforming abandoned spaces into places that confront the social
7 and spatial injustices affecting the neighborhood. The neighborhood has recently
8 been allocated substantial public funds to implement a series of actions to regenerate
9 the area.

10 Quarticciolo is located in eastern Rome, in the Fifth Municipality. It was
11 designed and built in the second half of the 1930s and constitutes the last of the
12 Roman Fascist *borgate*, settlements conceived to respond to the migration wave
13 from southern Italy and to accommodate those displaced by the demolition of the
14 historic city center. With the aim of transforming Rome into a «showcase city of the
15 regime» (Villani, 2012, p. 15), in addition to the demolition of large portions of the
16 historic center, the Fascist government proceeded with the removal of the informal
17 dwellings that had been built within the city, considering them an affront to urban
18 decorum. At the same time, these policies contributed to the spatial segregation of
19 lower-income populations, who were relocated to peripheral settlements physically
20 and socially detached from the consolidated city. These operations led to a severe
21 housing crisis. This crisis was addressed through the construction of new public
22 housing neighborhoods.

23 These projects implemented the Fascist idea of rural urbanism, combining
24 rationalist principles with traditional forms and materials, and defining a settlement
25 that evokes the unity typical of the rural village (Cianfrani, 2020).

26 The outcome of Nicolini's project is a neighborhood that «appears as one of the
27 best-designed examples in the field of the most popular types of urban settlements»
28 (Villani, 2012, 249). It presents itself as a strongly characterized place from an
29 architectural point of view, overcoming the anonymity and sterility of other
30 working-class housing experiences. Nicolini designed a project based on a
31 compositional and aesthetic idea, as well as a functional one, succeeding in giving
32 the *borgata* a specific atmosphere, thanks to its human scale, the richness of public
33 and semi-public spaces, and the variety of building types and elevations.

34 Such design choices produce an environment with a clearly defined character, in
35 which it is possible to orient oneself and identify oneself – qualities which, as
36 identified by Norberg-Schultz (2003 [1979]), are essential conditions for inhabiting.
37 This contributes to strengthening the communal dimension and the inhabitants'
38 sense of belonging.
39
40

1 **Figure 4.** *View from via Castellana*

2
3 *Source:* Photo by the authors.

4
5 The Institute's housing allocation policies were overwhelmed by the
6 unpredictability of the war. The bombings of July 1943 triggered a wave of
7 occupations of the housing units that were still under construction. The
8 neighborhood became populated by displaced people and homeless families from
9 the eastern districts of Rome affected by the bombings, characterized by a strong
10 working-class and immigrant presence. These occupations were gradually regulated
11 by the Institute: some dwellings were sold through rent-to-own schemes, while
12 others remained rental units.

13 Since its foundation, therefore, Quarticciolo has been characterized as a
14 neighborhood of housing occupations, resistance, and political struggle: in the final
15 years of the Second World War, it became a stronghold of the Resistance, while in
16 the post-war period and up to the 1980s it remained a highly active neighborhood in
17 the claim for rights, first and foremost in the struggle for the right to housing.

18 The dismantling of the welfare system, together with institutional abandonment
19 and the lack of care by the managing body ATER (Nardis, Olcuire & Fortuna, 2022,
20 49), has led, on the one hand, to the progressive deterioration of the neighborhood's
21 housing stock and, on the other, to the worsening of poverty conditions, commercial
22 desertification, increasing school dropout rates, and rising crime. These negative
23 phenomena mutually reinforce one another.

24 The housing situation is particularly critical: public housing allocation lists
25 have been blocked for years despite the presence of many vacant dwellings. A
26 significant proportion of inhabitants has been forced to occupy housing illegally in
27 the absence of alternatives.

28 Equally critical is the condition of non-residential public assets, and in
29 particular of ATER commercial premises, of which less than 30% are currently
30 active.⁵ The absence of commercial activities, and therefore of presences within

⁵Elaborated by the authors based on a table provided by ATER upon request by the authors, containing the list of ground-floor premises owned by ATER in the Quarticciolo neighbourhood.

1 public space, exacerbates the condition of insecurity in the neighborhood and leaves
2 room for the development of criminality, which constitutes a true counter-economy.

3 The neighborhood has long been affected by a stigmatizing media narrative
4 that, on the one hand, reinforces the perception of Quarticciolo as a “ghetto” to be
5 avoided and, on the other, fuels among inhabitants a sense of inadequacy, exclusion,
6 and condemnation.

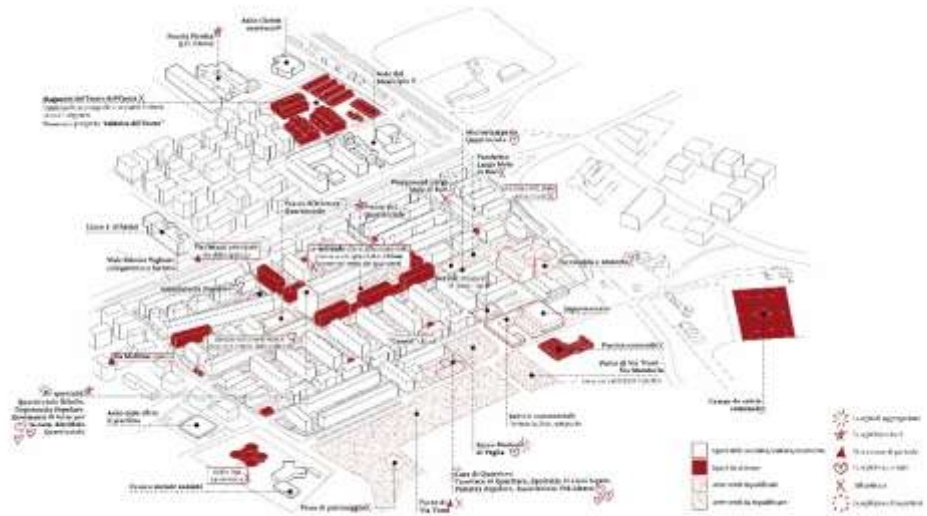
7 In December 2024, following the Caivano Decree, the government issued a
8 new decree known as DL 208 (Decree-Law No. 208/2024), which identifies seven
9 neighborhoods across Italy to which substantial funds are allocated in order to
10 address severe conditions of social and economic fragility and urban decay. The fear
11 among Quarticciolo’s inhabitants that this measure would translate solely into
12 securitarian interventions, detached from the reality of the neighborhood, led to
13 strong mobilization and to the presentation to institutional bodies of a bottom-up
14 masterplan – entitled “Abbiamo un piano” (“We have a plan”) (Quarticciolo
15 Ribelle, 2025, 2) – which identifies the necessary interventions from the inhabitants’
16 perspective. The implementation plan of the decree partially echoed the proposed
17 measures, but to date no construction sites have been opened, and the only concrete
18 intervention has been an increase in police presence.

19 The “Abbiamo un piano” masterplan was drawn up by the collective Quarticciolo
20 Ribelle, founded in 2013, under which many different local initiatives carrying out
21 social projects and mutual aid activities in the neighborhood are brought together, with
22 which we have interacted throughout the thesis research process. The reference place of
23 Quarticciolo Ribelle is the former police headquarters, originally the Casa del Fascio,
24 an iconic building of the neighborhood located at its centre, which currently hosts the
25 *Popular After-School* and the *Brewery*.

26 The initiatives present in the neighborhood are numerous and diverse. The first
27 project to be established was the *Popular Boxing Gym*, which offers young people
28 an alternative to the street and promotes the idea of sport as a social bond (Nardis,
29 Olcuire & Fortuna, 2022, 51). The role of the *Neighborhood Committee* and the
30 *Legal Desk* for the defence of housing rights has also been fundamental. Other more
31 recent and expanding projects include the *Popular Clinic*, the *Micro-printing*
32 *Workshop*, and *Bottega Quarticciolo*, an alternative economic development project
33 that includes the market, the aforementioned Popular Brewery, the *Food Lab*, and
34 the *Popular Carpentry Workshop*.

35 A research group from Sapienza University is also active in the neighborhood
36 : the Urban Studies Laboratory (LabSU), which provides its interdisciplinary
37 expertise to the area. Thanks also to the work of LabSU, in 2022 the *Quarticciolo*
38 *Civic Hub* was formalized as a true “incubator of social innovation” (Pontoriero,
39 2024, 331), enabling interaction between internal actors – self-organized initiatives
40 and third-sector organizations – and external actors, as well as between grassroots
41 demands and local public institutions.

The table had previously been subject to an initial processing by researchers from LabSU and was subsequently further refined by the authors through field surveys carried out in October 2025.

1 **Figure 5.** *Places and actors of Quarticciolo*

2
3 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.

4
5 *Methodology and Design Approach*

6
7 It is from this dense network of initiatives and from these «urban practices»
8 (Cellamare, 2019, 11) that the project takes shape and is constructed. These practices
9 constitute «latent projects» (Cellamare, 2019, 12), which the architectural project
10 aims to bring to the surface, making them not only visible and tangible, as they often
11 already are, but also more defined and structured, both in their spatial dimension
12 and in their relationship with the surrounding context.

13 The project is therefore understood as a process. A transformative process that
14 unfolds over time, characterized by the participation of multiple actors. A process in
15 which the architect, far removed from any form of protagonism, acts as an
16 interpreter of the transformative dynamics already present in the place and proposes,
17 through design, an open response. A project conceived as a possibility, open to its own
18 modification and evolution, both during implementation and throughout its life cycle.
19 A multiscalar project, ranging from the territorial scale to the architectural device,
20 capable of bringing together different dimensions of space, from the immaterial
21 dimension – namely social relations, public policies, and communication – to the
22 material dimension of spatial transformation.

23 The implementation of this method begins with engagement with the place and
24 its inhabitants, and with the study of «urban practices» (Cellamare, 2019, 11), which
25 «reveal and draw a geography of values and meanings» (Cellamare, 2019, 11).

26 In practical terms, this process took place through a continuous presence in the
27 neighborhood. The relationship with the *borgata* was facilitated by a research group
28 from Sapienza University of Rome, LabSU, which has been active in the
29 neighborhood for years, conducting research on the contemporary city and
30 particularly on urban peripheries and housing.

1 Participation in LabSU's weekly meetings made it possible not only to establish
 2 relationships with the various local initiatives, to become known within the
 3 neighborhood, but also to remain constantly informed about the evolving political,
 4 social, and bureaucratic circumstances affecting the area. This enabled the
 5 development of a research process that was as grounded as possible in the
 6 complexity of reality and attentive to the inhabitants' claims and struggles.

7 Alongside participation in these meetings, the process of observation and
 8 engagement took place through numerous site visits, photographic surveys,
 9 mappings, and spatial redrawing; but also, through interviews and participation in
 10 demonstrations, festivals, and collective moments of neighborhood life. This
 11 process was documented in a field diary composed of drawings and photographs.
 12

13 **Figure 6.** *Extrapolation from the field diary*



14
 15 Source: Graphic by the authors.

16 *An Integrated and Multiscalar Project*

17 Intervention strategy: three thematic strands

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 19 Following the analyses conducted and the relationship established with the
 20 neighborhood, this work identifies, at the territorial scale, three thematic strands
 21 related to living in the neighborhood that are considered particularly critical.
 22

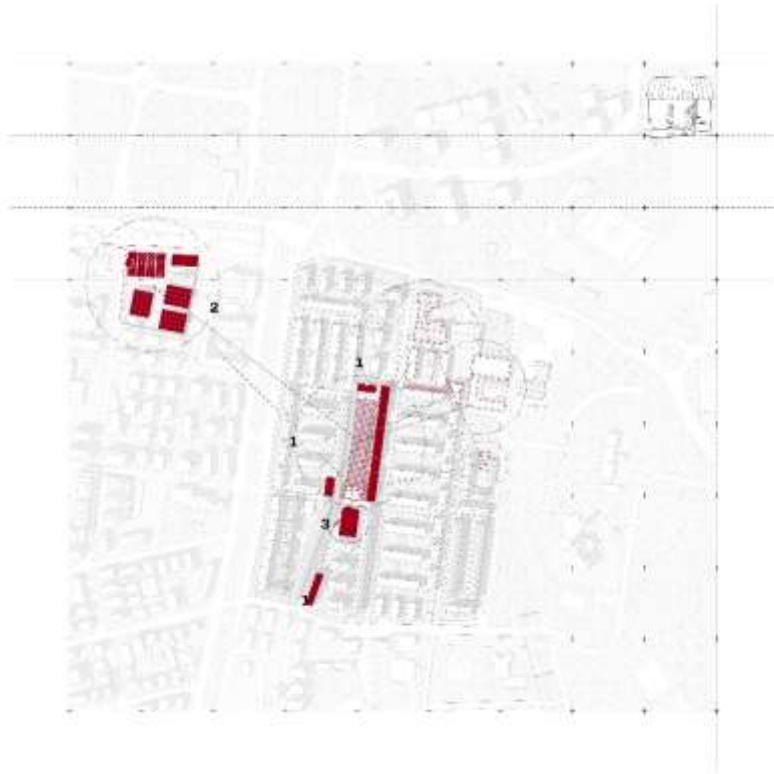
23 These three themes provide fertile ground for intervention, within which long-
 24 term processes can be activated, building upon existing networks. Their primary
 25 objective is to involve inhabitants in such processes, providing them with tools for
 26 socio-economic empowerment and spatial appropriation.
 27

28 Sport and play

29 Among the demands that the neighborhood has been advancing for years are
 30 those concerning the reactivation of spaces for sport and play. Despite the significant
 31 effort made by the Popular Boxing Gym to compensate for the lack of sports
 32 facilities, this issue still represents a major gap within the neighborhood. Through

1 field surveys, four key sites suitable for processes of reactivation and regeneration
2 were identified: two neighborhood parks – the park on Via Manduria and the small
3 park in Largo Mola di Bari –and two sports facilities: the municipal football field
4 and the municipal swimming pool. Except for the small park in Largo Mola di Bari,
5 all of these sites were already included in the masterplan developed by local
6 residents, who demand their refurbishment and renewed accessibility.
7

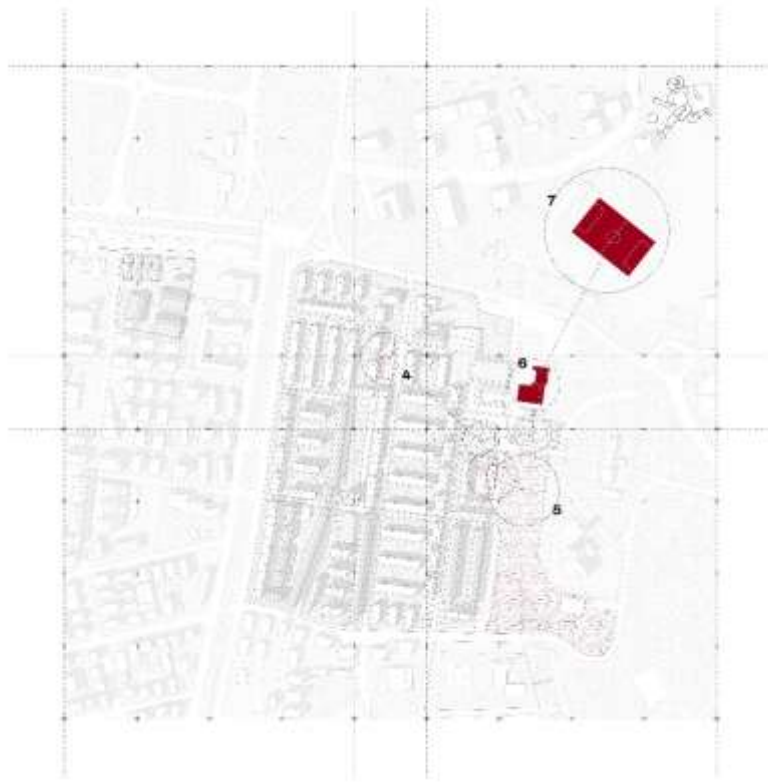
8 **Figure 7.** *“Economy and culture” masterplan*



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Source: Graphic by the authors.

For these spaces, the interventions considered necessary remain at the level of policy measures and building renovation. Therefore, this thematic strand is not further developed at the design level.

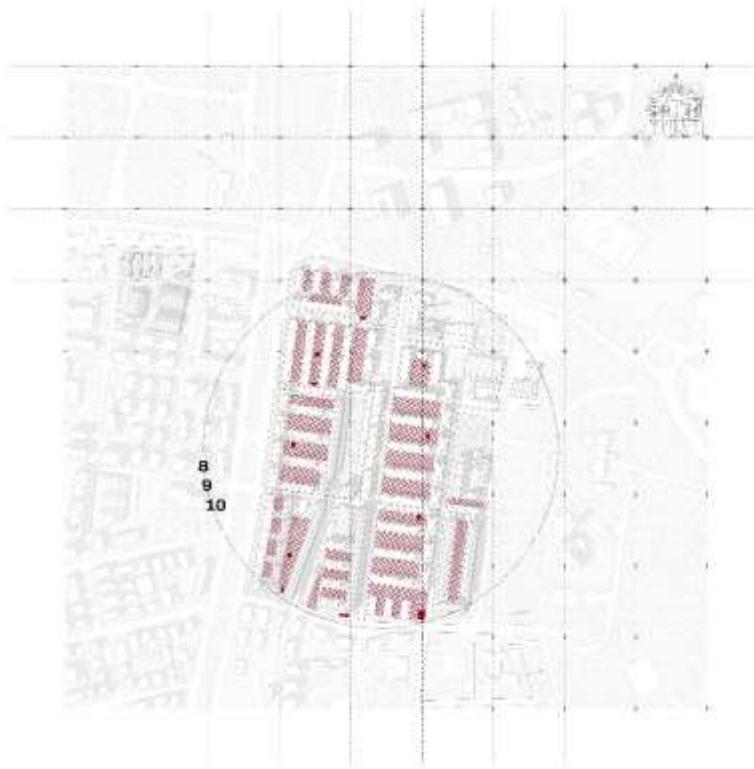
1 **Figure 8.** “*Sport and play*” masterplan

2
3 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.

4
5 **Life in the courtyards**

6 A strongly distinctive feature of the neighborhood’s morphology is the presence
7 of numerous large courtyards. Through extensive photographic surveys and the
8 mapping of each individual courtyard, it was possible to verify the existence of a
9 widespread culture of care, appropriation, and transformation of space, which can
10 be observed throughout the *borgata* and particularly within the courtyards. This
11 culture, together with the considerable availability and quality of courtyard spaces,
12 provides a strong foundation for a process of shared design aimed at consolidating
13 and formalizing already existing practices of use. This reflection also includes the
14 small buildings – former technical service structures – present in almost all
15 courtyards, through their adaptive reuse as shared tool libraries, intended in
16 particular for gardening equipment and seasonal furnishings.

17

1 **Figure 9. "Life in the courtyard" masterplan**

2
3 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.

4
5 Economy and culture

6 The issue considered most critical, and the one with the strongest negative
7 impact, is that which can be identified under the broader theme of economy and
8 culture. Commercial and cultural desertification represents one of the
9 neighborhood's key problems, not only because it hinders economic development,
10 but also because it results in a lack of pedestrian flows and everyday activity, which
11 are essential to the vitality and safety of the neighborhood.

12 Building upon the network of services already active in the area, all spaces
13 available for the reactivation or enhancement of activities were identified.

14 Among these spaces, two nodes were recognized as being of fundamental
15 importance within the neighborhood's reactivation network: Piazza del
16 Quarticciolo, with the ground-floor premises facing onto it, currently almost entirely
17 closed; and the so-called *Fabbrica del Teatro*, a complex of eight warehouses
18 belonging to the Rome Opera Theatre, two of which have been allocated to
19 functions serving the neighborhood.

20 Given the stronger sense of urgency observed within the neighborhood
21 regarding the reactivation of the local economy, it was decided to further develop
22 the design proposals for Piazza del Quarticciolo and the *Fabbrica del Teatro*.

23
24

1

2 *Piazza del Quarticciolo*

3

4 *Piazza del Quarticciolo was originally built as a rally square, with the Casa*
5 *del Fascio placed at its head, closing it on the short side. One of the two long sides*
6 *functions as the commercial frontage, alternating shop shutters directly facing the*
7 *square with shutters facing arcades. The side opposite the police headquarters is*
8 *also commercial, while the second long side is residential. It is a long and narrow*
9 *square that has undergone various transformations over the years, which have*
10 *resulted in prolonged construction sites, preventing its permeability and everyday*
11 *use.*

12 *At the end of the 1990s, Piazza del Quarticciolo underwent a significant*
13 *transformation, as part of the 1997 urban project “Centopiazze”.⁶ The project saw*
14 *the construction of large, raised basins, almost one meter high, intended to host the*
15 *tall plane trees that today characterize the space. This configuration, designed to*
16 *prevent cars from parking, profoundly changed the use of the square, which ceased*
17 *to function as a gathering place. The construction site, approved in 1997, was only*
18 *completed in 2008, depriving the community of the borgata of one of its few meeting*
19 *places for almost ten years. The reduction in the use of the square had a strong*
20 *negative impact on the activity of small shops, whose shutters closed one after*
21 *another, eventually leading to the commercial desertification observed today.*

22 *Today the square appears silent and desolate; almost all the shop shutters are*
23 *closed, with the exception of the tobacconist, the bar, and the greengrocer. Some*
24 *shutters are instead partially open and have been illegally occupied. The central*
25 *strip is only sporadically crossed by residents.*

26 *Observing the space, framed by the historic buildings and the ex Casa del*
27 *Fascio and shaded by the large plane trees, one can perceive a potential awaiting*
28 *reactivation.*

29

30

⁶Project launched in 1995 by the Municipality of Rome with the aim of a widespread urban regeneration starting from the symbolic element of collective life: the square.

1 **Figure 10.** *Central view of the square, dominated by the former Casa del Fascio.*



2
3 *Source:* Photo by the authors.
4

5 *The reactivation of space is conceived in two phases and levels: the immaterial*
6 *project and the material project.*
7

8 Immaterial project

9 *The reactivation of the shop shutters in Piazza del Quarticciolo includes a*
10 *fundamental objective: providing employment opportunities and economic growth*
11 *for the neighborhood. To achieve this objective, two instruments are designed: the*
12 *Festival of Voids and Ideas and the Open Shutters call for proposals.*

13 *The Festival is organized over three days and aims to provide inhabitants with*
14 *a tool for projecting themselves into the future, a space in which they can imagine*
15 *themselves as small entrepreneurs and approach the concreteness of this possibility.*
16 *Through the guidance of small business consultants, it will be possible to analyse*
17 *the proposals of many participants and define the most suitable ones in relation to*
18 *both the spaces and the context. The Festival also aims to provide inspiration by*
19 *inviting people who have managed to turn an idea or a passion into a profession.*

20 *On this occasion, the premises will be opened and observed, with the dual intention*
21 *of linking spaces to functions and offering an initial image of a square that is once*
22 *again open and lived in.*

23 *This first phase is followed by a second one, consisting of the publication of an open*
24 *call accessible to all, through which the inhabitants of the neighborhood will be able*
25 *to formalize their aspirations by applying for the allocation of spaces as a privileged*
26 *category. Other selection criteria related to social inclusion and care for the*
27 *territory will also be taken into account in the evaluation of candidates.*
28

1 **Figure 11.** *Commercial frontage: present state and possibilities*



2 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.

3
4 Material project

5 The process of reactivation also includes the physical transformation of space.
6 The material project is likewise conceived as an implementation divided into phases,
7 so as never to fully close the square, but rather to gradually bring it back to life.

8 The current configuration of the square does not allow for social or aggregative
9 use. The space appears fragmented, divided by the raised soil basins that contain the
10 plane trees. Rather than a square, it currently functions as a pedestrian passage.

11 The intervention pursues multiple objectives: to propose a “light” intervention,
12 developed in several phases, which does not result in the square remaining closed and
13 fenced off for years, as has already happened in the past; to intervene in order to
14 improve what already exists, limiting demolition works; to unify the space by filling
15 level differences and ensuring continuous permeability; to re-functionalize it by
16 introducing spaces for commerce, play, and sport; and to develop a project in close
17 connection with the neighborhood’s initiatives, existing activities, and those that are
18 hoped to emerge in the future.

19 The street that separates the square from the commercial frontage is
20 pedestrianized, thereby forming a large, unified space. Without intervening on the
21 existing greenery, the decision is made to raise the pavement in order to address the
22 issue of the raised soil basins. A spatial configuration is thus defined that plays with
23 level differences, transforming changes in height into urban furniture. All levels are
24 connected through ramps, stairs, and stepped terraces, ensuring continuity and
25 accessibility, as well as multiple possible uses.

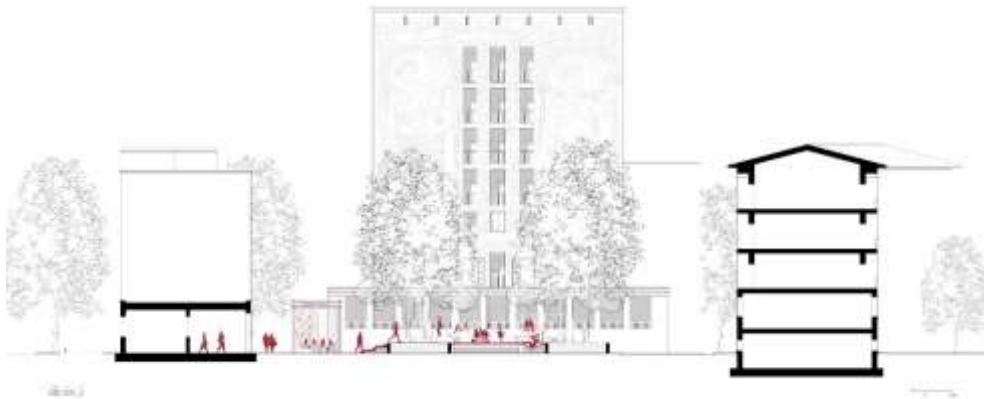
26 The square is re-functionalized by allocating space for play, sport, and
27 commerce. The long central space is rethought and divided into two more focal
28 “islands”. The first is dedicated to play, with elements designed for children; the
29 second is dedicated to sport and includes training facilities. In correspondence with
30 the area in front of the former police headquarters, a stepped seating structure is
31 introduced, providing space for moments of aggregation and for the sporting events
32 that frequently take place there.

33 The commercial frontage is equipped with metal structures assigned to
34 shopkeepers, with the possibility of outfitting and furnishing them through various
35 types of elements designed to be easily assembled by the neighborhood carpentry
36 workshop. These structures draw a guiding line, a grid to be modified, filled in, and
37 adapted to different needs and to evolving functional and spatial requirements.

38 The intervention is embedded in the context through an incremental logic,
39 remaining open to modifications and future developments.

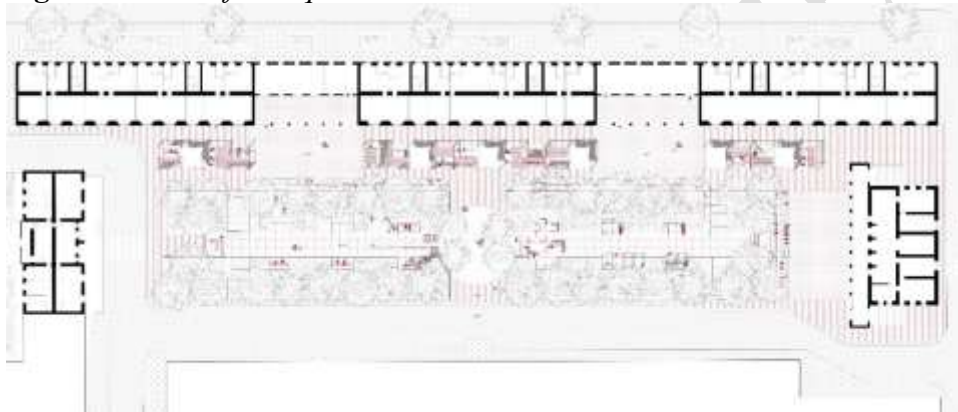
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1 **Figure 12.** *New section of the square. Authors' elaboration*



2
3 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.

4
5 **Figure 13.** *Plan of the square*



6
7 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.

8
9 **Figure 14.** *An extract of the new (possible) commercial frontage*



10
11 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.

12
13 *The Fabbrica del Teatro*

14
15 Process

16 The second design focus concerns the redevelopment of the complex funded
17 within the PON Metro Plus 2021-2027 program, where it is referred to as the
18 “*Fabbrica del Teatro*”. The complex is located just outside the *borgata* and
19 comprises eight municipal warehouses that have housed, since their construction
20 (the earliest dating back to the 1940s), the scenery storage facilities of the Rome

1 Opera Theatre. New functions are planned: the Opera Theatre will use some of the
2 spaces as workshops for the production of stage sets and for the transmission of
3 craftsmanship, while “transferring” two of the smaller warehouses to the active
4 realities in Quarticciolo, to be used as micro-productive spaces – the Popular
5 Brewery and the Carpentry Workshop – and as a *Hub for Local Economies*, a space
6 connected to the Civic Hub with the function of supporting the reactivation of the
7 local economy by organizing training activities, guidance, and consultancy related
8 to entrepreneurship and the labour market in general.

9 The project is therefore embedded within an ongoing real process: dialogue has
10 been carried out with the various actors involved in order to understand the interests
11 at stake, the practical needs and aspirations for these spaces, as well as the
12 constraints and difficulties that are slowing down the process. Meetings with LabSU
13 and representatives of the Civic Hub regarding the Economies Hub, with the
14 Popular Brewery and the Carpentry Workshop, and with the Municipality of Rome
15 and the Opera Theatre, have been fundamental in constructing design hypotheses
16 grounded in the real needs of the people who will inhabit and manage those spaces.
17 The focus has then shifted to the warehouses allocated to the neighborhood.

18 19 Architectural project

20 Once the different stakeholders’ needs had been collected – the “design
21 demands”, in particular those of the Popular Brewery, the Carpentry Workshop, and
22 the Civic Hub – and the existing condition of the warehouses had been analyzed,
23 several critical issues emerged: the function of the Local Economies Hub appears
24 poorly compatible with those of the carpentry workshop and the brewery, especially
25 from an acoustic point of view, and the available spaces proved to be limited. We
26 therefore envisioned two design scenarios: a low-budget one, in which the
27 warehouses are re-functionalized without major interventions for the brewery and
28 the carpentry workshop, while the Local Economies Hub is relocated to the
29 neighborhood square, occupying two or three of the vacant commercial units; and a
30 second, more costly scenario, which integrates all the planned functions, creating a
31 complex entirely dedicated to the theme of crafts and economy, and, through an
32 architectural gesture, conferring recognizability and added value.

33 This second design hypothesis foresees the merging of the two warehouses and
34 the addition of a volume inserted within them to host the hub functions that require
35 silence and privacy, while the ground floor remains open to the public on the Via
36 Prenestina frontage and flexible enough to change over time. In both scenarios, the
37 project is based on the principle of incremental transformation by users: a three-
38 dimensional grid placed at the level of the trusses allows panels to be added or
39 removed – which can be made of different materials and easily self-built – in order
40 to reconfigure the space over time according to contingent needs or functional
41 changes.

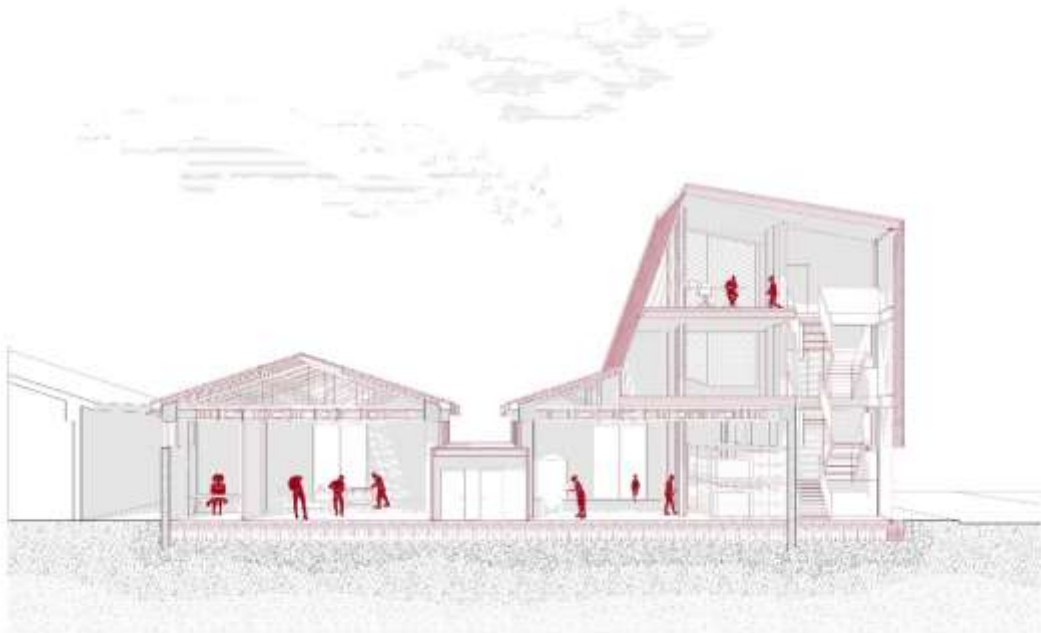
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1 **Figure 15.** *Fabbrica del Teatro, plan.*

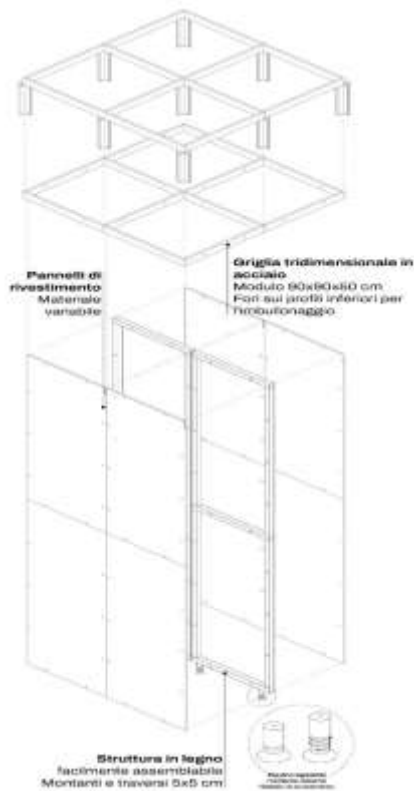


2
3 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.

4
5 **Figure 16.** *Fabbrica del Teatro, section*



6
7 *Source:* Graphic by the authors.
8
9

1 **Figure 17.** *Modular structure for rearrangeable partitions in the Fabbrica del Teatro*

2
3 Source: Graphic by the authors.
4

5 **Design as a tool for social protagonism**

6
7 Space – urban and otherwise – is, as already stated, the manifestation of society
8 (Till, 1998, 68), the theatre of democracy (Settis, 2017). On the one hand, every man
9 and woman has the right to live “in an environment whose quality of life permits a
10 life of dignity and well-being” (United Nations Conference on the Human
11 Environment, 1972); on the other hand, it is precisely in the built environment that
12 economic and social injustices become tangibly manifest. For those who are called
13 to design and plan the city, this therefore raises an unavoidable issue of social and
14 moral responsibility. It is from these premises that a research theme takes shape,
15 focusing on those places where injustices become streets, squares, and buildings, on
16 those territories excluded from the city while still being part of it. These territories
17 are often described as “fragile”, yet within them it is possible to recognize strength,
18 resilience, a desire for redemption, and an energy for change that can become the
19 foundation for mitigating the very problems affecting those same areas.

20 As an experimentation of these principles, the project described above is rooted
21 in the culture of self-organization and informal spatial transformation developed by
22 the inhabitants of Quarticciolo as a strategy to address social problems and
23 institutional abandonment.

24 The project emerges from their needs, their practices of use, their desires, and
25 their actions, configuring itself as a tool for interpretation and mediation among the

1 different actors involved, rather than as a top-down imposition or an act of authorship
 2 by the designer. It then develops as an integrated and multiscalar process, bringing
 3 together different dimension – social, economic, urban policy, architectural, and even
 4 urban furniture – and considering as an integral part of the project its own
 5 modification and questioning during both implementation and its life cycle,
 6 encouraging different uses and configurations by users.

7 The design process thus becomes an opportunity to strengthen the relationships
 8 between community and place, as well as within the community itself, while
 9 simultaneously becoming a tool for spatial appropriation and social empowerment.

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Sitography

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