

## The ex post analysis and perspectives of an Urban Creativity program between artistic requalification and social regeneration

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### Abstract

In 2015 INWARD - the National Observatory on Urban Creativity started the project called “Parco dei Murales”, a process of artistic requalification and social regeneration in the Ponticelli district, itself in the Eastern part of the greatcity of Naples. Four years after the completion of the pictorial works, questions regarding the influence of the creativeprogram on the urban area arise: how did these interventions generate a change in the neighborhood? What impact did they have on the community?

Many inhabitants perceive the eastern outskirts of Naples as a marginal space of this metropolis in Southern Italy, a “liminal” area, not only geographically but also socially, if we were to think about the exposure of some segments of the population to uncertain social and economic conditions. It is known that this area manifests an evident lack of services that can allow a change towards more certain conditions. The artistic and social experience in the “Parco deiMurales”, was born to subvert all this and allow the external public to enter an inhabited space previously consideredrepulsive.

Concerning the three macro-categories, such as the Art Field, Social Field, and Empowerment Field, we will try to answer the initial questions to investigate the positive and negative aspects of a collective program.

Through data related to the work experience collected from 2015 to 2021, to the elaboration of surveys, outputs submitted to the community, and comparisons with similar realities in Italy, we reached a liminal moment of the workwhich lies on the threshold between what has been achieved and the changes currently underway. What may its future evolutions be? How to envisage the extension of an urban creativity program for the social in a creative territorial system?

### Keywords

Urban Creativity; Artistic requalification; Social regeneration; East-Naples; liminality

#### 1. Introduction

In 2015 INWARD, the National observatory that is in charge of developing and researching Urban Creativity started the “Parco dei Murales”, project, that is to say a process of artistic requalification and social regeneration in the Ponticelli district, the eastern part of the great city of Naples (see Figure 1).

Four years after the completion of the pictorial works, questions regarding the influence of the creative program on the urban area have arisen: how did these interventions generate a change in the neighborhood? What impact did they have on the community?

#### 2. Context: the eastern outskirts of Naples

First and foremost, it is necessary to provide some information about the context of the outskirts of Naples andparticularly about Ponticelli.

The conurbation of Naples is discontinuous and fragmented, constantly crossed by phenomena of transformation: abandonment and marginality, segmentation and degradation of the collective space, infrastructural crossings, and disintegration of the environmental system (Lucci R., Russo M., 2012). Moreover, there are alternating layers of material history with past memories that generate an evident sense of identity and belonging (Lucci R., Russo M., 2012).



**Figure 1.** Overview of “Parco dei Murales”, Artwork by Luca Caputo aka Zeus 40, 2018, Naples, Italy

Identifying the most intimate nature of the city of Naples allows us to understand and analyze the context of the eastern suburbs. Specifically, from Enrico Formato (professor of Urban Planning at the “Federico II” University of Naples) we know that “Naples-East is the attempt to modernize the city through the progressive expansion of the urban fabric beyond the gates of Nola and Capua” (Formato E., 2012, pp. 164-165) characterized by a combination of the coastal settlement opposed to the countryside, by the city that extends towards the sea opposite to the reclaimed marsh (Formato E., 2012). The mixture of these elements together with further transformation processes(1) determined the formation of the eastern periphery. Following the industrial expansion, the urban landscape of East Naples will be made up of straight streets and orthogonal blocks, urban wings with open spaces, and squares (FormatoE., 2012, pp. 166).

Particularly, the district of Ponticelli lies less than ten kilometers from the center of Naples, is home to about seventy thousand inhabitants, and together with the

districts of Barra and San Giovanni a Teduccio, it forms the sixth municipality of Naples. Since the end of the 1960s, Ponticelli has been identified as one of the areas in need of immediate action in the Neapolitan milieu, in order to address the most urgent housing problems. As a result of this process, several overpopulated districts have arisen that currently incorporate numerous public houses. In 2017, ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) proposed a survey (Survey by ISTAT, 2017) on the security conditions and the state of decay of cities and their suburbs. The research also involved the municipality of Naples and from this, we have deduced that Ponticelli is the demographically youngest area and with a high rate of non-completion of the lower secondary school cycle. The gravest figure is linked to the incidence of families with potential economic hardship. Other problems affecting the area include the presence of the Camorra and the illegal occupation of social housing complexes (BottoneA., 2022).

Many inhabitants consider the eastern outskirts of Naples as a marginal space of this great metropolis in Southern



**Figure 2.** Overview of the residential complex “Aldo Merola” before the completion of the pictorial interventions.

Italy. An area that can be perceived as “liminal” not only geographically (see Figure 2) but also socially if we think about the exposure of some segments of the population to situations to uncertain social and economic conditions.

### 3. The “Parco dei Murales”: artistic redevelopment and social regeneration program on the edge of the city

In this residual context, plagued with the failure of radical urban planning and the complex relationship with the social sciences and art, cross-cutting components of the public space exist that can generate critical and operational tools linked to social and cultural urban transformation phenomena. Over time, this threshold territory has ended up neutralizing itself, losing its specificity, and escaping its own cultural identity. The lack of meeting places, squares, and spaces for free time, has favored evident discrepancies regarding the social and economic condition of the community. Numerous approaches have been attempted by the associations of the district (less so by the institutions) so any of those attempts were unsuccessful, transforming

the district into an archaeological-industrial area and characterizing it only with large public housing complexes. An important element concerning the limen of the territory is certainly the contradiction born from the moment in which, following the earthquake of the Eighties, many inhabitants of the center of Naples were transferred to this area undergoing identity theft. And even if the name of the neighborhood (Ponticelli means “small bridges” in Italian) evokes a territorial connection, these huge portions appear as urban desert: for instance no pharmacy is in the vicinity of this living complex.

In the specific case of the “Parco dei Murales”, we also find the presence of a gate, a threshold space being closer to the concept of a margin than an entrance door. Transforming this margin into an area of interaction between inhabitants and possible visitors was certainly one of the aims of the urban creativity program.

It has been observed in recent years that liminality is also found in the attitudes of the people who live there: they mark their territory and are very closed off to any opening



to the outside world. There has never been any reason why those who live here believed they had to leave this space and whoever was outside had to enter it.

The boundary is emphasized because there has never been a reason to face it: the goal was to replace liminality with a concept of socialization. Thus, such an artistic and social experience began to subvert the idea of an insurmountable space that was previously considered repulsive.

The notion of liminality, in the framework of this reflection, refers to the well-known theories of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep. He captured an invariant dynamic in the structuring of the rites of passage according to three distinct moments: separation, in-betweenness, and reunification. (Van Gennep A., 1909).

The aforementioned public housing complex was therefore selected for the start of the program as it guaranteed a strategic urban position that allowed certain visibility to the large façades to be built (see Figure 3), in addition to having found some of the characteristics spread fairly

homogeneously in the eastern suburbs of Naples; a choice made not to transform the interventions into obvious contemporary *dazibao* but because only with visibility could it be possible to counteract the invisibility that for too many years, these residential housing complexes in the neighborhood and their communities have been forced.

The approach by the locals was very cautious at first: no large facade had ever been painted by artists in Naples. Therefore, an operational team of volunteers administered a cognitive survey, carried out door-to-door to all the inhabitants of the complex: the aim was to meet the families and their members, assessing how many children or adolescents to involve and what activities, if any, would drive the community on.

Only with time some of these activities were actually carried out because thanks to the trust gained it was possible to achieve a seamless coexistence with the place. In this way, some boundaries of liminality were crossed, and we worked in a more specific way to realize a program in which the social part walked hand in hand with urban creativity intervention.



**Figure 3.** Overview of the “Parco dei Murales” after the completion of the pictorial interventions. Author: Gigi Vozza

#### 4. The model

Three sectors of a broader enhancement model were thus identified: the Art field, the Social field, and the Empowerment field. These are the three ambitions through which the project was conceived. First of all, an artistic action on the territory was necessary; having ascertained the absence of spaces for sharing and aggregation but also the difficulty of reaching certain places dedicated to playful and recreational activities (for young mothers in particular), consistent with the increase in school drop-out in the area, the need was to return to the community a possible place of artistic interest. In this context, social action was important because the community, notoriously repulsive and often unwilling to participate, would have more easily received, and appreciated external stimuli for the creation of a place that is aesthetically, ethically, and socially "more human". In the first years of action on the territory, a great deal of territorial leverage was carried out; from 2015 to 2018, 6 yearly workshops and more than twenty initiatives were activated, and they involved children and adolescents aged 5-10 and 13-14 respectively. The participation in a process that has been internally defined as "participatory curatorship" and the decline of "DIY-Do it yourself" processes in which the user feels capable of contributing to the change of what surrounds him through a practical experience, has been activated in a completely natural way, that need to regain identity and of lost membership; a union that can be said to be effective when the place truly feels its own, when it is possible to establish a non-inhibiting relationship with the subjects and with the spaces, when it is possible to participate together with the former and reinvent the latter (Brugellis P., Pezzulli F, 2006).

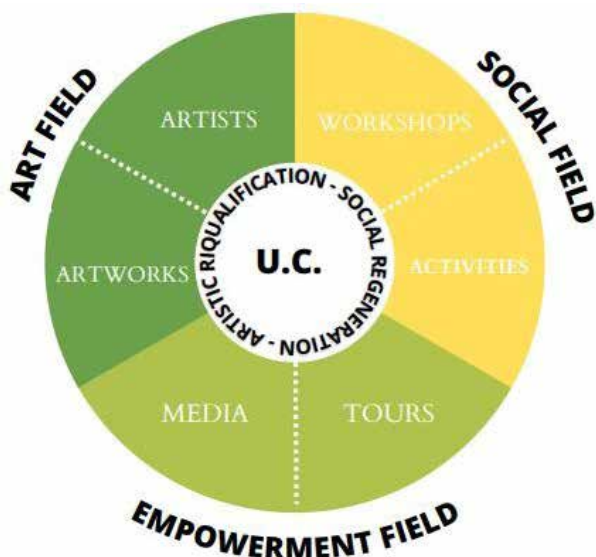
Overcoming the concept of boundaries and fear of the other (Vandermeer, 2018), the relationship of the community with the place where we implement our actions becomes fundamental and affects our vision of the world. So when a community acquires awareness of the position it occupies, the value of the space and the relationship with it, the possibilities of interpretation become numerous and potentially fascinating (this is one of the most important themes expressed by Mattia Campo Dall'Orto's mural).

The public housing complex was in fact known by a derogatory name which was then transformed into "Parco dei Murales", achieving a new reason for its territory to be proud.

Having identified the aforementioned problem of rejection and an inhabited place evaluated as liminal, empowerment was fundamental, triggering the opening towards the outside. This is where the importance of a reinterpretation of the place also by participants or external visitors is inserted for the creation of a more inclusive space that favors the encounter.

During these years of activity, numerous meetings and conferences were also implemented, in order to try and enact dialogue on this model of enhancement and compare its effectiveness as a scalable tool, and therefore its applicability to different territories or systems of urban creativity between artistic redevelopment and social regeneration. Most of the time the feedback has been positive but - while always bearing in mind that a hamlet does not involve the same problems as a suburb of a metropolitan city - the urban creativity program presents, on the whole, also a certain failure due to difficulty - more times found - to trigger the interest of the community in the long term and the lack of institutional interventions or services of the third sector which therefore slow down a process of territorial reevaluation.

Within these three fields, there are material components that generate more concrete effects, and the substantiality of the outcomes can be evaluated by analyzing the positive or negative outcomes. (see Figure 4)



**Figure 4.** Graphic of the Urban Creativity program between artistic requalification and social regeneration.

#### 4.1 Art Field

##### 4.1.1 Artists

It's good for us to start with the first segment that connects artists and works: what was the approach adopted? In the first instance, what emerges from our analysis is that the artists have always kept their style while meeting social needs. All the styles of the artists are recognizable, no one has betrayed their style. The authors of the interventions were able to bring out the social values of the project while always remaining faithful to their own stylistic lines. Furthermore, although there have been numerous comparisons with the community according to the internal approach of "participatory curatorship", no sketch has ever been subjected to external judgment. The children, adolescents, and other inhabitants of the Parco dei Murales have acquired the tools allowing them to appreciate what has been created together with the creative process itself. It meets the approach of Adam Cooper (Cooper A., 2014) who affirmed that the understanding of the



**Figure 5.** Luca Caputo, aka Zeus 40 creating the final artistic intervention in "Parco dei Murales".

value of street art is on a par with the understanding of the artistic contribution for which, in the idea of creating a creative periphery, urban art must go hand in hand with the knowledge of urban culture.

Precisely due to the multiplicity of factors to be considered in the intangible implementation of workshops aimed at the community and to facilitate communication between residents and artists, only artists of Italian origin were involved. The selected Artists were willing to work closely with the community and whose style could be in line with the audience. A rather delicate process, especially when confronted with the need not to carry out preventive censorship of the works (see Figure 5). These are criteria of considerable importance for this specific program, but they could certainly not be primary in the implementation of other urban creativity projects less connected to the urban context and to social needs. The artistic language was therefore used as a facilitator, seeking a meeting point between operators, artists, and the community.

#### 4.1.2 Artworks

Furthermore, in the years following 2018, the start of the project has generated initiatives that follow the same path. New murals have been created all around Ponticelli; these have been created not only by local artists but also directly requested by the community: a visible and tangible sign of how a desire for revenge that starts from urban art was also strongly desired by residents. The artworks have given the push to form a proper urban creativity system/district that goes beyond the limen of the residential park and the physical gate, also flowing into other geographical points of the neighborhood. This also allows the gradual growth of a new contemporary urban artistic heritage in the neighborhood characterized not only by archaeological sites but also by mural interventions inserted in the public space, destined to be lived daily by present and future communities.

It is also possible to state that some people living in the residential park identify themselves as habitants of the "Parco dei Murales". This new strengthened identification within the Parco demonstrates a sort of pride and a reborn connection to the territory. But it is important to note

that these murals were not always appreciated by the community in reference to the artistic/aesthetic taste but, after participating in the workshops, everyone felt that the artistic operation belonged to them too.

In the long term, having acted within an inhabited place has highlighted problems related to the lack of territorial synergies and the unspoken wishes of the residents. A problem that is also detected in some European projects of the same matrix confirms the data published by project realities such as "Street art murals for urban renewal" (Urbact.Eu, 2017) in Heerlen (LN).

## 4.2 The Social field

### 4.2.1 Workshops

Regarding the social sphere, the playful-creative workshops carried out between 2015 and 2018 were certainly significant. Several workshops were held not only in connection with the artworks, but also concerning other areas, such as break dance, rap, juggling, and theater. This allowed the involvement of the community using different approaches and guaranteed a new positive evaluation of free time (see Figure 6). However, all the activities were carried out in the area of the complex, and children and adolescents from other residential complexes were not interested to participate because the entrance gate was seen as a border. In light of this consideration, a further question arises: how long will it take for the people who live close to the works of art for them to feel as a part of a single community, overcoming the unconscious liminality inherent in the approach to approaching the territory and activities?

### 4.2.2 The Activities

One of the largest blocks built in the public housing complex in Ponticelli overlooks a football field. The specific work of art was created by a couple of Sicilian artists, Rosk & Lose, and represents two children who look at a soccer ball as a real object of veneration. Their gaze recalls the expectation and the desire to transform the field in front of the mural, which used to be a simple expanse of concrete, into a proper football pitch (see Figures 7-8). Thanks to the attention of the institutions, this space then became a real one. The mural, which involved a moment of liminal





**Figure 6.** Some children of the “Parco dei Murales” who join a workshop. Artwork by Roske&Loste, 2015, Naples, Italy

change, then became a symbol of the change itself. An isolated but significant case for the community, it confirms how fundamental it is to create works of a public nature concerning a place, a context, and a space.

The case mentioned above, although significant, is only a marginal result within a hostile context, something that does not obscure further problems. For example, we were unable to activate the recovery of the interior spaces for a better carrying of the laboratories on site.

The idea, sometimes too inflated, that art can affect environments and circumstances by focusing attention on places considered neglected areas or act in a curative manner on the personalities and places involved, is particularly applied in the context of urban creativity. Therefore, it seems to be universally agreed that the construction of the work must be built according to the needs of public space,

respecting the needs of residents and the multi-collective identity of the communities. Whatever the approach, from such an experience, one can understand how important it is to communicate with the people who live in these places or near them; communities can determine the success or failure of a project, but it is only through useful links, promoted by administrations, organizations, or artists, that they can become its custodians (Scardi G.).

### 4.3 The Empowerment Field

#### 4.3.1 The Media

In the tangible idea of structuring a promotional program made up of press releases (see Figure 9), film sets and street art tours, the process of reconstructing the territorial identity has experienced a clear improvement in the perception of the neighborhood, as shown by the online news outlets in the latest years.





**Figures 7-8.** Two pictures that show the “before” and “after” of the artistic creation of the football pitch in front of the murals by Roske&Loste.

The attention paid to the neighborhood is positive, but it is not enough to help solving some institutional problems. Having carried out such a project has certainly attracted the attention of the media to the place, but is often limited to the period of the work in progress and/or the presentation of the murals. However, the visibility obtained

was not sufficient to trigger an effective reaction from the institutions in implementing basic and recreational services absent in the neighborhood, slowing down and stopping urban and environmental degradation, and increasing the safety of the place.



**Figure 9.** A child, involved in the workshop and then represented in the mural by Mattia Campo Dall’Orto behind her, was interviewed by a TV company.

#### 4.3.2 Tours

The pictorial cycle of the “Parco dei Murales” has attracted more and more curious visitors and experts (see Figure 10), so much to activate a promotion phase culminating in the launch of the first tours. The recipients of the tours (completely free and conducted by the staff of INWARD and the operators of the Universal Civil Service) come from all over Italy and often from abroad and are mostly made up of tourists, researchers, experts, and undergraduates. There are also numerous guided tours organized for specific events and in collaboration with associations / territorial bodies (approximately 40 from 2016 to today) (“Parco dei Murales” website). The positive impact of the project has brought the restoration and valorization of other cultural sites such as an old archaeological villa (Vesuvio News) whose archaeological remains were discovered following the post-earthquake reconstructions in 1986.

One of the best pieces of evidence regarding the transformation process that can be found with regard to liminality is the prospected and presumed passage, as mentioned by Van Geep, of status from simple residents to new welcoming guests with the consequence that the Park itself changes from a habitable box to a tourist attraction. The actions of a tourist who comes in to see the works and a boy who goes out to give flyers to attract and entice passers-by reveal the principle of liminality (see Figure 11), a process lived by participants as a proper ritual of passage. It is a place that everyone can visit but an audio app has been created with the recordings made by the children during the workshops and an explanatory video was also made available in LIS (Italian Sign Language) in order to make it more inclusive.



**Figure 10.** A guided tour at “Parco dei Murales”, Artworks by Mattia Campo dall’Orto (on the left) 2016, Zed1 (on the right) 2015, Naples, Italy





**Figure 11.** Some children distribute flyers to passers-by outside the park.

## 5. Conclusion

What effects would the PDM model generate in other peripheries of the world where liminality is essential? Would it defeat it? Would it make it worse?

These are some of the questions that arose due to the development of a model that could help to understand how action can be systematized in particularly fragile areas such as that of the Ponticelli district.

By developing *ex-post* an analysis, we can draw the positive effects of the model on liminality. Can these outcomes be a toolbox from which to start acting on other territories by previously analyzing the context?

Many of these questions still haven't their absolute answers but we can certainly demonstrate through these points that the effects of this model on this portion of the territory have been fruitful. Certainly, there are different actions that could enrich it. Many factors have changed because of the pandemic and therefore some transformations are underway. From various surveys conducted in the context of the Italian suburbs, it emerged that following the pandemic, the economic hardship of families living in social housing in

the suburbs of Naples increased by 66% (Survey by "Albero della Vita", 2021, pp.8-9) and 89% (Survey, pp. 10.11). It was also highlighted that 90% (Survey, pp. 16-17) of the minors affected by the survey do not have a dedicated space to play in their homes. The inability to cross the threshold of one's own walls together with a hostile environment has caused an increase in anxiety, stress, and difficulty in relating among the little ones (Survey, pp. 20-21) In the specific case of Ponticelli, there is an increase in dirt and neglect of the common areas, together with episodes of criminality. Based on these reflections and strongly believing in the link between urban contexts and social transformations, we certainly consider numerous actions that can be improved in the future such as the possibility of creating more moments of interaction with the community, a more in-depth study on the predisposition of the audience to welcome urban art interventions but also the possibility of embracing new materials and new supports to integrate differently into the landscape and urban context. This could perhaps be a propitious historical moment to pause to reflect, ask questions about action, identify new possibilities for

intervention and investigate more about the durability of the works. We hope for functional and qualitative use of the model, for a reinterpretation of contexts that perhaps slow down the number of interventions also and above all in the suburbs so as not to find oneself again in front of a phenomenon of patronage of mural works but also to leverage on the study of experts in the sector and to make the communities really happy to recognize themselves again, through the collateral artistic experience, in broader processes of growth, consideration and new centrality.

### Endnotes

1. The Arenaccia area is related to the Third and Fourth Municipalities of Naples; it was built with the renovation works; the normalization of the territory by means of grillage (construction in iron or wood for protection, closures or support).

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