

# The Role of Culture for Inclusive Development

New theoretical approach and empirical evidence

**Master Thesis** in Cultural Economics & Entrepreneurship

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# **Acknowledgements**

To the support of my uncle and my parents without who this thesis would be only a thought in  
the fantasies of an enthusiastic student

“The only way to live in a big city is to create a little sphere of relations, while remaining indifferent towards the rest of society. It means constructing around oneself like a small city within the bigger, while the rest of the same big city remains useless and indifferent to the individual.”

Leopardi (1822) *Letter to Paolina*, Free translation.

## **Aim of the thesis**

The thesis explores the role of culture as an agent of regeneration and development in relation to modern economic transformations. The notion of “Culture” will be used to identify both the cultural sector as an economic actor and, in an anthropological sense, the set of meanings, rituals and practices that define groups identity. The thesis aims at understanding if and how culture, defined this way, can constitute a point of reference in political and economic discussions about inclusive development. To guide the reader, the analysis will focus on the role of top-down and state-led development strategies in comparison to bottom-up approaches. In the latter, culture could stand out as an engine of inclusive economic development. The research is inductive and explorative, and it is supported by the investigation of two case studies of urban regeneration in Milan, Italy

## **Structure of the thesis**

The first chapter considers the economic context to which the thesis relates. The dissertation in this part will offer a three-dimensional perspective of the actual economic and social challenges that characterise the knowledge-based economic system. The critical message is that the inequality mirrored in the polarisation of economic growth is threatening the stability of the urban systems. National and urban policies are in the front line to counterbalancing inequality and alleviating the ensuing social distress.

The second chapter delves into the use of top-down investments in infrastructure, one of the main strategies to counterbalance polarising forces. Better services and better connectivity should bridge the distance with lagging areas, allowing people to move to more productive cores and have better access to highly paid jobs. However, while infrastructural improvements are

essential components of strategies aiming at activating local entrepreneurial ecosystems, the outcome of many top-down development strategies have worsened the conditions underpinning inequality. In many urban areas, infrastructural improvements have caused the displacement of marginal social groups, while in more isolated areas their positive effect has been far from clear. The forces of agglomeration can be so strong that promoting infrastructure to attract capital and knowledge in lagging areas can prove ineffective in reducing inequality.

In the next sections, the thesis will focus on how culture has been included in development policies. The third chapter will consider the use of cultural infrastructure to stimulate urban regeneration and will consider its economic implications in relation to equality of development. The analysis will continue by including in the argument the more recent debates about the importance of culture for development, that is the concept of the creative economy and the creative class. After a reflection on the economic implications of the role of culture within these theories, an alternative perspective on culture-led development will be offered.

The two case studies that will be discussed aim at providing support for a vision of culture as engine of development for lagging-behind places and reveals two important conclusions

- 1) Stimulating “from the bottom” the cultural goods market is a more participatory way to address the challenge represented by lagging-behind places.
- 2) Identity is an essential cultural factor for any inclusive discourse on the role of civic participation.

**Keywords:** Culture, Knowledge Economy, Economic polarisation, Bottom-up development, Cultural Identity

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# Chapter 1

## The Economic Context

This thesis researches the context of an increasingly polarised economy. More and more, economists have to face the fact that processes of capital accumulation are at the same time the key to economic success and the cause of a polarised development favouring large urban centres while excluding the surrounding rural and small-scale urban economies. Economic and political consequences of polarisation are of paramount importance. Cities generate most of world GDP, while the rest struggles to find ways to valorise local resources and compete. Resources in lagging areas are depleted by a social context incapable to offer work and education opportunities, vibrant cultural environments and leisure options, and advanced technological infrastructure.

The dynamics of a polarised and unequal development are intense and challenging to overturn. The actual divergence between thriving and declining urban environments depends on profound structural transformations of the economic system. In a context in which knowledge and intangible assets are the driving forces of productivity, cities enjoy a substantial advantage compared to smaller towns. Cities represent the fittest economic environments in which knowledge can be continuously produced, processed, exchanged and marketed. Firms can enjoy the advantages of a dense market platform where tangible and intangible resources can be exchanged favouring innovation. At the same time, first-tier educational institutions, research centres, innovation incubators offer a large pool of talented workers. These factors determine that agglomeration economies of cities become vital to the business environment.

Although agglomeration economies are not at all a new phenomenon specific to contemporary societies, the pulling forces are now particularly strong for elements that are now essential to favour the economic development of a territory. The old consideration that development would be fostered only by creating the favourable conditions for capital and labour is not valid anymore in an economy that extracts profit from ideas and creative works rather than tangible factors.

Technological infrastructures and the exchanges of knowledge are productive resources that tend to self-reproduce within the environment in which they thrive, therefore, cities. This generates a paradox. On one side, intangible productive factors like knowledge and human capital tend to be extremely mobile. However, while it is possible to position a manufactory industry in a different area to spur its development, it is less likely that an industry like Google would move to an isolated area with underdeveloped technological resources.

At this point, we can try to observe the problematic aspects that emerge from an economic structure that favours the concentration of wealth and knowledge in specific environments. As the divergence grows between productive urban cores and declining areas, the quest to achieve a broader inclusive development that could involve urban and rural contexts, productive city centres and multi-ethnic suburbs, becomes an urgent concern.

The reason is that the exclusion of certain people from development is not only a geographical issue. People living in under-performative areas facing the threat of losing resources to more productive poles, are also to keep up with a business environment which is increasingly more complex and inaccessible for people not possessing the right skills. The traditional division of the workforce between white and blue-collar workers has now been replaced by a sharper differentiation that follows directly from the qualitative change of the nature of productive factors. Over the last decades, there has been an enormous expansion of forms of labour that require new essential sets of cognitive-cultural capacities<sup>1</sup>. These capacities constitute the fuel that moves the engine of the knowledge-creative economy and are responsible for the success of the leading economic sectors.

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<sup>1</sup> People endowed with the capabilities that are highly valuable in the new jobs have been identified as 'knowledge-workers' (Kunzmann, 2009), the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002), or what Scott (2011) designates as cognitive-cultural workers. This upper echelon of the workforce has access to high-wage jobs. At the same time, as Scott (2011) points out, the lower layer is far from lacking inventive abilities or the potential to develop creative abilities. However, it is steadily shunted out of high-wage areas and demoted to low-wage servile oriented functions.

Furthermore, digitalization and the ongoing process of substitution of human labour through robots deepens divergence and disparities between insiders and outsiders of the new paradigms of growth and development. In order to keep-up with a fast-upgrading digital infrastructure, workers need constant learning and skill-development. However, as the role of robots is likely to grow in the future, the stability of large swaths of the labour force is endangered by the advent of new technologies. The displacement potential intrinsic to automation is widely debated, but if the dystopic forecasts reveal to be accurate, unemployment is likely to be a significant concern for the achievement of inclusive prosperity. Many recent reports are predicting a job apocalypse that could leave out of the “circuits” of production almost one-third of the world workforce in the next decade (MGI 2017; ILO, 2018; UNDP, 2017). Displacement is likely to be felt stronger among the middle-skills and middle-income people engaged in rote jobs skewing them towards low-skilled and consequently, low-income occupations (Muro et al. 2019). The ensuing limited possibilities to climb the occupation ladder risks exacerbating an already present social distress which now has acquired a political dimension<sup>2</sup>.

The economic divergence between insiders and outsiders of the economy is one of the most complex political challenges for the stability of modern democracies and urban economies. If the economic gap is widening between small isolated production hubs and large urban cores, the ensuing social tension can be stark and for this reason, detectable in the latter. Cities represent the environment where inequality is a frequent phenomenon, and the urban map often mirrors it. If sometimes skyscrapers as dazzling symbols of the capitalistic system coexist with degraded and run-down surroundings, most of the times the urbanization process and capital accumulation gradually push away everything that cannot stand its speed. The agglomeration of financial

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<sup>2</sup> People outside of the top-rank urban employment system feel left behind from national governments that promote an economic system that renders them superfluous (Amin, 2012). By diverting the attention away from places in need of support, the risk is to set up dynamics of resentment from people stuck in areas considered extraneous to the productive logics (Rodríguez-Pose, 2017). The political consequences of the feeling of marginalization are already at play. The rise of populist and anti-establishment parties in major capitalist, neo-liberal and market-oriented countries, is the concrete expression of the resentment of the mass towards the elites. Rather than finding root on a sense of community nor civic engagement, sovereigntists rely on the battle against the diversity of various subgroup as the only things that guide political action. A political system built on anger as unifying feeling, risks to offers blames and not solutions, to tear the world apart rather than stimulating cooperation and solutions to common problems.



capital, technology and human competences, tends to favour the urban centre and to avoid areas which due to immigration phenomena, degraded surroundings and social tensions seems lacking the fertile humus for the digital and knowledge-driven economy to thrive. Consequently, the urban peripheries play the role of losers in the international contest between cities competing to retain the productive forces necessary to development. In marginal parts of the cities unemployment and economic downturn can have severe social consequences ranging from vandalism and the rise of criminal activities to the ghettoization of minorities.

It is noteworthy to mention that the type of challenges that a run-down environment face is not only determined by local factors.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they are place-specific consequences of wider social and economic transformations whose scope is hard to predict. The normal distribution of wealth within global cities that risks emerging, may not be only a problem that affects the traditional low-income groups which are more fragile and sensitive to displacement.

The examples of San Francisco<sup>4</sup> and other superstar cities are, of course, extreme. However, they help to highlight how the effect of wealth concentration in few geographical points and people,

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<sup>3</sup> Migration waves that push masses of diverse people to flock in the margins of cities are one clear example of how globalized phenomena are having a crucial impact on a local level. Trends in real estate markets have also affected how place-specific social realities developed. Urban development, favoured by global migration forces, seems to be the trend of the next 50 years. Poor communities tend to gather in the urban margins, while wealth always concentrates in the most productive and prosperous areas. These phenomena contribute to how the social fabric of specific neighbourhoods and places risk of becoming fragmented and precarious.

<sup>4</sup> San Francisco is usually taken as an example of the rising income inequality affecting prosperous American cities, and it sheds light on the inevitable future of many other techNoLogY hubs and superstar cities. Fostered by the Silicon Valley, San Francisco has established its reputation as one of the most innovative cities on the planet and world capital for the creative and tech industries. The city attracts many educated global job-seekers with high salaries and bonuses which are proved to drive up rents, food and cost of living in the area in which they reside. The negative spill-over of the growth of prices fosters a drastic increase in socio-economic inequalities between the few that can sustain the rising costs of living in the urban knowledge hub and a relatively weaker middle class which is cut out of the more productive areas of the bay. As the average price for an apartment rises at 1.4 million dollars and the average income stands around 80,000\$, the dream to own a house in the capital of fine art and technology becomes beyond the grasp of the majority of renters. What scholars usually described as a gentrification phenomenon affecting the lower end of society is now destabilizing the same middle class, which is typically accounted to produce it. The plumber, the policeman, the lawyer, the doctor, the teacher and all the middle/high-income layers of society which make up for the healthy life in a city risk of being confined in the extended margins of the global cities.

and the disparity of growth with the rest of society, is a widespread phenomenon not confined to underdeveloped areas or limited to low-income people. Instead, it threatens the stability of the urban system and of the economy itself.

## **Conclusions**

Achieving inclusion depends prominently on the cultural starting point of left-behind persons, professions and locations. Although the need for stronger educational investments aimed at disadvantaged people is well acknowledged, more uncertainty surrounds the public policies more suited to promote the inclusion of single areas, either suburban, rural or peripheral. Given the nature of agglomeration, the local-geographical aspect of public policies is exceptionally relevant. The current debate mainly revolves around public endeavours to strengthen the infrastructural endowment of left-behind places. Better lodging, better trains, better internet connectivity should “shorten the distance” of left-behind places from fast-growing urban cores. In the following pages, we will define this as a top-down approach and consider the eventuality that it should be complemented, as a minimum, by a bottom-up (culture-led) approach leveraging on the autonomous capacity of local communities of developing own ways to engage left-behind people, sectors or professions. More specifically, we will consider two case-studies of cultural development and identity-building, one bottom-up and the second top-down, in the Milan metropolitan area. We will show the relative failure of the second case and the relative success of the first.

## Chapter 2

### **The top-down strategy to economic development, towards an urban perspective.**

Public policies have struggled to mitigate the trends of unequal regional developments. One of the main tools in the hand of policymakers consists of structural funds aiming at levelling off economic gaps through top-down investments in physical infrastructure. Most notably, development programmes like the European Union's policy of "territorial cohesion" aim at reducing regional inequality financing infrastructure upgrades. The large fiscal transfers that the regional development strategy mobilised constitute the second-largest spending category in the EU budget accounting to a third of its total. Europe top-down cash infusions in regional developments represent one the most expensive "equality" oriented stratagems to bring self-sustaining growth to lagging places (Hendrickson et al., 2018).

Beneficiaries of these interventions, however, have not engaged in the process of catching up with more productive regions and countries. Criticism surrounding top-down strategies for economic cohesion has questioned its economic efficiency and warned against the political challenges that these strategies imply (see. Hendrickson et al., 2018; Pignal, 2010; Norman & Hinshaw, 2018). Development plans that do not consider the involvement of local actors and do not show a clear awareness of local necessities often results in economic failures. Infrastructural projects frequently end up being underused facilities or encountering the resistance of local communities cut off from the decision-making process. Furthermore, many of the countries benefiting from substantial European funds are also the countries in which nationalistic sentiments and anti-establishment political movements are the strongest. The sharpening of political contrasts between national governments and supranational institutions in these countries represents the greatest threat to the success of the same Inclusivity-oriented international programmes.

Further economic analyses considering also embedded social and political concerns of top-down investments are of primary importance, meanwhile, **top-down infrastructural projects continue to be at the forefront of many political agenda**. The reason is that they represent crucial resources in national development strategies as well as in more localised policies fostering the regeneration of urban areas. The connection between the urban and the national perspective is indeed stark. If better connectivity and services can start the economic engine of less productive areas, within cities, degraded neighbourhoods could follow the same path. Top-down infrastructural investments are essential to give people equal mobility opportunities and better access to work. Both rural communities and suburban residents could enjoy the benefit of moving to different places to work while remaining in their area to live. At the same time, the delocalisation of educational infrastructure outside the urban cores could favour learning processes that empower local communities to compete in skill-intense labour markets. Finally, the provision of technological infrastructure to isolated areas could at least partially counterbalance the strength of agglomeration economies in large tech-leading cities, contributing to the upgrading of local businesses, and enabling to work remotely (Hendrickson et al., 2018).

While the effectiveness of these top-down policies to activate the economies of lagging areas needs to be confirmed, top-down policies often imply further worsening of the conditions of unequal development especially when they focus on creating the conditions for capital to converge. For instance, numerous processes of regeneration, especially at the municipal level, have favoured local development to the detriment of specific target groups creating gentrification<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Early initiatives of urban regeneration introduced in the 70s and 80s relied on significant infrastructural investments, to bring new light to former industrial areas. The global collapse of the industrial and manufactory economy and progressive urbanisation involved localised social and economic repercussions. The abandonment of former industrial buildings and the unstructured development of peripheral areas led to a cycle in which economic decline fuelled even further social decline. Much of the effort of national and local governments in the 1980s aimed at addressing the decline of these disinvested areas by creating new markets in real estate and increasing the rate of construction through partnerships with private sectors actors. The global model of urban regeneration that emerged followed similar patterns in many countries despite the contextual differences (Lees, 2008; Smith, 2002).

Similarly, the use of business-intense incentives and firm-attraction subsidies often leads to benefits which are not captured by original communities. As Bartik (2018) observes, even if firm-incentives to participate in economic development lead in the short-term to higher employment rates, in the long-term benefits are likely to be captured by workers who migrate in the area rather than existing communities. Therefore, while cities focus on catching the “big fishes” to become leading global players, the humus of local entrepreneurship does not receive enough funds to favour new entries and stimulate growth. The consequence is once again that wealth concentrates only in the cities and parts of cities which have plentiful resources to attract leading global industries while the rest of the economy fails to catch up.

## Conclusions

Equality of opportunities depends on the access to infrastructure which can empower, connect and engage lagging places and communities. The emphasis of top-down strategies centered on infrastructural developments is for this reason undisputable. However, because of the numerous cases in which state-led intervention have proved inefficient in including areas in new mechanisms of development, alternative and complementary approaches need to be considered.

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The strategy relied on the creation of spaces conducive to development through the reactivation of productive market forces and the attraction of “middle-class” residents. The expectation was that the integration of middle classes within the existing community would produce social and economic spillovers that eventually would trickle down to the lower strata of the local population (Newman, 2004). The persuasive rhetoric surrounding urban development promoted infrastructural investments in disadvantaged areas pointing at their inclusive positive effects<sup>5</sup>. However, this top-down approach has been hotly contested for its inability to reduce economic inequalities between former residents and affluent middle-classes (Bailey et al., 2004; Robinson & Shaw, 1991). The creation of an attractive environment to middle-class residents through investments in new market properties, services, and leisure options creates the conditions for the revitalisation of market forces which tend to exclude lesser wealthy residents most in need of the regeneration intervention. The ensuing displacement of the former communities demonstrates the difficulty of top-down strategies to offer better employment opportunities to local communities and include them in the economic resurgence of the area. (Doucet, 2007). **In this model of development, economic growth represents a complementary effect of wealth polarisation.**

In the next chapter, the analysis focuses on the role of culture as a possible agent of urban regeneration and as an asset to economic development. After a first exploration of how top-down development policies have used culture to promote economic growth mirroring processes of polarisation, a second approach to culture-led development will be proposed as a complementary alternative.

## Chapter 3

### **The contribution of the cultural sector to economic development**

The usage of culture to stimulate economic development shows deep roots which connect culture with the dynamics of growth. The factors that reveal this connection are twofold, and they are evident both in the intervention to regenerate urban areas as well as within the dynamics of the broader creative economy.

Concerning the former, the next paragraph will propose a brief account of the evolution of cultural policies for urban regeneration showing how culture-led regeneration is strongly dependent on top-down investments models often necessary but hard to evaluate in terms of economic and social inclusivity.

The second chapter moves from urban regeneration to a second broader perspective that relates culture to economic development, that is the notions of the creative economy and the creative class. These theories advocate for the importance of the cultural sector in a global competitive economy.

Finally, a third paragraph will try to collect sources in the account for an alternative vision of culture concerning economic development and inclusivity. The case studies provide further support to the theory that culture is the foundation for the creation of a creative milieu which could activate productive processes in lagging behind areas, contributing to filling the gap with more prosperous areas and contrasting agglomeration economies.

## **Culture-led urban regeneration: an historical perspective reveals issues of inclusivity**

The cultural sector<sup>6</sup> has often performed a strong role in policies aimed at contrasting social and economic decline in cities. It is helpful here to retrace the evolution of urban cultural policies as a starting point to understand the potential in the usage of culture to stimulate development of lagging areas as well as the limitations of current approaches.

During the 60s and 70s, deep social transformations, with the protest movements of 1968 as a manifestation, challenged the shortcoming of existing cultural policies. The attention shifted from a narrow definition of culture, focused on the pre-electronic and elitist arts (theatre, operas and visual arts) towards alternative ways of cultural consumption and production. The socio-cultural revolution brought about by students protests, feminists' movements and mobilisation against war pushed for access to cultural activities to all social groups on the grounds of cultural democracy. The idea at the basis of cultural democracy is that access to all social groups to cultural life could enhance people's consciousness towards injustice and subordination triggering autonomous processes of social change (Bonet & Négrier, 2018). New cultural spaces started to raise awareness of the condition of disadvantaged social groups and of the necessity to enable them to produce and consume cultural products with which they could identify, with as a result that the notion of "cultural empowerment" got onto the political agenda. More popular cultural manifestations fostered by the new media started to be considered core cultural expressions (Pop Music, Cinema, Television). Cultural policies started to address the issue of cultural

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<sup>6</sup> The cultural sector embraces the group of businesses and industries that deal with the production of products and services resulting from artistic and creative expressions. They are characterised by high symbolic value as opposed to purely utilitarian purpose and connected to the institution of intellectual property/copyright. We will consider the cultural industries as the core artistic sectors among the creative industries. The 'creative industries' tag refers to a wider range of activities than simply cultural, and includes: advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer games, television and radio (DCMS, 2004). To distinguish between core cultural expressions and creative industries, we will adopt the differentiation proposed in the "concentric circle model" by cultural economist David Throsby (2001; 2008) which excludes among the group of cultural industries: advertising, architecture, design and fashion. We will consider creative industries also the not mentioned software and high-tech sectors because they have been the focus of governments discourse about the creative economy since the 1990s (Oakley, 2015). Finally, we consider the creative economy to include all creative industries (The Creative Economy Report, 2013).



participation promoting free festivals, marches, fairs, in which the entire community could take part<sup>7</sup>. Culture became an expression of the community with a clear social mark.

During the 80s the emphasis on the moral and social rationale of culture-led development was progressively substituted with the emphasis on culture as a tool for economic restructuring and urban physical regeneration. Political dynamics stands once again at the basis of the interpretation of cultural policies. The progressive collapse of socialist economic systems led to a shift of political climate towards more conservative and market-oriented political parties. Neo-liberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s promoted a squeeze in financial resources and government expenditure<sup>8</sup>, a shift towards deregulation, laissez-faire and market-led planning. The increasing interference of the private sector in urban development created the conditions for top-down property-led regeneration to emerge as the global model to stimulate the growth of lagging areas and sustain the competitiveness of urban economies.

The restructuring in economic terms of the role of culture is especially visible in how urban development policies incorporated it as a critical asset in the face of the global manufacturing crisis. In developed countries, the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy left many urban areas both in the city-centre and the suburbs economically idle with large facilities underused and abandoned. The decline of the built environment following the economic crisis led to a further social decline, and the redeveloping and activation of industrial areas for post-

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<sup>7</sup> Bianchini (1999, p.10; p37) identifies the period between 1960 and 1980 as the “age of participation” which marked the beginning of the use of culture as an agent of regeneration with a focus on social factors rather than economic ones. Cultural policies promoted culture as a tool to foster community-building, and the city centre became the geographical keystone to civic identity and public sociability. Differently, the period from 1980 to early 2000 is defined as the “age of city marketing” (Bianchini, 1999, p.38), where the top-down supply of cultural infrastructure became essential to differentiate the city among its international competitors. The market of cultural goods became oriented to the creation of an attractive leisure-friendly and consumption-oriented environment to live, visit and invest

<sup>8</sup> In a new climate of uncertainty concerning the level of public expenditures, the cultural sector needed to advocate for its economic potential to avoid further financial pressure. The stress on the economic dimension of cultural policies became the defensive strategy to preserve current levels of state intervention in the cultural sector (Myerscough, 1988, p.2). In these policies, the organisations supplying cultural goods and services started to be addressed as “industries” and the word “investment” often replaced “subsidy” to highlight the economic nature of public spending in culture (Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005).

industrial uses such as residential apartments or corporate headquarters became of paramount importance. In this context, a paradigm of “Urban Renaissance” relying on cultural infrastructure emerged as a possible answer (Evans 2001, p2). Policymakers and urban authorities started to perceive culture as the spring board for the development of lagging areas. The provision of cultural infrastructure became a successful strategy to spur major cities and emerging ones out of the obsolete industrial economies on which they depended. The new life of declining areas depended on top-down investments in iconic cultural facilities and flagship events (also referred to as the Bilbao-Guggenheim effect<sup>9</sup>).

The problem however, of this form of state-led intervention is the limited capacity to sustain inclusive development (gentrification is once again a common outcome<sup>10</sup>) and to address critical social and economic concerns to empower communities in the process of economic restructuring. The benefits of the urban renewal agenda risks of being captured by private developers and often follow private real estate interests. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the provision of clusters of creative production to spur development of obsolete

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<sup>9</sup> One of the earliest and most famous examples of this formula of urban revitalization is the opening in 1997 of the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum, Northern Spain, which was the first of many following cases of top-down regeneration of an obsolete industrial environment through huge public investments and the intervention of a world-famous architect. Eventually, culture-led urban regeneration received an international recognition as a strategy to move urban areas from poverty to prosperity either by relying extensively on top-down investments in large-scale cultural events (like the disputed ECoC project) and facilities or by developing creative and cultural quarters (such as Temple Bar in Dublin). Numerous cities in Western Europe (Manchester, Rotterdam, Glasgow, Barcelona, Frankfurt, Dublin to name a few) invested in culture to find an alternative economic niche to their former manufactory economies. Furthermore, city authorities promoted a top-down development of the market of cultural goods leverage on symbolic status of elegance, sophistication, innovativeness and vibrancy of the urban environment and therefore project the city on a global market. In this connection it is possible to highlight how culture amounts on one side as a key resource for a growing tourism sector increasingly localized in cities, and on the other, it strengthens the supply of leisure and entertainment activities necessary to retain middle-class and consumption-oriented residents accounted to fuel the economy (Kong, 2000, p,387).

<sup>10</sup> Critics of this approach have highlighted how top-down culture-led development may entail negative economic and social consequences. Similar to other infrastructural developments, cultural infrastructure is costly. The risk is to leave expensive, underused facilities (like the case of the Millennium Dome in London) or to meet the resistance of local communities which perceive their “indigenous” culture not represented through major cultural systems. The leading critic of top-down cultural development is that they tend to overlook the cultural needs of existing residents and communities. The ensuing regeneration process that these forms of intervention realize excludes local cultural groups and associations. The result is often their displacement determined by the rising costs of living.

industrial economies in lagging areas is conditioned by the presence of stronger agglomeration forces which tend to favour large urban environments. In other words, it is essential to consider whether strategies to attract major cultural industries are only successful in already vibrant economic environments like global cities (e.g. London, New York, and Paris) or if, instead, they can also be envisioned for smaller and/or disadvantaged realities (Flew, 2010).

To understand the scope of top-down intervention in cultural infrastructure it is necessary to widen the perspective. Urban regeneration is by itself conditioned to the development of single urban areas. However, in a knowledge-drive competitive economy, even localized interventions need to be considered in relation to the global factors which stand at the foundation of economic growth. The next paragraph will address this issue.

### **Culture and development within the discourse of the creative economy and the theory of the creative class.**

The approach of investing in cultural infrastructure as a development strategy to activate local economies has determined a new type of competition between cities. While regeneration as defined in the 1970s policy revolved around economic, social and environmental programmes to compensate the related decline of specific urban and rural realities, in the 1990s regeneration aimed at the repositioning of localities in the context of a global economy. Urban development became oriented on the harnessing of all resources to attract capital, both in forms of fast-growing businesses, wealthy residents, talents and knowledge workers.

In this competitive economy, two popular discourses link culture to economic development.

- 1) The first one is the notion of creative economy (Howkins, 2001) which connects culture with a broader ecosystem centred on the use of creativity as a productive input (Creative Economy Report, 2010; 2013). The creative economy encompasses the creative industries (DCMS, 1998) divided in nine subsectors: advertising and marketing; architecture; crafts; design and designer fashion; film, TV, video, radio and photography; creative tech (IT,

software and computer services); publishing; museums, galleries and libraries; and music, performing and visual arts (Creative Industries Federation, 2018). The foundation of the economic approach to culture is directly connected to the strengths of the creative industries to leverage digital innovation and creativity to realise profits and growth. For this reason, creative industries have been identified among the fastest growing sectors and considered valuable in terms of size (number of businesses, added value, and employment), resiliency and dynamism (European Commission, 2012). These factors have received increasing importance, especially after the last recession, after which the attention on creative-driven industries has increased for their ability to resist and cushion the negative impacts of the global economic crisis. Consequently, cities started to compete for the retention of the industries of the creative economy and invest in the supply of cultural goods and experiences. Through time, creative and cultural industries demonstrated their economic significance as resources capable of projecting a vibrant city image in a global landscape, and of representing a solid base for their economies. Nowadays, numerous examples stand out of cities that have experienced exponential economic growth even in periods of economic recession through investments in the creative economy (see The Economist Intelligence Report, 2015).

- 2) A second successful theory (Florida 2002) suggests that successful urban economies depend on the presence of a “creative class”. The creative class is defined as a group of professionals, not necessarily employed in cultural or creative industries, that drive economic growth in post-industrial economies. They include a super-creative core “fully engaged in the creative process” (Florida 2002, p.69) directed towards the innovation of commercial goods. Secondly, the creative class includes other knowledge-based workers whose work tasks entail complex problem solving and critical thinking. The strength of the creative class theory is that it provides a fast-policy guide to local economic development centred on the attraction of knowledge and creative workers<sup>11</sup>. According

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<sup>11</sup> This “fast urban policy” has been considered one of the main reasons for the success and diffusion of the creative class theory and related urban strategies worldwide (Peck, 2005, p. 767).

- 3) to the creative class perspective, the promotion of culture, diversity and entertainment is essential to appeal to this group of individuals. Thriving cities are those better capable of creating an attractive ecosystem for the creative class to settle by developing cultural assets, leisure opportunities and cultural diversity. For its capacity to create a vibrant ecosystem that appealed to the creative class, urban policy agendas around the world included the supply of cultural and leisure infrastructure to achieve economic development.

These two approaches are connected by the idea that in a knowledge-driven and globalised economy, creativity would be the crucial productive force and that the cultural sector could represent an effective response to centripetal forces of capital diffusion. However, each of these theories can be criticised on a variety of fronts. For instance, if we admit that future urban economies will be built around creative industries, it is unclear whether the success of those industries depends on the presence of an already economically thriving ecosystem or if conversely the latter is fostered by them. It is then still unsettled whether cultural industries can take a more significant role in these economies in the face of the growing high-tech manufactory, financial sectors or digital and software companies (Comunian, 2011). Secondly, from an economic perspective, the theory of the creative class has not provided a precise nexus of causality that relates it to economic development (Malanga, 2004; Kokkin, 2005). Finally, it is unclear the extent to which specific cultural attractions lure the different workers that compose the “creative class”. As a consequence, it is tough to defend the role of a specific cultural experience on the account that it could attract an audience of high-skilled knowledge workers (Markusen, 2006).

One of the limitations of policies aimed at fostering creating ecosystems is that they force the idea that successful economies depend on the top-down development of cultural infrastructure, high technology and leisure facilities to attract knowledge workers and fast-growing industries. This is evident by Florida’s indexes which are centred on hard-factors and infrastructures such as

museums, galleries and music clubs as a proxy for an attractive cultural environment (Florida, 2002b). However, as previously considered, top-down interventions which tend to focus on the provision of infrastructure lack an understanding of how this infrastructure is helpful to include local actors in the process of development. Many factors converge that may compromise the long-term capacity of fostering a local productive system that also includes disadvantaged communities and residents. The development of creative cities/neighbourhoods and the connection with rising social issues and inequality remains still an open question<sup>12</sup> (McCann, 2007).

While infrastructure is undeniably crucial to empower lagging areas in the process to catch up with the knowledge-based paradigm of economic growth, there is no guarantee that people will be able to take part in that process. The deployment of internet connections in rural areas does not guarantee that local tech businesses will develop in a greater economy or that outside-based firms will decide to settle in the more digitally connected area fostering the creation of an innovation-led thriving ecosystem. Similarly, the creation for the conditions for creativity to develop as a local resource for lagging areas may not be conditioned to the restructuring from above of the local supply of cultural and social activities. There is no magic formula that translates cultural infrastructure in the stimulus for the activation of local economies. We may need to think about a different logic. The organisational perspective reflected in a top-down government-led approach risks of being confined to one-time improvements in the built-environments while the complexities that processes of economic inclusion entail rest overlooked.

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<sup>12</sup> The current evaluation analysis of the creative economy (the most important one is the Creative City Monitor developed in 2017 by the European Commission) do not consider issues of inclusivity. The creation of a creative ecosystem still relies on the level of cultural infrastructure without considering the needs of the locations in which it is included.

## **A social and inclusive perspective on creativity and culture**

On a methodological perspective, there is no straight answer to how to solve issues of inclusivity. According to Comunian (2011, p.1161), much of the contradictions present in top-down cultural, economic policies is that they miss the understanding of the “complex interconnections which form the cultural development of the city”. Rather than fast-urban policies, municipal authorities aimed at developing their creative economies should pay more attention to how cultural production and consumption influence each-other in the long term. The focus on long-term impact is crucial even in the face of more immediate returns of promoting cultural opportunities for the creative class or focusing on the higher spending power of tourists. In this regard, Bailey et al. (2004) argue that successful development policies are those that are capable of maintaining the engagement of local communities in the production and consumption mechanism of cultural goods. Cultural production would then lead to cultural change in the form of a rediscovered sense of place and identity. The latter could favour the development of adaptive capacities of local communities to socio-economic challenges and, consequently, the development of an innovative and dynamic economic environment.

Similarly, Oakley (2015, p.16) argues that the future of culture-led regeneration will not depend on the provision of fast-policy tools and context-blind strategies but on a new politics of place which values the local cultural character while” recognising and interacting with the global forces shaping it”. In this connection, culture is perceived as a local intangible resource linked to identity and place attachment fostering localised forms of social solidarity and economic resilience. The latter, in turn, identify powerful asset helping to sustain local economies because they relate to communities as political entities<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> A critical function played by communities is to anchor people in real human networks, give them a sense of identity and the importance of their role within the local environment. Communities canalise the sentiment of civic engagement that is necessary for the creation of local community-based movements that push local governments to act as a shield of the interests of local minorities against the behemoth of big corporations. Furthermore, communities in which social capital thrives enable people to understand their needs in relation to the needs of the community and activate problem-solving capabilities to supply existing needs through the creation of goods and services (Rajan, 2018).

Expanding this inclusive perspective to the discourse of the creative class, Charles Leadbeater (2009) compares the traditional recipes to stimulate development through culture with a “broader” approach in response to modern urban challenges. In what Leadbeater considers the “narrow” account of creative cities, creativity remains confined to the narrow group of the creative class, and creative industries become the main field of its application. At the same time, cities, where this approach to development has been pursued, are the battlefield of many modern challenges such as global economic competition, poverty, the challenges of social diversity and environmental sustainability. To address these extensive problems, however, cities need a combination of top-down investments in infrastructure as well as the stimulus of collaborative forms of creativity which entitles the population at large to creatively contribute towards sustainable development. The focus on hardware infrastructure and professional skills, as well as measurable inputs and outputs, need to be complemented by an encompassing cultural change that considers residents as creative and political individuals entitled to access the democratic debates over shared resources and joint problems.

The idea that the creative capacities of citizens are a crucial resource for cities to address common challenges is now clearly acknowledged. Cities are the environment that most contribute to global challenges, both in terms of problem creation and problem solution. It is in cities indeed that effective solutions to sensitive challenges are developed and diffused<sup>14</sup>. We need only to think, for example, of how alternative consumption models like low-emission transports or car-sharing are present in global city-centres while diminishing as we move towards more peripheral areas. Cities are leaders in problem-solving due to the market potential that

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<sup>14</sup> The possibilities of cities to stand out as places where solutions are developed and marketed relies on political and economic factors. On the economic side, the concentrated presence of talented workers, dense networks of businesses and firms, and opportunities of knowledge exchanges and innovation which lead the economic dynamism of cities all contribute to the establishment of market-based solutions to urban challenges. Secondly, high political power enables global cities to collect funds and cooperation for large infrastructure-based projects which can restructure the built environment in accordance to new necessities. At the same time, cities can give responsibility to manage pools of resources and be proactive to local needs which may be overlooked by the more distant governmental levels.



comes from “the concentration of economic, physical and social asset in real places” (Katz, 2017, p.2), as well as from the dense networks of knowledge-exchange and creativity that drive the innovation process in a post-industrial economy. Increasingly, problem-solving is shifting from “command-and-control systems to the collective efforts of civil society, government, and private institutions” (Katz, 2017, p.2). Power is distributed across layers of governments, different sources of civic strengths and cross-sector collaborations. It is reflected in how global cities enable growth by leveraging on their distinctive sectors, create quality-job by adapting their educational systems, develop new collaborative and participatory forms of governance<sup>15</sup>, or capitalise growth through innovative forms of finance.

The strength of agglomeration economies that push market actors, talents and capital in cities is in a significant part responsible for the dynamism of value creation that happens in cities. For this reason, the identification and activation of the mechanisms that foster creativity, problem-solving and innovation in lagging areas may represent a difficult challenge. Nevertheless, the understanding of the creative economy as a diffused and social innovation and problem-solving process may point out an important role played by culture and the spaces in which it is produced.

As here understood, the nature of problem-solving in cities is dependent on the multidimensional intervention of different parties from civic, public and private actors. They bring problem-solving capacities and creativity to the ground of local issues fostering dynamic and flexible responses. Although market forces are concentrated in cities, civic engagement and creativity not necessarily thrives in fruitful and productive environments. Instead, it stems from a wide range of motivations, from the awareness of local challenges and the desire to collectively face them, to a developed sense of pride, cultural belonging and place attachment (Leadbeater, 2009). Secondly, cultural infrastructure, more broadly considered, including bars, coffee shops, libraries, universities, council debating chambers and wherever creative conversation about local

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<sup>15</sup> It is possible to think, for instance, to the model of participatory budgeting (PB) which cities like Milan, Paris and New-York have designed to give citizens the power to make real decisions about the allocation of resources for local needs.

challenges take place, become the distributed spaces where the social kind of creativity can thrive. Therefore, the structure of the system of cultural production and consumption, its connection with forms of civic participation fostered by collective identity and place attachment could reveal the potential of culture to stand out as a crucial factor to engage communities in the process of economic regeneration. Cultural infrastructure could function as a porous membrane between people's active engagement and the productive exchange of ideas, providing the humus for the creation of a productive, creative ecosystem even outside the ferment of city centres.

Some challenges need, however, to be addressed. This vision of culture as a catalyst of a diffuse creative economy depicts a utopian scenario where citizens are engaged in political and management decisions about local resources. It, however, implies high levels of public participation and awareness of local needs which cannot be taken for granted. Raghuram Rajan (2018), who studied how communities can leverage on social capital to form coalitions protecting local interests in the face of stronger market and political forces, argues that civic engagement and public participation can stem from the cultural identification with the close group of people that form the local community. In this regard, the community is defined as "a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage" (Rajan, 2018, p. 2). The empowerment of communities could be achieved through what is commonly known as *localism*, the devolution of power, expenses and activities to the community. Nevertheless, in order for localism to resolve in forms of diffused creativity and problem-solving capacities activating local productive processes, communities need to enable the coexistence with other cultural groups. Multiculturalism, a feature of the globalised urban environment, need not resolve in cultural conflicts and exacerbation of social tensions so that common challenges can be collectively addressed through inclusive solutions. Although cultural participation and the strengthening of the community identity bonds can facilitate the formation of social connections and awareness of common needs and (Putnam, 1993), the creation of a creative ecosystem based on cultural infrastructure lacks a precise model that would enable to foster it where distress is strongest and regeneration more needed.

## Conclusions

In the understanding of cities as creative ecosystems, innovation come about from networks of public, civic and private actors creating economic processes by addressing local problems. While creativity and knowledge exchanges in these networks tend to radiate economic growth in cities, their existence is not conditioned by them. The participation of people in creative processes could be catalysed by cultural infrastructure understood as the spaces where ideas emerge. The social nature of these processes makes them accessible also in locations where market driven economic growth hardly occur.

The future of regeneration may be defined by how policies can harness the creative potential of local people to face periods of economic transition and social transformation. A vision focused on top-down interventions may be limited, though. The supply from above of spaces of cultural participation to local challenges does not automatically translates in civic engagement. Participation must not be taken for granted. The understanding of one's own needs and desires, their expression in a social context are fundamental skills which need to be socially developed. In this regard, it is not possible to force people to take initiative in participating in local conversations. The creative environment instead may come about as the product of a bottom-up and community-based organisation of the spaces of cultural supply. A social perspective that considers people as active contributors and co-creators of the local creative ecosystem may come in hand to explain how spontaneous and inclusive processes of development rise in lagging areas.

We will consider now two case studies of regeneration processes in the metropolitan area of Milan, Italy, to consider the effects of a property-driven development on the achievement of economic growth and a second analysis of a spontaneous process of regeneration fostered by local communities and leveraging on cultural identity and the organisation from the bottom of the local cultural supply. The two case studies will contribute to this debate by showing how diffused examples of creativity leveraging on cultural infrastructure and identity can stimulate inclusive development.

## **Case Studies**

### **Choice of the Cases and Research Methods**

The two case studies consider two neighbourhoods in the metropolitan area of Milan. One is the area that extends north from the square of Loreto and is cut vertically from Via Padova, which connected Milan to its countryside and identified the neighbourhood geographically. Its choice derives from the fact that it represents a peripheral area and the example of an urban lagging place which suffered the effect of progressive urbanisation and globalisation. The area of Via Padova is a socially complex and multi-ethnic environment with a long history of violence and criminal activities which stigmatised the place and its residents. The negative association with the place hampered the process of development despite the economic growth of Milan. Due to the local social distress, the area has suffered from constant disinvestments, and leading sectors (like finance, high-tech and creative industries) never developed. Conversely, the renovation of business activities depended on the generational change of local business owners and new residents often foreign-born.

In the past few years, the area of Via Padova, renamed as NoLo, experienced a robust regeneration process started and catalysed by local communities. In particular, the case is the example of a spontaneous process of regeneration based on the organisation from the bottom-up of the supply of cultural goods. Furthermore, residents leveraged on local identity bonds between different cultural communities to overcome the stigma that hampered the development process. For these reasons, it represents a suitable case to understand how culture could foster inclusive regeneration from the bottom-up rather than the top-down. Finally, the case shows how lagging-behind places can use culture to mitigate the process of concentration of resources in central areas and be included in the economic development of the new economy.

The case of Via Padova will be supported and compared with a second regeneration process which happened in the 1970s in the extreme peripheral areas of Milan, in the municipality of Segrate, about two kilometres outside of the area of Via Padova. The case represents a top-down intervention led by private investments and supported by the state, for the creation from the ground-up of a residential and middle-class neighbourhood named *Milan 2*. Despite the project was not finalised to the regeneration of the peripheral areas of Milan (in that period the regeneration efforts were concentrated to support the city centre), the process resembles other state-led developments strategies where middle-class residents were attracted in marginal areas through investments in services and leisure options. The case study of Milan 2 has been chosen for two main reasons. On one side, it embodies some features of contemporary top-down interventions aimed at restructuring the built environment to become environmentally sustainable and for this reason, attractive for investments. The project of Milan 2 was perceived as extremely innovative for the time, especially for the structure and organisation of the green spaces and transit areas. Secondly, the project is characteristic for the presence of two major creative and cultural industries, Fininvest, a media and television company (which laid the foundation of the mediatic empire of Mediaset) and Mondadori an important publishing house. For this reason, it can be compared to other attempts to foster development through the promotion of the industries that define the creative economy and over which cities compete to diversify and drive their economies.

Finally, the two case studies reveal two different models of cultural identity, one structured from above and, in the case of Via Padova, defined democratically and affirmed through time and the constant contribution of the residents. It will be possible to highlight some implications of the issue of identity as a cultural process on the possibility to favour economic development.

The research was conducted between July and August 2019 through the identification, collection and interpretation of historical documents, the analysis of statistical data retrieved from secondary sources, the exploration of the local environment through participation to cultural events, discussions with residents and business owners and the collection of photos.

The first part of the research consisted of the collection of information about the history of the two case studies. Via Padova is an ancient reality, and the foundation of its stigma needs to be traced back in time. The consultation of historical documents and archives retrieved from “Archivio Casa del Sole”<sup>16</sup>, a local educational association, has been essential to understanding the social and economic evolution of the area of Via Padova. This method of analysis enables to understand the social and economic dynamics that describe Via Padova as a lagging place. Similarly, the initial analysis of Milan 2 through a historical perspective is useful to show how Milan 2 is a top-down development which shows a clear beginning in time. In this regard, the choice of sources is decisive. Their belonging to recognized archives determines the reliability of the sources for the case of Via Padova. Similarly, concerning Milan 2, it has been possible to access to historical editions of national newspapers and historical documents retrieved from residents (in particular the promotional booklet that was distributed to new house owners at the beginning of the project).

To evaluate the process of regeneration the study considered also statistical data. In particular, the data considered included the number of residents, indexes of demographic composition and the trends in the real estate market. The number and demographic composition of residents, in the case of Milan 2, proved essential to demonstrate the static nature of its development. Concerning Via Padova, instead, the demographic composition indicates how much the phenomenon of immigration can account for the social distress that the neighbourhood sustained. Finally, indicators about the trends in the real estate market enable to highlight the presence of possible phenomena of gentrification. The data were retrieved from the Italian national bureau of statistics, ISTAT, and from SISI, Sistema Statistico Integrato, the platform for statistical analyses of the municipality of Milan, and from internet platform of statistical analysis Tuttitalia.it.

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<sup>16</sup> The historic archive of Scuola del Sole includes three photo funds, the album “La scuola all’aperto Umberto Savoia, 1927 coming from the documentation archive Milano-Nord of Renato Bont, the album “Vincenzo Aragozzini”, 1929, coming from the historic archive of Golgi Redaelli, the album (presumably) “Vincenzo Aragozzini”, 1938, coming from the historic archive of the former pedagogic national library of Firenze.

The interpretation of the recent regeneration dynamics happening in Via Padova relied on the monitoring of secondary sources. For phenomena that start from the bottom, which are recent and in constant evolution, one of the most precious sources to understand the initiatives that are implemented and how people react to those initiatives is represented by social media and the internet. In the case of Via Padova/NoLo it has been possible to gather information from numerous sources online which corresponded to the organisations that have been recently set up in the area and have contributed to the process of regeneration. The research also analysed social Media groups on Facebook, especially a growing Facebook Group, “NoLo Social District” which gathers many of the initiatives that contributed from the bottom to the renaissance of the neighbourhood. Considering the attention that the phenomenon of NoLo received on social media, national newspapers, blogs, radios, it has been possible to deduce sufficient information to understand the driving forces of the process of regeneration.

The interpretation of secondary sources has been supported and validated through a selected interview with Stefano Zoli, the manager of Hug, a multifunctional cultural space, which is one of the main agents of the regeneration of Via Padova. The interview has been open and took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July in the spaces of the company. Finally, the study has been complemented with the first-hand experience of both environments, Milan 2 and NoLo, in July, August and September through the participation to cultural manifestations, the observations on the status of the physical infrastructure and of the functioning and engagement of the different activities that stand at the basis of the regeneration process.

## **Limitations**

Considering that the analysis is, for the most part, qualitative, it is essential to understand its limitations and how they have been addressed. Researches based on qualitative methods risk of being subjective compared to quantitative analyses. Besides, despite the researcher’s attempt to remain as objective as possible in his interpretations, a qualitative method remains subject to

different interpretations. Finally, the results are unlikely generalizable, since it is often hard to gather enough data to share evidence.

To overcome these issues the study confronts multiple methods of analysis. This way of working is called “triangulation” and consists of the evaluation with different sources, theories, methods, implementing interviews with field observations and secondary data. In this regard, it has been possible to confirm some interpretations using quantitative data. However, the research encountered numerous impairments in the collection of relevant statistical data since both case studies are not yet a statistical basin because they are included in broader statistical areas. While for Milan 2 it has been possible to analyse different indicators of demographic composition, in the case of NoLo the only useful and relevant data were those of the house prices, ethnic composition and demographic growth. To overcome the subjective interpretation of secondary sources, the research benefited from the abundant number of sources, and the researcher tried to select the most reliable ones. In this regard, the consultation of historical archives and the use of national and financial newspapers helped the researcher in the selection of the most relevant information. The choice of interviewing the manager of Hug also goes in this direction. Hug is one of the first realities that contributed to the social and cultural phenomena underpinning the bottom-up regeneration process of Via Padova/NoLo. The interview offered a relevant primary source to test the information gathered through secondary sources. Finally, instead of focusing on one case, the comparison between two bordering realities, considering the relative differences, distinctly validate the research. Therefore, despite the presence of specific limitations, the analysis is able to offer a solid field of observation to understand the bottom-up and top-down phenomena of regeneration and create a productive discussion on the role of culture to stimulate inclusive development.



## **Via Padova and NoLo**

### **Identity and History of an Urban Periphery**

It is impossible to talk about the territory that extends in the northern periphery of Milan and which pivots around the central street named Via Padova, as a homogeneous and unified large neighbourhood. Its heterogeneity, which itself constitute the foundational force of the local collective identity, derives from the influx of people and wares from the rural areas north of Milan, resorted to Via Padova as transit and access door to the dense metropolis. The root and the generation principle of the area derive from its nature of commercial corridor, which welcomed, just before the industrial development, growing masses of immigrants coming from the nearby countryside. Since then, the pressing urbanisation preserved the nature of transit passage while new industrial hangars melted with workers' houses and old farmsteads. With time the development of the urban fabric progressed in spontaneous and fragmentary manner, completely extraneous from any planning activity on the part of a local government which tended to expel in the marginal urban areas all the functions that did not conform to the consumption vocation of the city-centre (Semino, 1986, Agliani & Barra, 2017). The intervention of the state here appears sporadically with the construction of public schools and infrastructural investment to enhance urban mobility in the first decade after the Second World War, while a prepotent new flux of immigrants coming from the distant regions of the North of Italy and the South drove the residential development of the area. For this reason, where elsewhere government interference was aimed at rationalising urban peripheries and creating homogeneous low-cost residential environments, Via Padova preserved the complex nature of the physical structure. It maintained the juxtaposition of buildings of different nature and function and conserved the historical settlements defining the identity of its development (Novak, 2008).

The social structure of the area is affected by how new migration fluxes became integrated with previous ones. The coexisting of different people in the same building gave rise to a mix of cultural and social encounters which favoured a molecular and spontaneous integration process. The

common spaces of old farmhouses and the new workers' houses became the essential spaces for forms of mutual assistance and solidarity mechanisms to emerge favouring the communitarian relationship with people coming from different migration phases. Furthermore, the social diversification and the labouring nature of the area have favoured the integration of many new immigrants through the opening of a diverse range of commercial activities and services aimed at the needs of the growing working-class which was basing its social and economic life in the area around the local factory (Agliani & Barra, 2017).

However, while many small artisan activities settled within the internal courtyard (*cortile*) of the workers and farmers houses, the "open" living-space of the local building structures enables also the self-reproduction of manifestations of social deviance that often come with the fast and diversified demographic and economic changes. Via Padova has always been the street of numerous underprivileged people who, without the financial security of stable occupation, have been exposed to small criminal activities and found in small taverns and courtyard the suitable environment for extra-legal behaviours. The diversity of forms acquired by these criminal activities (sometimes ending up with famous example of violence and vengeance like the murder of the criminal Sandro Bezzi, in 1949) appears to be an endemic element of this territory and favoured the diffusion of the stigma of the street and its surroundings as a disreputable area characterised by violence and gang fights.

The modernisation processes beginning in the early 60s, in a period of intense economic growth, and continuing since recent times, favoured the laceration of the social and economic bonds that held the local communities together and counterbalanced criminal activities. Increasingly substantial residential investment, led the development in the area of Via Padova of numerous blocks of flats which, although providing access to essential commodities (water, sanitary facilities, ecc..) contributed to the loosening of social bonds observed in more "open" traditional residences. The numerous local commercial activities started to fade as dominating processes of deindustrialisation change the labouring social fabric into a middle-class (more attentive to services) one and large distributors started to impose over smaller players. The ever-present base

of pervasive social activities, like societies of mutual support, consumption and production cooperatives, and citizen's centre (case del popolo) cannot avoid the economic and social crisis of local producers. In the vacant spaces left by those who left, a new migration wave sustained by globalisation forces, pushed people coming from the East, South America and North Africa to fill the spot left in the market. By relying on the low cost of services and by providing tertiary and disqualified activities which local people did not want to do, they resisted the competition of large retailers. However, they were never able to fully integrate with the Italian community, as the spaces and the occasion for that to happen gradually faded away. At the beginning of the century, the neighbourhood counted 33528 residents of which only 9% were immigrants coming from different countries. In 2010 while the overall number of residents hardly changed (34539) the national presence diminished, and foreign people rose to more than a third of the leading Italian community<sup>17</sup>. The fast change of the social fabric, not followed by processes of integration, contributed to the stigmatisation of the area as a slum. Local public policies limited to act only in a repairing perspective, and the temporary solution of social problems required the constant intervention of the law enforcement agency (Bricocoli & Savoldi, 2010).

Most unlikely, despite the lack of government help, Via Padova found a way to counterbalance the dangerous social and economic trends that made the area a place where business would not invest, and people would choose to avoid.

### **The recent process of regeneration**

Right when the perception of the area becomes more pessimistic, an opportunity of redemption presents itself to the local communities. The permanence of traces of the old architectonic and social fabric, together with the low cost of rents and the stimulus of the overall growth of Milan as a global city, has summoned new professional and social figures like students and creatives whose presence is quite visible in the neighbourhood. While their overall impact is difficult to assess, they drive local development by opening new activities, professional offices, creating new

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<sup>17</sup> Data formulated through the comparison of different statistical databases from SISI.

gathering places. Furthermore, they use new technologies to fuel and renovate the mechanisms of social solidarity and social connections.

An example is the use of the new online communication media to create social cohesion. Social media through the creation of Facebook groups (the most important is “NoLo Social District” opening in 2016, now counting over 8000 subscribers<sup>18</sup>) have enabled the fostering of mutual connections between different residents but also the revelation of needs and the ensuing matching and creation of their supply. The use of the virtual space to favour the integration of diverse communities translated into numerous initiatives to which local people contributed by offering their know-how. Different activities promoted through social media ranging from sports classes, music and language courses, cooking and knitting classes and many others, enabled people to share their skills and finding the opportunity to social encounters and integration.

Social media were also used as channels to find help and recommendations. The Facebook groups function as useful information points where requests of finding an electrician, plumber or good local restaurants are answered by the people registered. Similarly, new brick and mortar activities opened to provide spaces of social gathering and to offer multifunctional services which adapt to the needs of local people. An example is Hug a local bistro, which is also a co-working space and cultural venue, that aims at providing a friendly environment where people can feel at home. The place is managed in such a way that it can adapt to the needs expressed by its customers. Inside the commercial venue, created within the courtyard of an old working-class house using the space of an old chocolate factory, people can find an impressive variety of free services ranging from concierge services to a weekly appointment with a psychologist and a lawyer, to the possibility to organise social events. Many of these activities became a real signature for the neighbourhood and were further promoted by different parties. It is the case of the many biking tours that have the aim to promote cycling as a healthy and sustainable activity while at the same time discovering the neighbourhood and its history and acting as a patrol for illegal activities.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NoLoDistrict/>

Another activity which became famous is the peculiar phenomenon of the Sunday breakfast along the streets. The event welcomes the local community, despite the ethnic background, to bring their food to share it with other residents. It creates a climate that resembles one of smaller towns and reflects the trend of taking back common spaces for social purposes and at zero costs. Similarly, the initiative of an open-air cinema (CineNoLo) that runs through the year aims at bringing new light to common spaces which have been associated with a place of fear and criminal activities to become a space of cultural consumption.

Following a prosperous period of cultural and social ferment driven by the numerous and diverse activities that emerged in the past three years and led the regeneration of the area, Via Padova has started to see the possibility to be free from the negative stigma that affected it. A sign of change is represented by the diffusion of a new term to identify the area and the street of Via Padova. Since 2015 the term “NoLo” which stands for North of Loreto, and geographically identifies the area, has started to spread through word of mouth and now drives the cultural change of the neighbourhood<sup>19</sup>. An impressive number of new social cultural and commercial initiatives have leveraged on the name “NoLo” as a symbol of their local belonging. Parallel to this, people, despite their ethnicity and cultural belonging, started to identify themselves as “Nolers”, creating profound bondage with the area and the spaces and activities that make it alive. The new name enabled the fostering of a strong sense of place attachment and identity bond that went beyond all racial and ethnic barriers.

The cultural change of the area is therefore determined by a new symbolic identification of the belonging to the specific place which consolidated in the attribution of a different name to the area and its inhabitants. At the same time, it leveraged on the previous identity bonds that had since centuries characterised the area as a multicultural environment.

The neighbourhood has started a spontaneous and bottom-up process of regeneration which tries to build its own cultural identity while maintaining the contact, inevitably physical, with the

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/NoLo-milano-leva-marketing-territoriale-e-comunita-social-AE0Z1KKF>

more extensive metropolis. On one side indeed the area of NoLo is highly embedded in the urban fabric of the city of Milan. The three underground stations that cover Via Padova and connect it to the city centre do not reveal any form of the discontinuity between the beginning of the neighbourhood and its surrounding. If some person had to walk across Milan, he would not find any geographical sign of its reaching NoLo besides crossing the long Via Padova which once not surprisingly identified the area.

The term that the residents have started to use to identify the neighbourhood reveals that the only reference point is the square of Loreto. While the square itself is vibrant of cultural elements linked to its history (the hanging of Benito Mussolini and other fellows), the area surrounding the square has never acquired an identity linked to the name and the history of the square. The area is only particularly useful to identify the converging angle between the different neighbourhoods (Via Padova, Città Studi, Stazione Centrale, Buenos Aires). Since the area around Loreto never defined a specific neighbourhood, which would have included otherwise the southern part of Via Padova, the name of NoLo, which uses Loreto as its boundary, could diffuse without clashing with previous cultural identifications with the square (Novak & Gazzola, 2008).

The fact instead that the cultural identity of the neighbourhood became more and more independent from the surrounding area is not highlighted only from the term NoLo or the establishment of a symbol (a white whale) as the local mascot. It is revealed also through the presence of channels for the diffusion of local cultural like the local radio (RadioNoLo) with a local news broadcast (GiorNoLo) and the attempt to find the right balance between local cultural initiatives (for instance BienNoLo, a local art fair, SanNoLo a local music talent show, or NoLo Fringe Festival a performing art festival hosted by local commercial venues and public spaces) and other widespread events that have acquired importance for the city of Milan (like FuoriSalone, the most important Design event which recently has found space also in NoLo, and similarly BookCity, one of the most important events connected to literature which contributed to making Milan famous as City of Literature (Unesco, Creative City Monitor, 2017)).

According to, Stefano Zoli, the manager of Hug, the strength of NoLo is that it is a “reality in constant evolution on a social point of view”. Rather than being competitive and individualist, the local culture is “collaborative, where all people know each other, all the associations collaborate and dialogue”. NoLo is also a creative reality. The most important cultural associations RadioNoLo, BienNoLo and more recently, the NoLo Fringe Festival, “create identification with NoLo<sup>20</sup> and stimulate the social fabric to collaborate”. The initiatives that come out of these collaborations are multi-fold. The manager stresses in this regard the recycle programme following the NoLo Fringe Festival, which started different campaigns supported by different local activities educating the public to environmental respect and the care of the neighbourhood.

Differently from other neighbourhoods with a strong and rooted cultural identity, NoLo is an area with strong local roots, but that is also open and projected to the outside. The activities in the different cultural spaces like Hug aim at creating a connection between local people but also with outside associations. Most of the activities of Hug welcome external associations, educate the public to sustainability and use the revenues to support local no-profit associations. This way on one side the name and culture of NoLo becomes known on the outside<sup>21</sup> and, on the other hand, the area becomes a reality in constant evolution. Different people, like the manager of Hug himself, are readily accepted as Nolars. “You immediately put yourself in the condition to

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<sup>20</sup> One of the main factors is the symbol of the white whale, mascot of the festival and also of NoLo, which was included in the name “NoLo fringe festival” and also addressed by local associations like the students of local schools using waste materials to create their interpretation of the whale.

<sup>21</sup> The mark of the diffusion of NoLo outside its community is represented not only by the massive hype that it received on different media or the numerous people that from other areas of Milan or globally have come to see cultural events like the NoLo Fringe Festival (the last manifestation counted over 2500 visits). The influence of NoLo on the outside is also marked by the recent adoption of new but similar names and cultural symbols to identify nearby areas like Sos which stands for South of Sesto or Prego, Precotto Gorla. The jury is still out on whether these new cultural phenomena will grow like NoLo, but their birth highlights the desire of people in different neglected areas to find their own identity to convey a different image of themselves.

understand how to contribute to the place because the doors are always open. This way a strong sense of belonging developed. “

NoLo started from a little group of creative people, and then spread out as the many local associations and even single citizens wanted to “share and express activities which had an important role in their life, they had some know-how to convey”. The manager of Hug tells many stories about how local activities developed in the spaces that he runs. A book group, a knitting group of old women, a class on pregnancy organised by recent moms and social events organised from local people with domestic animals or children which would usually be rejected from other commercial venues. According to the manager, the social logic expressed through different events, overcomes the market logic of profit and any hierarchical imperative that would hamper spontaneous processes of participation and the development of ideas into new projects.

Eventually, ensuing the intense cultural ferment that has surrounded in the past years the phenomenon of “NoLo”, the municipality of Milan has confirmed (Feb 2019) that the freshly coined term would be the new name for the area that once was named Via Padova.

It is not possible to know whether this process will end up in the displacement of the most fragile and marginal residents. For now, the price of the houses remains low (around 2500,00 euros for square metres respect to the 5000,00 of the nearby central areas<sup>22</sup>), also due to the old and sometimes decadent state of some infrastructure. Nevertheless, while many local players are contributing with everyday practices to the strengthening of the identity of NoLo, the intangible resource that the name represents can be quickly seized by real estate agencies to market and raise the value of the apartments they sell or rent. It risks to contributing to a possible future increase in residential prices.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.immobiliare.it/mercato-immobiliare/lombardia/milano/via-padova-20132/>



Finally, what is noteworthy to mention is that it is not possible to highlight a single and exact agent that triggered the process of regeneration. Instead, a vast array of players has contributed to catalyse the process by setting up activities, creating networks of local associations, involving the local community, nudging the municipality towards the sensitive destination of local infrastructural investments<sup>23</sup> and sharing deep attention for the territory and the needs of the residents.

The case of NoLo is an example of bottom-up regeneration set up by creative entrepreneurs but made effective and sustainable through the contribution of the residents. It can be compared with another attempt of regeneration that happened in the 70s at about 2 kilometres outside of the area of Via Padova.

While in NoLo the regeneration process is still dawning and much thorough analysis must be carried in the future to understand its outcomes, the case of the top-down creation of the neighbourhood of Milano 2 is mature and its scope more visible.

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<sup>23</sup> Most of them reflect the attention of local communities to place qualities and sensibility towards its cultural endowments. One example is the effort to regenerate the local covered market which has gone in decline to provide space for local association and commercial activities, mostly linked to agriculture, to do business and set up opportunities for social encounters. Another recent attempt included the effort of local associations to dialogue with the community and propose plans for the renovation of a railway underpass which is now a symbol of criminality and danger. See: <https://www.milanolife.it/notizie/2019/03/20/un-tunnel-in-degrado-diventa-galleria-il-nuovo-progetto-di-via-padova/>

## Milano 2

### A top-down intervention in the hinterland of Milan.

The project of Milano 2, developed in the late 60s, could resemble even today innovative top-down interventions to stimulate the regeneration of an urban periphery. The neighbourhood that covers 712 thousand m<sup>2</sup> in the north-east fields of Milan, in the municipality of Segrate, presents a residential core with numerous groups of modern flats immersed into a large green area rich of natural diversity, and a lake that hosts swans and other animals. The number of cars is reduced to the minimum and people can move around using the pedestrian corridors that flow adapting to the shapes of the buildings, refusing a linear tendency and merging perfectly into the landscape. The residential area possesses all the infrastructure that is necessary to sustain the life in the neighbourhood isolated from a large city, such as commercial activities, schools, libraries, transports, churches, a post office, a bank and a cutting-edge sporting club. In a very innovative way for the time, the entire area was covered by bicycle and pedestrian ways. They never cross the roads for the cars which are located in a different and lower level so to reduce the impact of the traffic.

The project, which was the result of the private entrepreneurial investments of Silvio Berlusconi, later the Prime Minister of Italy, has been presented through the media as an oasis of harmony between nature and innovative architecture. A place where people could live a lifestyle firmly in contrast with the grey, chaotic, polluted atmosphere of the nearby large city. The commercial campaign promoting the residential area rather than selling a house aimed as selling a lifestyle: the house in the green but fully serviced countryside as a status symbol for a wealthy middle class willing to escape the unpleasant aspects of life in a big city (smog, crimes, immigrants, political fights) to build a new life close to the city but in a protected environment<sup>24</sup>. Different from NoLo whose cultural identity depended on its long history of migrations and multiculturalism, the new-born area of Milano 2 had to build its identity from the ground up. The bond between people

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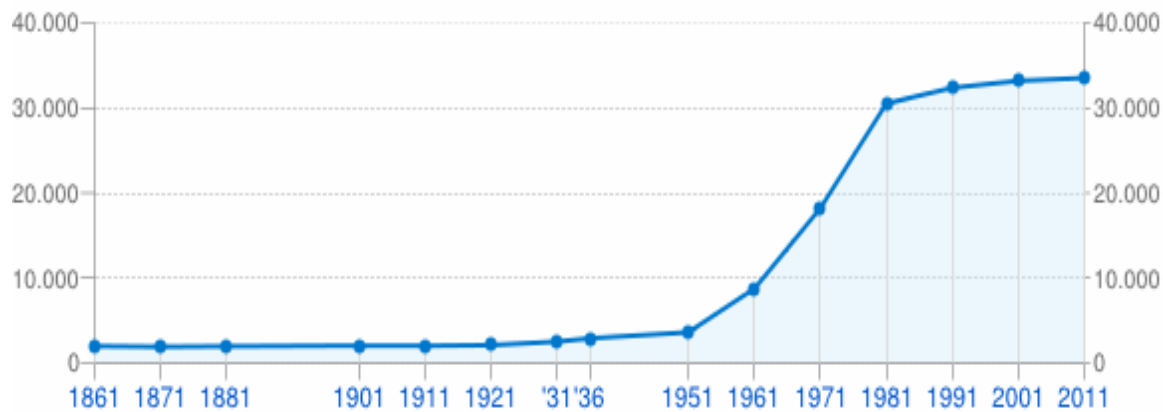
<sup>24</sup> This is visible by looking at the numerous articles on national newspapers that between 1969 and 1972 promoted the infrastructural project, as well as reading the advertising booklet distributed to the residents of Milan 2. Vv. Aa., *Milano 2: una città per vivere*, Edilnord Centri Residenziali, Milan 1976.

and the territory that later started to emerge was based on the almost total absence of social diversification between the residents and the proud identification with prominent cultural and mediatic industries in the neighbourhood.

The story of Milano 2 is indeed profoundly marked by the presence in the area of two major cultural industries; the headquarters of one of the largest Italian publishing houses (Gruppo Mondadori) and the pillar of the Italian television Fininvest (Later known as Mediaset). In particular, the neighbourhood offered the setting for the experiment of the creation a self-sustaining life through the ownership of a private and local tv station, (TeleMilano) which provided the foundation basis for the development of Fininvest as a mediatic empire. Before being acquired by Silvio Berlusconi and radically transformed to serve the wider public, TeleMilano was indeed a local tv station serving 20000 users and collaborating actively with the local residential community for the creation of TV shows and the broadcasting of local information (Visconti, 2011). However, the collaborative character of the local cultural production vanished as the tv business became economically unsustainable. The neighbourhood also lost the numerous groups of initiatives that sustained its cultural and social life. By losing its cultural and social vibrancy, the neighbourhood remained idle: an isolated homogeneous neighbourhood in which life could be possible only for high middle-class families looking for a calm place to raise children. This is the identity that eventually the place preserved.

The marketing campaign designed to attract residents in the construction complex promoted an aura of attractiveness through slogans like “Milano 2 the city of the number one”, “Milano 2, Operation Clean Air” or “Milano 2, an innovative solution to urban development” as Italian newspapers titled in the late 60s. However, as soon as the propulsive thrust ended, the neighbourhood of Milano 2 struggled to sustain its initial growth and development. In 1961 the municipality of Segrate counted 8000 inhabitants after 20 years the number skyrocketed to

30.507<sup>25</sup>. Since 1981, the average growth dropped dramatically to an annual average of 3%. Now the demographic growth has settled in accordance to that of Milan, around a 1% increase each year.



Number of residents through time. Source data Istat, Elaboration: Tuttitalia.it

After almost 50 years, the physical structure of the area seems untouched as it never felt the passing of time. The price of an average apartment in Milano 2 remains quite high for a peripheral area (around 3500,00 euros per square metre<sup>26</sup>) mainly due to the modern style and conservation status of the infrastructure. What seems vanished instead is the social vitality that characterized the first decades of the project. Walking in the neighbourhood one seldom happens to meet a resident. The only moments of sociality happen within the Sporting Club. The central square, designed to be the centre of social activities and encounters, rests desolate for most of the day, maybe due also to the lack of leisure options (only a couple of restaurants animate the square).

Similarly, the long series of colonnades which served as pedestrian roads where residents could find a variety of commercial activities and services are now mostly deserted. A significant part of

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<sup>25</sup> National migration movements and periods of economic prosperity can influence such numbers. The contribution of the construction of Milano 2 to the average growth is hard to evaluate. However, the data reveal that the infrastructural investment has not sustained the growth in the periods of economic downturn.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.mercato-immobiliare.info/lombardia/milano/segrate/milano-2.html>

the shops closed during the period of the last recession. Nobody has filled their gap, and many shop windows remained closed.

Finally, the local population has not experienced a demographic turnover. If we observe the data of the broader municipality of Segrate, which also includes Milano 2, it is possible to notice how the demographic trends of Milano 2 have not counterbalanced the general ageing of the population.

<b>Year</b>	<i>Ageing index<sup>27</sup></i>	<i>Turnover of active population index<sup>28</sup></i>	<i>Structure of active population index<sup>29</sup></i>	<i>Mortality index</i>
<b>2002</b>	100,3	187,5	107,9	6,8
<b>2003</b>	106,2	197,5	111,4	6,7
<b>2004</b>	110,6	184,6	112,4	6,4
<b>2005</b>	115,9	175,4	115,9	6,1
<b>2006</b>	120,7	162,3	121,4	6,2
<b>2007</b>	125,5	160,6	126,2	6
<b>2008</b>	129,6	159,4	129,8	5,9
<b>2009</b>	131,6	162,8	134,2	7,3
<b>2010</b>	133,6	156,4	138,2	7,6
<b>2011</b>	135,5	148,6	139,9	7
<b>2012</b>	142,5	136,4	143,7	7,7
<b>2013</b>	148	125,3	146,2	6,5
<b>2014</b>	154,3	118,3	149	7,5

<sup>27</sup> It measures the ageing degree of a population. It is the ratio between the number of people >65 years old and the number of people <14 years old.

<sup>28</sup> It represents the ration between the segment of the population which is about to retire (60-64 years old) and the one which is about to enter the labor market (15-19 years old). The active population (the one in the working age) is as young as the number is closer to 100.

<sup>29</sup> It represents the ageing degree of the population in the working age. It is the ration between the older working age population (40-64 years old) and the younger (15-39 years old)

<b>2015</b>	158,5	113,9	151,6	7,8
<b>2016</b>	163,9	113,4	152,9	7,6
<b>2017</b>	167,6	114,2	154,7	8
<b>2018</b>	172,6	118,7	157,9	8,8

Source data Istat, Elaboration: Tuttitalia.it

The ageing index reveals that the population since 2002 has become older despite the turnover of the active population shows that the number of young people about to enter the labour market is significant compared to the one of whom is about to retire. If we also consider how the structure of the active population has gradually skewed over the years towards the older segment of the active population, we can conclude that the group of people (20-39 years old) in the first phases of the working career have, through time, left the neighbourhood.

## Case findings and reflections

### **The project of Milano 2 does not foster the development of the urban areas outside Milan.**

The creation of the new residential complex of Milan 2, has not been able to sustain the development of Segrate and the nearby area. The innovative and sustainable architecture, the organisation of spaces to foster social interactions and the provision of leisure options which characterise many top-down regeneration projects did not favour economic growth. After an initial boom fostered by new residencies and a general period of economic prosperity, the population of Segrate stopped growing. The bus lines to the city centre and the presence nearby of Milan's airport did not contribute significantly to the long-term demographic growth of Segrate and Milan 2. Secondly, the commercial supply of the neighbourhood did not withstand the pressure of the recent financial crisis and the ensuing period of economic recession. The gradual disappearance of leisure options has contributed to making the neighbourhood more socially still. Consumption and entertainment came back to the city centre.

In this regard, it has been crucial for the evolution of Telemilano to the bigger Fininvest and later Mediaset. In the first years of life, the neighbourhood was characterised by numerous opportunities of cultural participation created by the local tv. The development of many programmes relied on the effort and contribution of the residents. Furthermore, the tv provided an essential resource for the diffusion of news about local activities and contributed to the public debate over local necessities. However, after the inclusion of Telemilano in the broader industry with a national focus, the role of local initiatives linked to the broadcast system collapsed. Finally, in 2016 all the television studios were transferred to the headquarters in a different neighbourhood, a choice made for the sake of “centrality and most of all, innovation”<sup>30</sup>. The merge therefore aimed at exploiting the advantages of the technological infrastructure of the more prominent and central studios of Mediaset. At the same time, following the disinvestment of the broadcast major, the original building still lacks a new business destination.

Overall, it is hard to evaluate the impact of the project of Milan 2. A first limitation is represented by the commercial nature of the investment, which was not aimed at providing the propeller for expanded economic growth. For this reason, it is not possible to generalise conclusions about top-down development projects based on the relative failure of Milan 2. The primary purpose of the infrastructure is indeed to provide residential spaces for middle-class families and not to offer better connectivity, technological infrastructure to empower people’s mobility and improve people’s productivity and access to jobs. These instruments are necessary to policies that want to move in an inclusive direction that so desperately the economy urges. It is indeed possible that the future construction of an underground line connecting the nearby airport to the city centre will facilitate the demographic expansion of Milan 2. At the same time, the municipality of Segrate could grow in the future as more investments are made to make the hinterland’s built-

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<sup>30</sup> According to the words of Paolo Liguori, director of the studios at Milan 2 in the last broadcast on Friday 14th 2016. <https://www.tvblog.it/post/1362861/mediaset-chiude-la-sede-di-milano-2-linformazione-si-sposta-a-cologno>

environment more sustainable and safer. Finally, the growth of Milan as a global creative city and the increasing demand for houses for an expanding middle class could favour the economic development of the area, especially considering measures of house prices and the number of businesses.

Nevertheless, the case revealed how the strategy to pump up local economies by investing in infrastructure and the attraction of high-income residents and prestigious firms might be controversial. Besides, it reveals the downside of a top-down restructuring of cultural supply through the inclusion and attraction of major creative and cultural industries. The presence of Fininvest and Gruppo Mondadori was not sufficient for the creation of an attractive and vibrant ecosystem. Young workers, potentially included in the group of creative class stimulating economic development, prefer to move in the city-centre to live. Different from NoLo, businesses stopped investing in the area, and the lack of migration did not enable a recycle of commercial activities. Finally, the growing age of the population and the lack of a generational turnover did not offer the stimulus for cultural organisations and a diffuse leisure supply to develop and settle spontaneously in the area.

It is not possible to consider Milan 2 a productive core thanks to its innovativeness (once driven by its infrastructure), nor for the presence of leading high-tech or creative industries and the creative ecosystem that surrounds them. The large-scale intervention in the urban fabric of Segrate with a narrow focus on built-infrastructure did not create the conditions neither for the sustainability of creative and digital industries like Fininvest/Mediaset as well as for the birth of a polycentric local economy based on creativity and innovation.

Finally, the emphasis on forms of identity handed down from on high, did not favour the spontaneity that makes up the vitality of cities to emerge. After the conversion of the local tv in a national broadcast, the social basis essential for people's engagement in the creation, maintenance and recreation of the local sense of place vanished. Residents were not encouraged to have a stake in the running of their neighbourhoods even in the face of the decline of local



activities. The social and community-centred sphere of the neighbourhood did not receive the necessary space to develop spontaneously. As a result, the neighbourhood is now socially and culturally poor and bottom-up and inclusive processes of regeneration are not likely to manifest. The case of NoLo shows the relative importance of the social and cultural dimension of development in a positive way.

On a final account, it is essential to notice that Milan 2 is not a neighbourhood desperately in need of regeneration. Prices of apartments are steady and despite shops closing and young people choosing to live in more central locations the area is just changing its social fabric. Businesses inevitably suffer from a demographic shift. Most likely, however, since businesses are not investing and government intervention is not needed due to the still good state of the infrastructure, a positive change needs to be enacted by residents and local associations, therefore from the bottom. A perspective that focuses on cultural elements (such as cultural identity) and spaces for social aggregation as a source of civic engagement and a catalyst of creative initiatives may contribute to understand how to stimulate economic growth when top-down initiatives become sterile or ineffective.

### **The success NoLo: a bottom-up and social perspective on the development of lagging areas**

Different from Milan 2, the regeneration process of NoLo has been spontaneous and driven by the local community. In just a few years, the community of Via Padova succeeded in releasing itself from a heavy negative image, stimulating the opening of new businesses and fostering economic growth in line with the new creative-driven economy. The factors that need to be considered to understand the development process are multi-fold.

- 1) **Bottom-up cultural supply:** The contribution of multiple residents which started various social and commercial activities and structured from the bottom the cultural supply of the area has been essential to the creation of an inclusive creative ecosystem. In the area,

it is not possible to register the presence of significant cultural or creative companies. Instead, a vast basin of creative and cultural activities (including bars and restaurants) contribute to the vibrancy of the neighbourhood.

- 2) **Cultural Participation and Inclusivity:** The inclusion of different cultural groups in the socio-cultural activities revealed essential to the regeneration of the area. The cultural supply that emerged in NoLo promoted the inclusion of different communities valorising place-specific resources and promoting local artists and creatives. The balance between cultural and social events that reflect the cultural supply of Milan (such as the world-famous Salone del Mobile as a Design event which is present also in NoLo) and local cultural experiences favoured the integration of marginal communities which tend to be excluded from major cultural exchanges. Cultural participation determined for the participants a strong sense of ownership towards the projects happening in NoLo. Sense of ownership, in turn, helped to develop a culture hostile to crime and vandalism and open to diversity (the numerous biking tours which also have the function to patrol the area are an example of how this cultural dynamic has been implemented). As an outcome, the inclusion of different communities helped to eradicate the stigmatisation of Via Padova both among residents and on the outside.
- 3) **Platforms for creativity:** In the regeneration process of NoLo a crucial role played the numerous platforms that enabled people to express ideas, interact and eventually translate these ideas into projects. Creative industries strongly rely on these creative processes, but in NoLo, creativity is mobilised by local communities and not only by workers belonging to the creative class or people engaged in creative occupations. It is therefore possible to envision creativity also for areas which do not possess a thriving creative economy led by major creative industries. Creativity seems channelled through specific spaces, both public squares, parks, social groups online, bars and churches as well as from the variety of social and cultural events that animate the neighbourhood. At the basis of this emergence of creativity as a local resource, stands the capacity of people to

express their needs, understand their role in the community, raise awareness of local challenges and contribute to the debate for the identification of possible solutions. Virtual platforms like “NoLo Social District” on Facebook helped people to share projects and gather consensus for their realisation. Places like “Hug”, on paper a local bistro, do not only function as multifunctional spaces promoting a culture of inclusivity, openness and attention for local resources, they also provide the spaces for creative conversations to happen about community challenges, needs and desires. These spaces constitute the catalyst of local creativity in the neighbourhood.

Interestingly, these observations are in significant part consistent with one the first formulation of the notion of the “creative city” and creative ecosystems by Landry & Bianchini (1995). The authors understand creativity in the city not as the exclusive capacity of the creative class or the productive force driving creative industries and consequently, the global economy. Differently, they consider creativity as a diffused resource that can be mobilised to face urban challenges. In this view, the city is creative when the residents are in a position to exploit their inventive and creative capacities to solve common problems. It is, therefore, a form of creativity that is open and diffused and not confined to specific occupations or industries. In NoLo, a diffused creativity arose precisely from the contribution of the residents in setting up activities, spreading an inclusive culture of acceptance, mobilising consensus towards initiatives that addressed common issues. Finally, consistent with what happened in NoLo, the authors identify in the peaceful coexistence of different cultural groups, the presence of place-sensitive cultural supply fostering a sense of locality and facilitating cultural participation, a crucial element for a thriving creative ecosystem (Landry & Bianchini, 1995, p, 28, 29,30).

The case of NoLo shows how cultural infrastructure understood as the spaces where creativity emerges, are an essential resource to stimulate development. This vision is quite consistent to what Leadbeater (2009) considers the “broad” account of creative cities. The success of NoLo does not derive from massive state-led intervention, nor the creation from above of the conditions for the convergence of firms and capital. Differently, the organisation of cultural

supply came from the bottom. Cultural happenings, a motley supply of social activities in private or public spaces (as the Sunday breakfasts along the streets), online social groups and numerous third-sector associations created the conditions to share awareness about local issues and provided the space to share creative solutions through the contribution of residents. The social and cultural sphere of the local life of the neighbourhood proved essential to favour regeneration.

Even though public spaces can be designed to catalyse creativity, as the case of Milan 2 shows, the planning from above of the physical infrastructure may not be enough to favour development. Furthermore, even in the face of adversities, people in Milan 2 chose to leave rather than mobilise forces to address local challenges.

In this regard, leadership is considered essential for creative initiatives to catch on (Putnam,1993; Rajan, 2018) and NoLo could have significantly benefited from the importance of Milan as a global city attracting creative talents from all over the world. However, in NoLo, the crucial factor for the development of a creative environment has been the contribution and participation of the local population regardless of geographical origin, ethnic belonging, occupation or educational background. The simple deployment of innovative infrastructure, the design of public areas for social interactions, the presence of major creative industries in the case of Milan 2 revealed insufficient to stimulate inclusive forms of participation and the development of new businesses and cultural events. While the area of Milan 2 and Segrate is now declining, with the population getting older and businesses closing, the once degraded area of Via Padova is flourishing through a cultural change in its inhabitants. The firm will of redemption shared through different platforms led to the opening of new activities and the creation of civic coalitions to push governments to support local initiatives aimed at solving local issues.

The identification of a diffused permeability between residents and creative initiatives does not directly cast a shadow on the more selective theories of the creative class and the creative economy which focus on specific people and infrastructure. The success of NoLo may derive in

part from the presence in the area of members of the creative class, especially artists and artisans. It is also possible to envision that top-down policies promoting cultural supply could facilitate the engagement of citizens in addressing local needs. Despite the documented failure in this regard, the success of the interventions needs to be considered case by case. Social phenomena that underpin processes of regeneration are complex, and it is not easy to predict their development in the future. This limitation is also relevant to the case of NoLo and Milan 2.

Nevertheless, an approach that considers how a community can stand up by itself through new mechanisms of socialisation (in the case of NoLo, Hug and NoLo Social District are some examples) and by leveraging on cultural elements underpinning a new local identity, offers a new and essential perspective. The creation of physical and virtual platforms that facilitate social connections and position at their core a deep attachment to place and local resources is the key to the success of NoLo. However, the value of place attachment tends to be often overlooked by market-based and profit-centred perspectives, and place attachment is a feeling difficult to structure from above as the case of Milan 2 considered. A traditional economic perspective is blind about how the sharing of specific values and purposes can facilitate social interactions and the creation of new businesses. It would be hard to justify on an economic level the choice of Hug to offer most of its services for free and refusing to add a fee to those services despite the growing demand. However, the mission to create a sense of place and conviviality and participating in the phenomenon of NoLo is the foundation of the activity of Hug and different local businesses. The sharing of the purpose of contributing to the neighbourhood seems an important component that enables the activation of knowledge exchanges between different actors, stimulating the dialogue between the civil society, businesses and public authorities. These knowledge and ideas exchanges are the foundation of the knowledge and creative economy and represent the crucial element that underpins the capacity of superstar cities to address global challenges (Katz, 2017). In Via Padova, a run-down environment suffering severe social pressures, these knowledge exchanges are activated by initiatives facilitating social connections and a sharing of the value of place-attachment. The renewed possibilities of social interactions favoured also by a cultural shift projected towards the regeneration of the area enabled existing local actors to share ideas, identify common problems and start new projects to

address them. The core idea behind NoLo Social District, the main “incubator” of new projects in the neighbourhood, is managed so that people can share non-lucrative ideas that improve the social life of the area. It seems, therefore, that this potential for innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship is latent even in lagging areas. In this regard, a value-based perspective (Klamer, 2017) may be capable of revealing and activating the forces that enable creativity and innovation to rise in lagging areas like Via Padova. Despite NoLo being an open and inclusive reality, the sharing of specific values even in tacit form may prove necessary for people being accepted as Nolars. Further studies need to be conducted especially if the local community decides to issue a formal definition of what NoLo represents and its core values.

For now, the values that are at the foundation of the project of NoLo are hard to define. Eventually, everyone has the potential to identify himself/herself with NoLo as long as that his/her actions are directed to contribute to the neighbourhood. The inclusivity of purpose is the key to include different people in the process of development, and it is also the factor that makes NoLo an evolving concept rather than a static one. The next and final paragraph will address this issue.

### **Local cultural identity connects people in the achievement of inclusive development**

The case of Milan 2 and NoLo/Via Padova represent two different examples of how development is conditioned to specific aspects of cultural identity.

Milan 2 has been a project which aimed at creating from the ground-up a new residential area. The development of the neighbourhood did not preserve the existing (despite feeble) identity of the place linked to the rural life outside of Milan. The marketing campaign promoted suburban life in Milan 2 as a symbol of innovativeness, sustainability, peace. The perfect environment for a wealthy middle class willing to raise a family outside of the urban chaos of the big metropolis. The identity that the place developed and preserved is linked to the homogeneity of its residents,

and their life-style (wealthy suburban families seeking tranquillity, safeness and comfort). Besides the near homogeneity, the bond between residents and the place depended on the presence of the most prominent Italian television company, Fininvest. Both inside the community and from the outside, the identity of Milan 2 started to be associated with the entrepreneurial success of Silvio Berlusconi, the financier of the project, in building the most influential media company in Italy.

Both forms of identity are static and reflect a traditional view of how identity is established. By convention, indeed, identity is quite a rigid concept based on the fact that people are coming from the same place and sharing the same culture. The same definition of a community is linked to the same factors. Identity defines culture in a restrictive way according to how intense the bond develops. It is a way to define the inside by discriminating who does not belong to it because of not sharing specific characteristics. Most characterisations of identity start from a pre-ordered definition depended from, for instance, the type of language, the colour of the skin, religion, beliefs and rituals or specific habits. Other times, they differentiate with their specific values and norms. In this regard, identity is linked to what Habermas defines as “constitutional patriotism” (Verfassungspatriotismus) in which the national constitution defines the foundational values. These forms of identity come from above. They enable People born in a specific place to understand to be different from people coming from another region.

Even the identity of Via Padova derives rigidly from the rural and industrial nature of local life, and then from the convergence of people of different geographical location, culture and religion. As visible from the case study, the rigidity of this type of identity often creates the conditions so that multiculturalism resolves in conflicts driven by a lack of mutual understanding and acceptance.

It is possible, however, to envision a different type of construction of identity. One that does not stem from individual characteristics but constitutes the progressive results of processes of social interactions aimed at valorising the incessant research for a common and shared goal. People

may share an identity when go in the same direction, that may not be pre-ordered or known. It may not possible to *a priori* define it. In this case, identity relies on the concurrence of intents and evolves through mechanisms of confrontation, conflict and eventually consensus. These forms of identity, if we believe in living in an open society (Popper, 1945), are evolutionary and projected from the bottom. They are built through moments of conversation and debate between people. They are modern and tend to overlook differences in the face of threats and difficulties. They favour integration as long as people participate in local cultural and social life in respect to socially defined virtues which must be verified through practice or law.

People contributing to the project of NoLo share this liquid form of identity. It arises from people's desires of redemption and develops gradually through discussion, and social interactions. Its direction is reflected in local initiatives and through the collective decisions about specific necessities and how to address them. It is developed through the everyday actions of local people, and through its inclusion in discussions, rituals, and objects.

The form of identity which people from NoLo (Nolers) are developing could fall under the notion of what Klamer (2017) defines as a shared good or shared practice. Identity has to be shared and becomes part of everyday practices to acquire an accurate characterisation. Its strength depends on the number of people that recognise themselves as Nolers and therefore contribute to its development. Secondly, if it is possible to define ownership of the identity of NoLo, that would be shared, and for this reason, NoLo is only subjectively definable and therefore fluid. Its value derives from a consensus over its definition and its development happen through the debate over the direction to take, which may imply dissent.

Along these lines, NoLo is a social experiment that started from the bottom, which creates place-bound identities in a modern way. Nothings assumes that it will not change in the future due to gentrification. The lack of precise ownership and definition makes the identity of NoLo fragile and for this reason worth to fight for. Real estate agencies are already capitalising on the term NoLo to rapidly sell or rent houses in the neighbourhood contributing to its gentrification.



Through time it could develop as a different local identity and the people that now contribute to defining what NoLo stands for could change.

The identity of NoLo is nevertheless a priori no exclusive. It is based on place qualities and the sharing of responsibilities in relation to its future as a collective resource. If a society requires constant adjustment to address global transformations, the understanding of identity as democratic and dynamic favours integration. When a place-bound identity exists and is stepped on or marginalised, forms of regressive experiences emerge which may bring to racism. Giving a strong identity to Milan 2 created a prototype of separate people. The identity of NoLo instead is continuously in the making. It represents the common purpose that enables strangers to recognise each other based on what they share and by accepting how they differ. Finally, In the process of defining what NoLo stands for, cultural infrastructure acted a learning arena fostering the formation of shared values and ideas exchanges which, in the case of NoLo, contributed to finding solutions to shared problems and led to the creation of new businesses.

## **Conclusions**

The thesis examined the role of culture for economic development in the context of a polarised economy. As lagging places still bear the scars of the crisis of traditional fordist economies and struggle to attract and retain a competitive advantage in an increasingly globalised economy, the quality of culture as an essential resource emerges. Culture becomes the common denominator for lagging areas to prefigure new and (upgraded) possible economies. The results of this research reveal how bottom-up processes of regeneration are capable of leveraging on culture and civic participation to activate a process of economic restructuring. In NoLo, people actively contribute to the creation of new businesses, social activities, structuring from the bottom the supply of cultural services and goods. While the bearing of the public intervention from above in transforming local economies needs to be constantly questioned a bottom-up perspective that

pays attention to the social and cultural processes which underlie development may prove effective in guiding lagging areas out of a stagnant decline.

NoLo is an example of a community which valorised local resources and transformed the social challenges of multiculturalism into a cultural flagship. Differently, the comparison with the project of Milan 2 shows how the lack of a social and cultural vitality can lead areas to not be dynamic and resilient to the challenges posed by social and economic transformations.

In this respect, the cultural vibrancy of NoLo does not rely on the presence of significant clusters of cultural infrastructures or leading creative industries. Instead, a widespread basin of creative and cultural initiatives promoted by local associations and residents turn out capable of projecting outside the community a new image of the former disadvantaged place. The use of bottom-up and community-led cultural infrastructure may prove a strategic element to shift the perspective of lagging places as areas where investments are not productive or even necessary, therefore enhancing the possibilities for these places to compete in a globalised economy.

The challenges to understand bottom-up regeneration processes, however, is that the factors that stimulate people to be pro-active towards local issues are complex to point out. The same identification of cultural infrastructure as crucial to local development remains blurred because cultural goods and services do not have a proper and selected space. Hug for instance, like many other spaces, while offering a bistro service, it also operates as the headquarter of many cultural initiatives and contributes with its activities to share a culture of acceptance, social and environmental responsibility and openness. Therefore, it is essential to understand cultural infrastructure as spaces where ideas and debates emerge besides considering the physical spaces and the organisations that supply cultural goods and services as their primary activity. While this broader identification can bring confusion, it enables to grasp the potential of a “broader” creative economy (Leadbeater, 2009) where citizens, local associations, and public authorities contribute together using creativity to face common challenges. The importance of this approach in the economic context of the knowledge and creative economy needs to be carefully considered. While lagging areas seem to lack the necessary resources to enable a thriving economy, the knowledge exchanges that networks of local actors activate to contribute to

common purposes favour interventions and initiatives that foster to the economic regeneration of lagging areas.

To correctly evaluate the economic development of NoLo it would be necessary to conduct longitudinal studies since the regeneration process is just at the beginning. Another challenge to correctly measure the phenomenon is represented by the necessity to identify different indicators besides simple measures of house prices and the number of activities to consider the inclusivity of the development for current residents.

One of the elements that need to be considered, for instance, is the cultural and symbolic value of the name “NoLo”, compared to the former identification of Via Padova. Local people sharing a desire for regeneration embodied in the term NoLo, contributed to its diffusion through a variety of channels. The diffusion of a symbolic element of NoLo, in turn, helped to develop a strong feeling of place attachment linked to a renewed image of the area. A value-based perspective could be useful in exploring and identifying the values that underlie the processes of interactions between local actors contributing to direct their efforts to a common purpose. Furthermore, while local infrastructure is gradually improved under initiatives of local people, and numerous businesses have been set up and are starting to settle in the area, those measures of economic development do not describe the entire reality of NoLo. There are huge swaths of economic activity that for their social value escape to the radar of standard economics. A value-based perspective focused on the values that the businesses realise, rather than their output, is essential to understand the economic potential of the regeneration of NoLo.

Finally, the strength of NoLo in engaging people in a regeneration process depends on the fact that it leverages on modern considerations of identity. The identity that Nolers share is continuously in the making. It does not select on the basis of ethnic backgrounds, places of origin, religions, and political preferences. Instead, it offers anyone living in the neighbourhood the opportunity to contribute to its social and economic life. Because of its open and dynamic nature, the identity of NoLo favours the integration of different people in the process of economic

restructuring. It also proves an essential component to face the challenges of disadvantaged and multi-ethnic environments where social distress and processes of radicalisation are likely to emerge.

The difficulty in understanding the impacts of such identity forms is that they evolve through constant consensus and dissent expressed in a variety of practices, rituals and moments of interactions. While acting as a symbol for people to identify with, the name NoLo is becoming a brand, endowed with intangible value for businesses that operate in the neighbourhood. Escaping any attempt of a fixed definition, the identity of NoLo, and the cultural value that the name embodies, are at constant risk of being captured and exploited by parties looking for personal profit rather than striving to realise shared purposes. The presence of constant debates of gentrification among residents acknowledges the possibility that real estate agencies could capitalise on the name NoLo and its cultural value, leading to an increase in the cost of living.

At the same time, the fact that NoLo is a continually evolving reality could make the community more resilient to such threats. The coalition of forces between local actors could push government intervention to protect what the community values. According to Rajan (2018) communities which are linked by thriving identity bonds function as social and political entities capable of mobilising energies and exercising pressure to grant the wellbeing of its members. The contribution of communities in a society where market forces tend to predominate to the detriment of small and community-led initiatives and people feel increasingly distant from their governments needs to be investigated. It is possible that communities could represent a precious resource for the regeneration of places that might be not the winners in the globalisation exchange, but that must not necessarily confirm themselves as losers.

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# PHOTOS

## Via Padova



**Streets and apartment in Via Padova.**

**Above you can see the popular apartments built in the 60s that favoured individual comforts to social cohesion.**



**Via Padova seen from the apartments of one of the residents**





**An Onlus for Palestinian people next to a Chinese shop and a Turkish kebab restaurant.**



**A local market  
reveals the multi-  
ethnic presence in  
the neighbourhood**

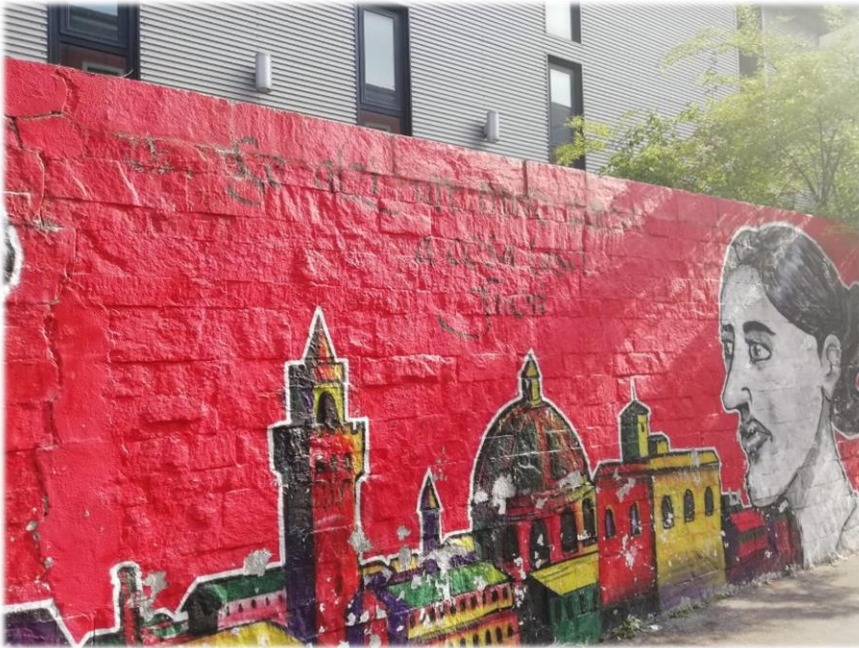




**A banner saying “I Love my neighbourhood” promoted by a local association.**

**Comitato Autogestito Crespi**





One of the many famous murals of NoLo. Most of them rather than including simply the symbol of the whale of NoLo they carry sentences of acceptance towards diversity.

"If you raise a wall think about what is left out"







The main entrance of Hug.  
The main cultural  
multifunctional space of  
NoLo.





**Some night activities of the neighbourhood**

**A local vintage market where sellers are local people and an open-air concert outside La Salumeria del Design one of the many cultural spaces.**







**This was a very recent project. The first week of September. The renovation of a square to enable children to play free.**

**The initiative came from a group of mothers whose children attend the school that you can see at the opposite side of the square.**



**One of the debated examples of speculation. The new residential complex bears the name of NoLo and capitalizes on the name to sell the apartments.**



A local ice-cream shop carrying the sing for a campaign to clean the neighbourhood with the name Nolo.



# Photos Milan 2







**The infrastructure of Milan 2 divides the street from the pedestrian road and bicycle lanes.**





## **Mediaset/Fininvest studios**

**The building hosts a bank and a co-working space with different businesses.**







**The spaces occupied by Mediaset (once Fininvest) are now empty.**

**Above, a big sign “renting” for the entire floor occupied by the studios.**



**Below the main entrance of the building is almost desert.**



**The main square of Milan 2**  
**Photos taken on a Friday at**  
**12,45 in September**









**Below the main restaurant of  
the square and social meeting  
point of the neighbourhood**







**Some of the shops  
that closed.**

I included these photos for two reasons:

- 1) The shop is one of the many places which strives for the regeneration of Via Padova
- 2) Because on the window people can find adverts for the local social initiatives and names of local associations. It is interesting to compare it with the list of fliers found outside one of the building of Milano 2



In the display case there are two adverts for renting, an advert for a school for the elderly, a flier that shares info about the local card tournament, an ad vert for a local hospice and the local obituary